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Disrupting the Way We Work: An Honors Summer Vacation

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Abstract: Authors describe how a summer respite introduces alternative ways and spaces in which to work, positing how collaborative discourse and dismantled hierarchies can affect positive change and productive outcomes for honors programs.

Keywords: collaboration in education; curriculum planning; functional workspaces; Youngstown State University (OH)–Sokolov Honors College

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While some assume that the summer is our off-season, the team at the Sokolov Honors College at Youngstown State University knows that it is the time we have to be most “on,” tackling all that we don’t get to do in the semester and positioning us for a strong start to the upcoming fall. Summer 2021 seemed particularly daunting with a laundry list of items to catch up on and big projects to move forward. Through collaboration among staff and students, along with embracing creative ways to work, the honors college reached a new level of accomplishment.

Rather than holing up in our individual offices trying to divide and conquer, we took a new approach: we set up shop in our honors classroom together, forgoing desks behind doors for laptops and constructive conversation. On nice days, we took our show on the road (or to the porch), continuing our collaboration by walking around campus or sitting outside in the sun.

By embracing alternative ways and spaces in which to work and empowering each other to contribute beyond the boundaries of our individual lanes, we experienced a whole new level of passion and productivity. We created a space that was completely open and without hierarchy, giving one another

the opportunity to contribute to any conversation and blurring the lines of what is in each of our formal job descriptions. It turns out that a little shared time collaborating on activities that are not necessarily one's job leads to better and more efficient outcomes.

Some of the projects executed under this model included redesigning the honors capstone experience; solidifying a new strategic plan and mission statement alongside students, faculty, alumni, and community members; developing and executing plans to better communicate with faculty campus-wide; creating a contract honors catalog; and working alongside our student staff to host a focus group about our Introduction to Honors seminar, informing our retooling of the course for fall 2021. We involved our students at every turn, inviting their feedback on any potential changes that would impact them. We also encouraged our student staff to take on new levels of responsibility, empowering them to own a project from start to finish with guidance as needed.

The capstone redesign has already led to an increase in the number of students registering for the honors capstone seminar. In spring 2021, most graduating seniors had completed an extension of their major capstone for honors credit but with only two students having enrolled in the honors capstone seminar. Enhanced communication with seniors about the redesigned experience resulted in an increase in honors capstone enrollment, with 19 completing the course in fall 2021 and 74 currently registered for spring 2022.

As summer came to a close, we went back to our respective duties and workspaces but within days began to feel the void left by the lack of collaboration. We have a renewed appreciation for the power of unbridled conversation that can occur in shared physical space. Reducing barriers to communication can lead to constructive outcomes. While we can adapt to working in multiple locations, we crave those moments when you can almost see an idea taking root, an occurrence that does not materialize in quite the same way while apart.

In the words of Aaron Stoller, who writes about honors as a third space, "in order for honors to occupy and transform the academy it must begin by transforming itself" (p. 43). While each of us can do our jobs independently, we learned that working together leads to a better final product in a condensed period of time. Even in the two hours spent writing this reflection at a local coffee shop on a Saturday morning, we covered many other topics and came up with several new ideas to develop more fully another day. Going forward, we will seek out the time and space to recreate those powerful moments harnessed in the summer of 2021.

Summer is over; our collaboration is not.

REFERENCE

Stoller, A. (2021). Honors as a third space occupation. *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, 22(1), 43–52.

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