

2008

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Sara Quay  
*Endicott College*

Amy Damico  
*Endicott College, squay@endicott.edu*

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SARA E. QUAY AND AMY M. DAMICO

# Cultural Studies as the Foundation for an Honors Program: Documenting Students' Academic and Personal Growth

SARA E. QUAY AND AMY M. DAMICO

ENDICOTT COLLEGE

*"I will take the concepts I learned in this class with me for the rest of my life. I am no longer content to believe only what I am told."*

—A first year Endicott Scholar

## ABSTRACT

A new honors program based on the field of cultural studies rigorously combines theory and practice, resulting in significant academic and personal growth among participating honors students. Particular activities and assignments connect academic theories to real world experiences, including writing a 'shopping' paper, eating dinner at an Indian restaurant, conducting an ethnography, playing the Game of Life, and participating in a walking tour of Ground Zero. Pre- and post-test assessments, five qualitative surveys, and an end-of-the-year comprehensive portfolio are used to document student learning. A new honors journal publishes an essay by each student from the first year in the program. Key areas of growth are identified as students' ability to apply academic theories, be confident as students, comprehend difficult reading material, and write sound academic papers.

## WHY CULTURAL STUDIES?

At our small comprehensive college, the creation of a new honors program provided the chance to consider what it means to educate honors students in the twenty-first century. What do today's honors students need to know, and what are they able to do? How can an honors program support these goals, particularly in the context of our college's unique mission? The vast majority of our students arrive on campus to pursue professional majors and participate in a series of academic internships. The new honors program was designed to exist

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outside of these majors and experiences and, due to heavy requirements in many programs of study, to fulfill the general education requirements of students participating in the program. Therefore, the program was set up to explore the liberal arts while staying true to the mission of the college, which aims to “instill in students an understanding of and an appreciation for professional and liberal studies [and to put into action] the concept of applied learning” ([www.endicott.edu](http://www.endicott.edu)). In order to be most meaningful to our students, the program was designed to help them connect the liberal and professional arts and to tie theory to practice outside the classroom.

The field of cultural studies became the focus of this design. Cultural studies is by its very nature interdisciplinary, drawing on theories from fields as diverse as English, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and communications (Lindlof, n.d.). In fact, as Smith (2004) writes, by “its very nature, cultural analysis is always going to include in its project a questioning and investigation of the forms of disciplinary knowledge.” At the same time, cultural studies is about more than classroom learning. The field asks students to use the theories they study “to think critically about basic beliefs about how people and social institutions operate” (Stearns 2004) and to explain those beliefs through active observation and research. This unique juncture between theory and practice fits our college’s mission of applied learning, and from the outset we believed it would both academically challenge and personally interest our honors students. Furthermore, as Smith (2004) states, these “ways of exploring reality . . . are intellectually coherent and part of what’s necessary for today’s educated citizenry.”

### THE ENDICOTT SCHOLARS PROGRAM

Using cultural studies as its foundation, the Endicott Scholars Honors Program was built around the following learning objectives: students will (1) develop the habit of intellectual curiosity; (2) understand the concepts of “culture” and “theory” from a variety of academic perspectives; (3) identify ways of thinking and knowing within academic and professional disciplines; (4) comprehend challenging readings in primary and secondary sources; (5) write academic papers that are intellectually sound and stylistically proficient; (6) serve as models of intellectual seriousness and courage; and (7) assume leadership roles in and out of class.

To meet these goals, the program requires students to complete a series of honors seminars throughout their undergraduate years. As freshmen, students complete a two-course sequence that introduces them to the field of cultural studies, *HON100 Honors Seminar I* and *HON150 Honors Seminar II*. These courses lay the groundwork of cultural studies by requiring students to read a wide range of academic articles within the field of cultural studies (see Appendix A). The foundational seminars provide students with the background in cultural theories that allows them to pursue the rigorous upper level HON350 seminars.

During the inaugural year of the Endicott Scholars program in 2006, students read and applied the ideas, theories, and concepts they were learning in a variety of academic assignments, including an ethnography, a textual analysis, a literature review, and a cultural response paper about September 11th (see Appendix B). The cohort participated in a range of out-of-class activities, including lunch with a campus guest speaker, dinner at a local Indian restaurant (where they practiced taking field notes for their ethnographies), and a trip to Ground Zero as part of a unit on September 11<sup>th</sup>. The trip to Ground Zero gave students a chance to apply what they had been reading and writing about all year to a real place and a real experience. They were able to reflect on their learning during the year and consider how their understanding of culture had changed.

