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Community Beyond Honors: Butler University's Community Fellows Program

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ABSTRACT

Campus collaboration between academic areas is often encouraged but can be difficult to implement in practice. Opportunities for instructional collaboration where the goals of each program must be met are even more challenging. Despite such challenges, a collaboration known as the Community Fellows Program was initiated between the Honors Program and the Center for Citizenship and Community at Butler University. The Community Fellows Program has not only brought together academic and programmatic areas at Butler but also introduced Indianapolis community leaders to honors students, faculty, and staff. While our students have appreciated the community leaders' "real world" experiences, the community leaders have been invigorated by the experience of working with our students in the Honors Program. This article describes the process that brought these elements together, the results of the collaboration, and our hopes for future implementation of the Community Fellows Program at Butler University.

BACKGROUND

Butler University is a comprehensive university that educates close to 4,000 undergraduate students. The Honors Program at Butler University is an interdisciplinary program open to all undergraduates. It is both selective and elective as students are invited to apply based on their academic achievement, program application, and decision to join the program. Once admitted to Butler, these students are invited to join throughout their first year of academic study. Additionally, students who achieve the appropriate academic qualifications may petition to join the program at any time provided they are able to complete the program prior to graduation. Approximately ten percent of the undergraduates at Butler are current participants of the Honors Program.

The Honors Program requirements include completion of four of Butler's interdisciplinary Honors Program courses; completion of a departmental honors course, and completion and presentation of an honors thesis. The Honors courses are taught by Butler faculty from all five colleges as well as selected

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community members in areas of expertise not offered by our faculty base. Students from all disciplines enroll in these courses. With only one exception, these courses do not fulfill core requirements, and none of these Honors courses may be counted toward the academic major of the student.

Butler University's Center for Citizenship and Community (CCC) was founded in 1996. Its work is informed by the educational mission of the university, and the Center is dedicated to engaging university faculty, staff, and students in addressing community-based issues that have an impact on individuals and families beyond the campus. In 1999, the CCC was awarded a Community Outreach Partnership Centers (COPC) grant and in 2003 a COPC New Directions Grant, both administered through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Office of University Partnerships. These grants have enabled the CCC to strengthen its existing community partnerships, develop new relationships with community-based organizations, and invigorate the university's curricular offerings with innovative courses that bring students into direct contact with community members and the challenges they face.

COMMUNITY FELLOWS PROGRAM

In 2003, Dr. Margaret Brabant, director of the Center for Citizenship and Community, approached the director of the Honors Program with her idea to create a "Community Fellows" teaching position at the university. After years of working with secular and faith-based leaders and community activists throughout the broader Indianapolis area, Brabant sought to bring the experience and knowledge of some of these professionals to the campus. As she considered where within the existing curriculum such professionals might teach, the Honors Program struck her as most hospitable for the following reasons. First, the program encourages both an interdisciplinary and inter-college pedagogical approach to student learning. Second, the program has a history of providing the means through which more experimental and/or specialized courses have been introduced into the standard curriculum. Third, the program's infrastructure allows for greater flexibility in terms of course meeting times and locations, thereby enabling students more readily to attend cultural events (e.g., concerts, plays, lectures) that are incorporated for the express purpose of supplementing classroom learning. Importantly, the flexibility of the program also permits the effective use of the service-learning pedagogy and offers access through which the university can welcome the intellectual and moral stimulation that the Community Fellows promise.

Brabant was able to secure a Community Outreach Partnership Centers/New Directions grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. A portion of this grant's budget was allocated to cover CCC administrative costs for the project and half of the expenses associated with the fellows—one stipend and teaching supplies. This allocation was matched by a similar commitment from the Honors Program. The initiative was launched in the 2004–2005 academic year and completed in the 2005–06 academic year.

Fellows were selected based on relevant professional and teaching competency as demonstrated by their *vitae* and presentation of course material to Drs. Brabant and Wilson. Prospective fellows were interviewed a full year prior to their teaching assignment in order to allow Brabant and Wilson sufficient time to consider the course designs submitted and to permit the fellows the time necessary to prepare their respective courses. Each fellow was expected to teach an upper-division Honors course with an enrollment cap of 15 students. Fellows were expected to incorporate within their respective course structures a method whereby students could share their semester-long research and learning with the university as well as broader Indianapolis communities. Fellows also agreed that they would make a presentation at a meeting of the Center for Citizenship and Community's Advisory Board. Two courses were offered, one in the spring of 2005, the other in the fall of 2005. Each was offered for two credit hours, normal for an Honors course, and the Community Fellow was compensated \$1700, the nominal stipend awarded to all adjunct faculty teaching Honors courses.

