

Food and Culture

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Abstract: A course on food and culture with several experiential components successfully encourages honors students to learn about new cultures and themselves.

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Honors 350: Honors Special Topics is a three-credit-hour interdisciplinary course providing honors students with a chance to delve deeply into the professor's chosen topic for the semester. In the fall of 2023, the professor for the course was a member of the dietetics faculty. She chose the topic of food and culture to appeal to a broad number of honors students and allow for experiential learning. The course was offered once a week (three hours per meeting) in the dietetics program's kitchen laboratory. There was no textbook for the course, but students were required to follow a kitchen lab dress code for safety and cleanliness.

To begin the course, the professor provided the students with an introductory lecture on food culture and kitchen safety, a lesson necessary to the cooking component. The course assignments included attendance and participation; a food documentary reflection; culture menu development and presentation; a personal food journal; and a "What I Eat" presentation.

Each week the students began the session with a lecture (from either the professor or an assigned classmate) on a new culture. After the lecture, the class then prepared three or four recipes significant to that culture. The recipes were chosen based on their cultural significance and the time taken to prepare them as well as the difficulty and skill needed to prepare them. After completing the food preparation, the class sat together family-style

to discuss the lecture and the food. Cultures in the course included South Louisiana (Cajun and Creole), Mexico, Taiwan, India, Germany, Turkey, Greece, French Polynesia, Norway, Northern Italy, and American Holiday Culture (Halloween and Thanksgiving). After the discussion, the students aided the professor in cleaning the lab.

Some weeks, instead of cooking on campus, the class took part in field trips in the university community to grocery stores and restaurants that represented the culture's native foods. During these trips, the students wrote food journals, each selecting one food item for the class to sample and discuss. At the end of the semester, the students submitted their food journals and "What I Eat" presentations, in which they reported personal growth not only in their knowledge of world cultures but of their attitudes and behaviors. One student reported, "I have always been scared to try new things, but I pushed myself this semester to taste everything. I learned that I should always be willing to have new experiences." Other students' comments included the following: "This was the best class I have ever taken"; "I don't look at the way other cultures do this anymore and think that they are doing it wrong. They are just doing it differently."

Overall, it was a successful course. Students attended class at a 100% rate and participated eagerly. One idea for the next time the course is offered is to have the students complete a sensory and quality rating of each recipe at the end of class, which could help the professor collect anonymous feedback on the recipes for continued improvement.

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