## **PROGRAM ASSESSMENT**

The Endicott Scholars program was assessed at the end of its first year. Each of the seven program objectives was evaluated with at least one and sometime multiple outcome measures, including pre- and post-curriculum surveys of reading comprehension, terminology, and application; weekly on-line threaded discussions; and a comprehensive self-reflective portfolio based on all program objectives and student work from the entire year.

### **LEARNING OBJECTIVE 1: DEVELOP THE HABIT OF INTELLECTUAL CURIOSITY**

The “habit of intellectual curiosity” refers to students’ ability to connect their classroom learning to their lived experience and their desire to ask questions about the world around them. This objective was assessed using a comprehensive portfolio that asked students to “Describe 2 concepts/readings/ideas from this course that you found especially interesting, that made you want to learn more, or that led you to think about the world around you differently. In a 3-4 page essay, describe each concept/reading/idea and demonstrate how it impacted you and your ways of thinking” (Appendix C).

Evidence that students had met this program objective was demonstrated in 100% of their portfolios. Students commented repeatedly that the material and activities of the course “opened their eyes” in new ways. Examples of student comments include the following:

“After a year of learning about culture, texts, and cultural work, I now have the hunger to learn more about everything.”

“[The concepts] made me recognize the reproduction of certain aspects of culture and made me question why these things are reproduced in certain cultures and not others . . . they impacted my way of thinking greatly and stretched the way I thought, the way I went about my problem solving and understanding, expanding my horizon of thinking in big ways.”

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“The study of these theories from the honors program will be present in the back of my mind forever. I will be unconsciously examining every type of text I come across whether it be a store I am shopping at or a movie I am watching. This class has truly helped me to become more aware of my surroundings.”

### **LEARNING OBJECTIVE 2: UNDERSTAND THE CONCEPTS OF “CULTURE” AND “THEORY” FROM A VARIETY OF ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVES**

“Theory” and “culture” are central to the discipline of cultural studies and students explored many types of theories and many definitions of culture throughout the year. This program objective was assessed through the reflective portfolio, which asked them to “Choose two of those theories and write a 3-4 page essay that: 1. summarizes, in your own words, the main ideas of each theory; 2. describes how each theory can be used to understand culture; and 3. compares and contrasts what happens when a similar cultural text is read through the lens of each theory” (Appendix C).

One hundred percent of Endicott Scholars indicated that HON100 and HON150 expanded their understanding of culture and theory:

“I came to see that there is much more to culture than what the dictionary says. I was encouraged to look at the world from many different points of view, and I learned that there is more than one way to read an aspect of culture. In everything I did and saw, it was like experiencing it through the new eyes I gained from the Scholars Program.”

“I was able to apply the cultural theories and concepts that we learned about in class to practically everything around me . . . I feel it is worth mentioning that I will be able to apply cultural theories and concepts as I begin my clinical next year. I will be able to observe and participate in the micro-cultures of nursing throughout a hospital.”

Assessment of this objective also occurred through a questionnaire given after the spring trip to Ground Zero. In a post-trip reflection, students were asked to imagine taking the trip to Ground Zero a year earlier, before they had been introduced to cultural studies, and then to answer the question “How was your experience of NYC impacted by the ideas you have learned this year?” Students responded as follows:

“I always knew that the twin towers symbolized the wealth and power of America, but knowing more about texts and ideologies helped me to understand exactly why they were targeted and how great an impact 9/11 has had on America.”

“[If I had gone to NYC before this class]I would definitely have not examined what I was seeing critically. I would have accepted what

was in front of me and probably left NYC with the same amount of understanding as I had when I came. But through all the concepts [we studied] I was able to see how culture has changed and think back to how NY must have been before 9/11."

"Without this class, this tour would have been a visit to a place where something devastating happened. But because we've discussed many aspects of cultural theory I was interested in everything—from the economic impact of selling WTC memorabilia, which could be some individual's principle income, to what the role of leaving some rubble and pieces in their original form since the attacks says about what we need to hold on to."

### **LEARNING OBJECTIVE 3: IDENTIFY WAYS OF THINKING AND KNOWING WITHIN ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL DISCIPLINES**

Students were expected to learn about a wide range of academic and professional disciplines throughout the year, and the selected readings for the course addressed content relevant to the theories and practices in many fields of study. Specific assignments—including the ethnography, textual analysis, cultural response paper, and a literature review—were completed during the foundational sequence, addressing the multidisciplinary theories and practices. All of the Endicott Scholars completed the assignments, and thorough assessments of their work indicated that students were in tune with the course content.

