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Taking on the Challenges of Diversity and Visibility: Thoughts from a Small Honors Program

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Abstract: The Monroe College Honors Program, located in New York, enjoys an extremely diverse student body, which can be attributed to its location within and proximity to New York City. Data about the Monroe College Honors Program are presented. More importantly, this essay presents the strategies that the honors program uses to meet the needs of a diverse student body. Our students face many challenges, including difficult family situations and economic hardship, and so the honors program has created a rigorous but flexible curriculum and co-curriculum to meet their needs. The approaches used to serve this population focus on getting to know students, implementing an adequate budget, and creating flexible curricular/co-curricular options. The essay also addresses student-centered tactics that increase the visibility of the honors program on campus.

Keywords: diversity, gifted education, higher education, marketing

INTRODUCTION

The field of honors education evokes a variety of images: students, faculty, and administrators waxing poetically about theories and ideas, for instance, or a drive toward academic and personal perfection. I argue that a third image of honors is one in which solutions to problems can be not only identified but implemented. I agree with Richard Badenhausem when he writes that we “are really good at complaining” because complaining is easy whereas identifying and implementing lasting solutions are really hard.

In considering Badenhausen's call to solve problems in the field of honors education, I have realized that many of the challenges we face are interconnected. The same is true in a racially diverse honors program, where the reality that students face includes significant economic challenges. If these students are included in honors, we must work to make honors not only an "academic jewel" of the institution but a diverse and inclusive academic jewel. As Coordinator of the Monroe College Honors Program, I believe I can provide some insight into how the honors community at large can start to take on these challenges.

About Monroe College and the Honors Program

Monroe College has an undergraduate enrollment of just over 5,500 students. The college's two on-site campuses are in the Bronx and New Rochelle, New York. A brief snapshot of Monroe College shows a much different picture from many other institutions of similar size around the United States: the college offers many of its undergraduate degrees online; 75% of undergraduates are enrolled full time; 62% are female; 43% are African American; and 40% are Hispanic/Latino. Our student population reflects the college's geographic region. The New York metro area has always been diverse, and as of March 2018, Bloomberg ranked New York eighth on its list of "20 Most Diverse Regions in the United States" (Del Giudice & Lu, 2018).

Monroe College is not only attracting students from non-white backgrounds but is also successfully graduating these students. According to data released by *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education Magazine*, Monroe College is among the top 100 minority degree producers (Top 100, 2017). Virtually all of Monroe's associate degree programs and two of its bachelor's degree programs rank among the Top 10 in the nation for graduating minority students, including degree programs in its School of Allied Health, School of Business and Accounting, School of Criminal Justice, and School of Information Technology.

The Monroe College Honors Program enrolls approximately 4% of the undergraduate population, and the diversity of the program mirrors that of Monroe College. The honors population from the fall 2018 semester included 242 active, enrolled honors students: 169 were female and 73 were male; 106 were Hispanic; 93 were Black; 21 were non-resident aliens; 9 were Asian; 9 were White; and 4 were unreported. These data clearly demonstrate the diversity of Monroe College and its honors program.

CHALLENGE #1: DIVERSITY

To take on the challenges that diversity presents, the Monroe College Honors Program learns about each of our student's lives and needs; implements an adequate budget to cover all program-related costs; and creates a flexible curriculum/co-curriculum to enable students to meet their requirements in a variety of ways.

Achieving diversity has not been challenging for the honors program, but growing the program has been harder. In fall of 2016, 155 students were actively enrolled in the program, and in the fall of 2017, the number grew to 212, so the program grew about 64% over two years. Achieving such substantial growth required a lot of outreach to incoming students, recruiting high-performing continuing students, and cheering on students who didn't think they were "honors material." Many of our students are first-generation college students or have had only one sibling in the family who has gone to college. Therefore, they lack the support they need to know that they can take on all the challenges a college environment presents. So getting to know our students is especially important.

Upon admission to the honors program, the honors program coordinator reads the personal statement of each student to gain insight into the student's past and his/her motivations for the future. As students progress through each semester, the faculty and staff of the college stay in regular communication. All first-year students (not only honors) are assigned a full-time faculty/staff mentor, who remains in contact throughout the student's first year. Mentors, student services staff, and other college personnel enter notes into the student's profile on the "Monroe Tracking System." The honors coordinator regularly checks in on the notes to understand the latest on each honors student.

