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# **ENRICHING THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY THROUGH A SEMESTER-LONG HONORS SYMPOSIUM**

**EARL BROWN, JR., MARGARET C. BROWN  
RADFORD UNIVERSITY/NATIONAL COLLEGIATE HONORS COUNCIL**

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper will focus on the theory and practice of a semester-long honors symposium on a current topic of significance to the academic and area community (e.g., the environment, service learning, ethics, the search for peace, cultural diversity). One purpose for such a symposium is to provide leadership opportunities for students to develop a topic, organize events (including time and place), find and contract speakers, create and distribute publicity both on and off campus, arrange for receptions and book signings, find students to introduce speakers, and create opportunities for students to present and share their research. A second purpose is to engage students in research on the topic and give them the opportunity to share their research with others, thus providing multiple perspectives on the topic. And, finally it offers the community a forum in which to come together to consider in depth an issue of social and political importance.

Ways to develop and facilitate a semester-long honors symposium will be discussed, as will a timetable for planning a symposium and ways to adapt courses, develop extra-curricular activities and programs, encourage student research, and involve the entire academic and area community. Additional topics include funding, student leadership and involvement, and using local expertise as well as bringing to campus nationally recognized authorities. The paper concludes with an exploration of ways to adapt courses to fit different symposia topics.

## **OVERVIEW**

To create a semester-long symposium, a faculty member or Honors Director needs to work with all departments, with religious organizations, with fraternities and sororities, and with area community leaders to create as broad and diverse a perspective on the subject as possible. Funding may be discovered in a wide variety of places. The Radford University Symposium received funding from the host university, the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the NCHC and the SRHC, to name just a few.

Symposia averaged approximately 100 events across a fifteen-week period, from experiential learning activities (field trips, service learning) to major speakers (Cornel West, David Mayberry-Lewis, Harold Hodgkinson, Allen Ginsberg, Noam Chomsky, and Tim O'Brien), to speakers from the community, to art exhibits, to musical performances, to Native American Powwows, to film series, to weekly talks with Vietnam veterans and their families, and to a Northern Kentucky University student's exhibit of a labyrinth she had created as her final honors project to promote greater awareness of women's issues. All of this culminated in an honors week with two or three major speakers, student presentations, and an honors banquet.

But the highlight of this symposium was the student presentations. Some twenty to thirty honors and non-honors classes focused some part of the semester on the symposium topic. Many of them would require students to do independent research and give a presentation on that research during Honors Week or during the University's Undergraduate Forum.

To adapt a course to fit the symposium topic, Maggie Brown would change books, use different films, and get different speakers to enhance her ENGL 102 honors section on the Vietnam War as well

as keep her weekly meetings with Vietnam veterans. During the Search for Peace symposium, she had students read books on the theory of war, brought in a poet to discuss his experience as a medic, and focused her film series on films dealing with war and its effects. During the symposium on Cultural Diversity, she used films about Vietnam, brought in a Vietnamese ex-prisoner of war, and read books detailing the experiences of blacks and women in the war.

Challenges of creating a semester-long symposium include the logistics of creating an honors colloquium for in-coming freshmen and determining a timeline, funding, assessment, and the number and variety of courses that participate in the symposium as well as the time allotted for the symposium topic during the semester in a particular course. Another challenge is how to get honors students involved in such or similar undertakings. A special opportunity is using the symposium as a model for students to present their research. Strategies for success include sending out letters in the summer to get students involved in making decisions, giving them a sense of ownership of the symposium and its topic, and reducing the frustration by providing students with explicit guidelines and assignments. Finally, it is very important to inform faculty of the opportunities available for their students during the semester-long symposium.

The symposium is an excellent means of involving the academic and area community in exploring a topic in depth. Some such activity whether it is a symposium or other similar endeavor is an important means of providing research and developmental opportunities for students. One participant offered this observation, "A major lesson of the Radford symposium example is that students should be involved in speakers and programs. It gives a tremendous sense of ownership and leadership experience."

## **SAMPLE SYMPOSIUM INFORMATION DOCUMENTS FROM RADFORD UNIVERSITY**

### **1. Pre-Semester Publicity for the 1995 Symposium**

*The Honors Program this spring is sponsoring a symposium celebrating diversity. The coordinating committee, chaired by Aliya Ishaq with Dr. Jeri Carter as her faculty advisor, have planned numerous activities as well as co-sponsored many others. The purpose of this and our other four symposia have been to bring to our campus and local community a greater awareness of the symposium's focus. We hope that through a close analysis we can all come to a greater understanding of and respect for each other and the world in which we live. But celebrating diversity is not enough for the coordinating committee. The committee feels very strongly that it is important to examine the validity of the concept of diversity. Is diversity always worth celebrating? Would it be better on some occasions if the world were less diverse? What role, for instance, has diversity of language played in hindering communications? Are we really willing to share our world with diseases intent on killing humanity? We need to explore all the ramifications and implications of diversity--celebrating it is not enough. The Honors Program believes that through the many honors courses that are focusing on this subject this semester and the many activities dealing with this subject that many of these and other issues will be raised. Only by giving this subject the close scrutiny it deserves can we all make our own decisions about the nature of diversity and its importance in our community, nation, and world.*