COURSE DESIGNS AND OBJECTIVES

The first course offered by a Community Fellow, entitled "Design, Ecology, and Community," was presented in the spring of 2005. This course was taught by Sam Miller, an architect with CSO Inc., based in Indianapolis. Miller's interests lie in "green architecture," and he designed the course to encourage students to examine a series of ecological questions related to design systems that include natural and human-made structures. The course also encouraged students to consider the interrelatedness of place with spirit, the interdependence of species, and different ways to use social activism for the betterment of one's local, national and global communities.

Guest speakers were invited to speak with students both about the course readings, which focused on the connections and dislocations between architectural designs and ecological systems, and about their professional experiences. These professionals were also invited to attend, and offer commentary upon, the students' final presentations. Students were instructed to select topics of research that would enable them to study and reflect upon the reasons they felt a particular connectedness to a given place in terms of their own physical and spiritual balance. Many of the students' final presentations included photographs taken and observations recorded from such sites.

The second community fellow, Allison Luthe-King, MSW, with Community Solutions Inc., of Indianapolis offered a course entitled "Grassroots Growth" in the fall of 2005. Her syllabus explains that the course was designed to help students "explore the various strategies for addressing issues of poverty, social justice and racial justice from the grassroots perspective in Indianapolis." Students were urged to consider, through course readings that provided philosophical and political foundations, why certain urban neighborhoods are distinguishable by "high concentrations of low-income residents and/or African American

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residents” and suffer from various forms of civic neglect. In addition to asking students to “compare and contrast the strategies implemented by traditional and non-traditional not-for-profit organizations,” the course also exposed students to the various funding streams that are directed to restore a measure of “social and racial equity.” In order to better acquaint students with different communities and the issues encountered by families and individuals, the course was conducted primarily off-campus at an area community center. Guest speakers from grass roots organizations, non-profit organizations, and educational institutions brought students face-to-face with leaders and emerging leaders who daily attempt to alleviate poverty’s pain and offer a measure of justice to those most frequently ignored. Ms. King ends her course description with the following wish: “I hope you find it a valuable and humbling experience” (HN300 Fall ’05 syllabus).

The “Grassroots Growth” course also included a service-learning component that provided opportunities for students to compare what they were reading and discussing as a community of scholars with first-hand experiences gleaned from weekly encounters with community-based activists. The service-learning component was designed, according to King, to provide students with opportunities that could enhance the students’ ability to reflect upon “the challenges communities face to make progress on social justice” (syllabus). As with any well-designed service-learning component, we made certain that the appropriate service project was developed in consultation with our community partners and stakeholders. Supplemental oversight of the service-learning component of the course was provided by the Center for Citizenship and Community, which is charged with creating, maintaining and advancing partnerships between Butler as an academic and neighborhood institution and our surrounding communities. The students’ final reports were delivered at a community service site. These presentations generated additional interest on the part of community members to learn more about Butler University’s CCC and Community Fellows program. One outcome of the service-learning component of this course included an invitation extended to Allison King to make a presentation on her course design at the annual Governor’s conference on service and volunteerism.

The Community Fellows program requires no additional staffing beyond that which already exists. It is coordinated and evaluated by Brabant and Wilson with support from Melissa Ludwa, Honors Program Coordinator. In addition to the \$1700 stipend, each Faculty Fellow has been awarded \$300 for professional development (books, videos, preparative materials, tickets for a show or event, etc.).

COURSE ASSESSMENT

The usual assessment tools have been employed to determine the effectiveness of the program. These tools include teaching evaluations, interim evaluations, and enrollment lists to gauge student response. Additionally, community

members were invited to comment on their interactions with students and to give their assessment of student presentations. Prior to the course commencement, the directors of the CCC and the Honors Program consulted with the fellows to review course objectives, goals, and expectations and to establish a mid-term evaluation that was appropriately tailored to their respective courses and teaching styles. The directors also used the university's standard end-of-semester course evaluation that is completed by students in all honors courses. In addition, Brabant and Ludwa remained in contact with the fellows throughout the semester to offer support and guidance. Finally, the respective directors consulted with the fellows upon completion of their courses to assess the experience with each fellow and to determine how the program fared from the fellow's perspective and how the program might be improved for future fellows. Both fellows presented at the CCC's Advisory Board meetings (Miller in March 2005 and King in December 2005).

TESTIMONIES

We include only a representative sample of the students' responses to the Honors course evaluation questions. The evaluation questions are: "In what ways was the Honors course different from your other courses? To what extent was it challenging? What are your thoughts on the reading and writing assignments? Your instructor? The class environment?" Selected answers to these questions follow:

"DESIGN, ECOLOGY, AND COMMUNITY," SPRING 2005

"This course made me really think about the world we are living in today and how it could and should be changed for the better. The challenge was realizing that things that I take as 'given' in the world are really often hurting the way society could be. . . . This course has sparked my interest in the ways society and place must be integrated—not just be two separate ideas. In the future, I am sure I will . . . *actively* attempt to support community-based ideas. Life in America could be so much better if everyone was actively involved in creating community—not just a place to live."