Aside from battling feelings of doubt and fear about their ability to succeed in college, our students also face the problems Badenhausen mentions, including "difficult family responsibilities, and economic challenges." Many of the students in the Monroe College Honors Program work either part-time or full-time. They serve as caregivers to their loved ones. Over half of the students enrolled in the fall 2018 semester reported a household income of less than \$50,000. Knowing that our students face these challenges, Monroe College ensures that the honors program budget can cover almost all program-related expenses, which is the second way we take on the challenge

diversity presents. The honors program budget covers expenses such as tickets to a theatrical production as part of a literature course; travel, board, and registration for a conference; and art supplies or a pair of dance shoes for honors courses in modern art/dance. Students pay a minimal course fee between \$10 to \$25 per honors course to help offset course-related expenses. Planning for our students has made it possible for students to afford honors experiences that are experiential or co-curricular in nature.

Despite the trials our students face in their personal lives, they are graduating from college and earning honors diplomas. We graduated 36 honors students in 2016, 31 in 2017, and 31 in 2018. As a point of reference, we began with 175 honors students in the fall of 2015, and 20% of them completed all the program requirements and graduated with an honors diploma in the 2018 commencement ceremonies. Nearly all the students who did not complete the honors diploma requirements still graduated from college, but our program wants to continue to increase the honors graduation rate, so we are working on innovative and creative solutions to make honors more accessible to our students.

The final way we tackle diversity is by crafting flexible requirements for the program. Students must “opt-in” to the honors program, and at this time, they are told about the academic and co-curricular requirements of the program: maintaining a minimum cumulative GPA of 3.3; completing a minimum of 15% of their coursework in honors; and participation and reflection on at least three experiential activities, e.g., a volunteer project, an intercollegiate project, and participation in a national or regional honors conference. Students are told they will be challenged and will grow, but the “do-ability” of the honors program is emphasized more because often these students are experiencing self-doubt or don’t have an advocate rooting for their success.

Honors administrators and faculty should take a good look at their requirements and evaluate them not only for rigor and challenge but for feasibility in terms of course scheduling and extracurricular scheduling since part-time workers, for instance, can’t always do evening events. Further, we need to get to know our students—not just their writing style or where they can improve a skillset but their needs as a person. Research shows that students of diverse, low socioeconomic backgrounds generally lack familial support; therefore, an advocate at their institution is extraordinarily important in determining whether or not students will graduate.

CHALLENGE #2: VISIBILITY

It isn't enough to achieve all these goals; we also need to make sure our programs and colleges are seen and heard across campus. Visibility is a challenge that nearly every honors program faces, and to take on this challenge the Monroe College Honors Program allows students to do the job; communicates news regularly; and maintains an online presence.

Improving visibility could be the full-time job of an honors professional, but another way to achieve this goal is by empowering the students we have recruited. Honors students have a wide range of connections across campus: they major in various fields of study; they are athletes; they are resident assistants; they are commuters; they are leaders for other clubs on campus; they are basically everywhere. If we ask our honors students to take honors with them wherever they go, the visibility of the program/college will increase exponentially.

Part of my job is to increase the visibility of the honors program at Monroe College. Every time students are accepted to a conference, whether local, regional, or national, a press release is issued. When the honors program hosts a major college-wide event, e.g., Community Service Weekend, a press release is issued. When a student success story is posted on the college's website for a graduate of the School of Criminal Justice, it notes that the student was also an honors graduate. Copies of the honors newsletter, *The Experience*, are distributed across both campuses, sent as part of admissions folders, and housed in an online repository on the college's website. Regular updates are sent to the President's Office, and the honors program is often featured in his college-wide emails. In all of these examples, the visibility of the honors program is connected to the students because, after all, honors is about the students.

The honors program is active online: it has pages on Instagram and Facebook, and it has a page on the college's main website. Posting photos and announcements regularly keeps students up to date; they share these posts and enjoy seeing themselves tagged in pictures. Students have also come up with some of our social media strategies, e.g., Motivation Monday, Topic Tuesday, or Wayback Wednesday. Maintaining an active online presence and involving the students to help do that are essential to maintaining visibility.

CONCLUSION

Honors programs and colleges are leaders in higher education. Many well-established, high-impact practices began in honors, and honors can be the leader in creating pathways for greater diversity and inclusion in higher education. While higher education seems to be ignoring “the monumental demographic shifts taking place in our country and universities” (Badenhausen), we can invite change into our honors programs and colleges. When many of our students don’t see themselves as “honors material,” thinking that smart kids only hail from a privileged background, they are victims of a story about honors, what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie refers to as “a single story” (2009). It is time to write a new story about honors and, as Adichie says, “regain a kind of paradise.”

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