*Events this spring will kick off with a graffiti wall to give our university the opportunity to express their views on diversity followed by Dr. Karl Pribram's talk entitled "The Brain, A field of Dreams." Other major events include a talk on demographics by Dr. Harold Hodgkinson, Director of the Center for Demographic Policy, thanks to generous grants from the NCHC Portz Fund and the SRHC Dollars for Scholars; our keynote speech by Dr. Cornel West, Chair of the African Studies Department at Princeton, and author of Race Matters and other equally important works on race relations in the United States; a talk during honors week by Ms. Melinda Paras, Executive Director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force--both of these lectures are thanks to the generosity of the Scholarly Lecture Series; and The International Bartok Congress and the Bartok/Kabalevsky Piano*

*Competition, one of two congresses held in the United States, but the only one featuring Bartok's son as a guest speaker.*

*Other events which the Honors Program will sponsor or co-sponsor this spring include the annual Native American Heritage Association Powwow, Myer Reed 's two panel discussions--gays in the family and gays in the workplace, Anna Fariello Gallery Exhibit, entitled "Defining Ourselves"; International Student Association's World Fest Week and their monthly coffee houses, Appalachian Awareness Day, the Bread for Life Monday luncheons with a series of speakers on diversity cosponsored by the campus ministry; Dr. Karen Ross speaking on "Black Images in TV," co-sponsored with the Center for Gender Studies; Dr. Muriel Lederman speaking on "Feminist Science"; Ms. Opal Moore and Ms. Joy Harjo (cosponsored with the English Club and a grant from the Scholarly Lecture Series) reading from their poetry ; Buddy Timberg's film series comparing foreign films with their American counterparts; Maggie Brown's weekly series on Vietnam with films about Vietnam and a Vietnamese prisoner of war, and a panel of refugees put together by David Maxey.*

*But the highlight of this and all our symposiums will be the student presentations during Honors Week (April 3-8). When students get together to give presentations focusing on diversity, the university community has the chance to see true interdisciplinarity in action. The students drawing on their class discussion and assignments to make presentations create a dialogue which informs other students and faculty about diversity from that discipline's perspective.*

*What makes this symposium truly different will be the number of events dealing with diversity being sponsored by so many organizations this spring. It is as though the entire university has seen the need to discuss the issues of diversity. Organizations within the university have sponsored workshops, panel discussions, and talks on this subject. We are most pleased that through the enumerable activities on our campus this spring that diversity will not remain some abstract ideal but will become a part of all of our lives*

## **2. Teaching a Course Focusing on the Symposium**

*The advantage in having a course focus (in whole or in part) on the symposium is to give students taking one or more honors courses a chance to integrate material and ideas about that theme into their honors course(s). So that a discussion in a sociology course may take advantage of a speaker on chaos theory and discuss the effect that theory may have on society. Or, a film dealing with the theme may help students gain a different perspective on that theme than one they have gotten from your honors course.*

*1. Opportunities will be available to take advantages of additional resources:*

- 1. Speakers, panels*
- 2. Workshops*
- 3. Field trips*
- 4. Service-learning activities*
- 5. Films and other programs*

*2. Students will have opportunities to:*

- 1. Give presentations, especially during **Honors Week or at the Undergraduate Forum.***
- 2. Introduce speakers*
- 3. Display artwork*
- 4. Take on leadership roles--for more information, contact Allison Rose (arose@runet)*

*How you take advantage of these opportunities or how you integrate them into your course is up to you but we hope that you will give students credit for attending events, giving presentations and providing other support roles for and during the symposium. (The Symposium Organizing Committee will arrange for students to pick up slips at the event to prove that they attended if you need some sort of verification. I*

*myself have students write a response to each event that they attend. We also create a published record of our symposium and if your students' responses are good, we would like to publish them in our book.)*

## **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES**

Margaret Brown taught honors courses for many years at Radford University, focusing particularly on the Vietnam War. She is currently the Editor of the *National Honors Report*, a quarterly journal published by the National Collegiate Honors Council, and is working on her second novel.

Earl B. Brown, Jr. served as Director of the Radford University Honors Program from 1984 to 1997. He currently is in his second term as Executive Secretary/Treasurer of the National Collegiate Honors Council.