"This course looked at a variety of issues: engineering, design, ecological process, community . . . things that I'm intrigued by but never would have looked at otherwise. It was challenging in the sense of analyzation—Sam had us break down things and look at the basics and how to create change. It is hard to think outside the box when you don't really realize that you're in one."

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“This class expanded my interest in the environment and how humans interact and affect it. Professor Miller more guided our thoughts [rather than] teaching them to us. We were free to think on our own and expand our talents. The reading was somewhat extensive, even more than an English class, but most of it was purposeful. Overall, this class offered me something I couldn’t get from my major and other core class.”

“GRASSROOTS GROWTH,” FALL 2005

“This course was dynamic in that it used many resources and combined them to present a great deal of information and different types of educational opportunities that have been easy to retain. The assignments complemented the other parts of the course, the instructor was very knowledgeable, and the environment was essential.”

“This course was different from others in that we were actually immersed in the community. This was a crucial part to the class and was very enjoyable and educational. The class and instructor were great for expressing ideas and fostering discussions. It challenged us to think about the problems in our community and what WE can do to help.”

“This course has been very different in that we held class at various sites around the city of Indianapolis in order to truly see and interact with communities and their citizens. The course demanded much out of class time. But this requirement proved instrumental to the learning in this course and therefore [is] justified. The reading requirements added to the learning and discussion in this course. Professor King is knowledgeable on grass-roots growth due to her education, profession, and personal experiences. I recommend that she lead another similar honors course.”

“Great learning experience because we actually were able to learn things by interacting and spending time with people who are different from us! More classes like this one are definitely needed!”

In addition to student evaluations, we also value the faculty members’ response to teaching the courses. We asked each faculty member to reflect on the teaching experience. Following are the responses from the faculty members:

“DESIGN, ECOLOGY, AND COMMUNITY,” SPRING 2005

“I had a blast this semester. Also managed to see the outlines of some new ideas as well. The teacher got taught; exactly what I’d hoped!”

“GRASSROOTS GROWTH,” FALL 2005

“[The students] really enjoyed getting off of campus. I also think the guest speakers (residents and non-residents) presented them with some variety of issues and viewpoints. I could tell from their reflection papers that they all got different things from different aspects of the class, so I think it was valuable to everyone in one form or another. I also think we’ll get a lot from their evaluations, hopefully, as we spent a lot of time talking about how to spread this beyond the fifteen students.

Many [students] suggested visiting other neighborhoods. . . . My original intent was to visit four different neighborhoods, but I didn’t feel they would have enough time to feel a “connection” to anyone in a particular neighborhood. I still think this and would stick with one primary neighborhood.”

The students’ testimonies are powerful statements concerning the relevancy of these particular courses in their lives. The faculty reflections similarly indicate that the Community Fellows had positive experiences and an interest in sustained involvement with our students.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

As we expected, the inclusion of community leaders into the teaching faculty of Butler University has had an impact on the lives of Butler students, faculty and staff. Working with the Community Fellows has broadened our students’ awareness of and interest in urban problems manifested in various Indianapolis neighborhoods. Further, the direct exchange of information and experience and the service-learning components that are part of Community Fellows Honors courses have increased our students’ understanding that many urban problems are systemic and will not be diminished, let alone eliminated, without innovative and heart-felt thinking. It is our contention, after one full year of operating this program and two successful course offerings, that the Community Fellows have enhanced Butler’s ability to communicate that a college degree should be a communal asset and not merely another accoutrement of social status that is devoid of moral worth.

The program has also had a positive impact on the Community Fellows and the populations they serve. Minimally, we expected that they would travel between two distinct worlds—the academy and the direct service realm—and in so doing would remind us all of the paradox that, while learning takes us to heady gathering sites of information and facts, it also humbles us as we ponder

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the truth of Socrates' assertion that the wisest among us is the one who realizes the paucity and frailty of human knowledge. Our hope was that the fellows would return to their clients with renewed perspectives on their own work and deeper understanding of the ways academics can and should address the needs of urban areas through teaching and research methods. First-hand knowledge of the inner workings of "the academy" has better equipped the Community Fellows to communicate to their co-workers and the clients they serve the importance and significance of a college education.

The success of these initial pilot courses has garnered a commitment from the CCC and the Honors Program to continue the Community Fellows teaching program. The Community Fellows program aligns with our university's commitment as an urban institution to recognizing educational value in partnerships with surrounding communities.

As we move forward in developing the Community Fellows program at Butler University, we hope that the Fellows will continue to be party to an education reform movement. The roots of this movement stem from the Jeffersonian notion that an educated citizenry is one willing and able to communicate its concerns to political leaders, hold its leaders accountable for their actions (or inactions), and transfer political power when the citizenry deems such change necessary and desirable.

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