As the year progressed, students demonstrated deeper understandings of course material. The first year's focus on some of the theories used in cultural studies (such as neo-Marxist theory, feminism, and cultural imperialism) as well as skills in research practice (such as interviews, observational fieldwork, and library research) provided students with different vantage points from which to think about their individual programs of study. In class discussion, papers, and on-line threaded discussions, students demonstrated a broader application of course terminology and concepts as was most evident in the progression of on-line discussion contributions by each student. Initially, student responses to the assigned readings contained phrases such as "I'm not sure if I'm right," "I was a little confused about what [the author] was saying," or "I didn't get it," indicating the students' lack of confidence in their understanding of the material. As students made their way into the first semester of the course, this discourse began to change as students wrote posts that spoke specifically to the content of the reading and the authors' perspectives. Students also began to craft responses that connected the material being read and discussed in class to their individual majors and other classes.

In the second semester, students evidently were able to apply the knowledge gained in the first-year sequence of honors seminars to their other classes, activities, and majors. As a nursing major described, "I was able to apply the

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cultural theories and concepts that we learned about in class to practically everything around me. . . . I feel it is worth mentioning that I will be able to apply cultural theories and concepts as I begin my clinical next year. I will be able to observe and participate in the micro-cultures of nursing throughout a hospital." Another student wrote, "I feel that second semester . . . was a major turning point for me. I began to apply all the concepts I had learned previously, I discovered and worked towards good study habits, and I felt more comfortable in everything I was doing."

### **LEARNING OBJECTIVE 4: COMPREHEND CHALLENGING READINGS IN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCES**

Students were required to read assignments from a variety of academic disciplines, including anthropology, communications, literary studies, philosophy, and sociology (Appendix A). This program objective was assessed through both a pre- and post-test survey of reading comprehension and the first-year portfolio. The pre- and post-test survey asked students to evaluate their understanding of one of the most difficult and important readings of the course, Lindlof's essay "Cultural Studies." Specifically, students were asked: "On a scale from 1-5, how well did you understand this reading?" A score of 1 meant "I did not understand this reading at all" while a score of 5 meant "I understood this reading very well." Students completed the survey after they read the essay for the first time in the fall, and then again at the end of the spring semester.

On the pre- and post-test assessment of reading comprehension, all but one of the Endicott Scholars recorded increased understanding of Lindlof's essay. In September the majority of the students rated themselves a 3 while in May the most common rating was a 5. During the May classroom session, when students were asked to revisit Lindlof and assess their comprehension, a number of students commented aloud about how well they understood the main points of the essay. Several students noted on the written comprehension assessment that they could see how much they had learned over the year. One stated, "I feel like this is our final exam. Everything we learned is in here."

This objective was also assessed through the reflective portfolio which asked students to "Look back at the readings you were asked to complete as an Endicott Scholar this year. In a 1-2 page essay, describe your growth as a reader this year. Compare and contrast your confidence and comprehension from September to May. Be specific. Feel free to include quotes of passages from readings that exemplify change in your understanding, note specific readings that marked turning points in your reading, or quote your own gullnet posts. Identify 1-2 ways you can challenge yourself to be a better reader in the future." Students reflected in their portfolios on the change in reading comprehension between September and May:

“From September to May, my confidence as a reader went from thinking I was going to flunk the course because I would never understand what we were reading, to being so glad that I could grasp more than I had before and wanting to add to the knowledge gained from the reading.”

“My comprehension of the material has increased so much since this course started, and as a result I am more confident in all of my work, including gullnet posts and papers. I am now able to discern difficult readings with ease compared to nine months ago.”

“Most of all, this class helped me to wholly understand complex readings and subjects.”

“Overall, I feel that my reading skills have greatly improved through completing such challenging assignments.”

### **LEARNING OBJECTIVE 5: WRITE ACADEMIC PAPERS THAT ARE INTELLECTUALLY SOUND AND STYLISTICALLY PROFICIENT**

Endicott Scholars were asked to develop their skills as writers over the course of the year. This objective was assessed through the self-reflective portfolio and through the Endicott Scholars publication, *Exploring Culture*. In the portfolio students were asked to “Choose three papers you wrote this year and in a 2-3-page essay describe how each registers your growth as 1. a student and 2. a writer. These papers do not have to be your best. Rather, they should mark turning points in your understanding of yourself as a learner and as a writer. Be specific in your reflections: what was it like to write each essay and how did it change you? At least one of the papers should be from the first semester.”

One hundred percent of the students in the program thought they had improved their writing skills. For instance, students wrote in their reflective portfolio:

“When I looked back on the work that I accomplished in the beginning of the year compared to what I am completing now, I was shocked. My papers showed growth in analyzing and organizational skills. They now flow smoother and make points that display critical thinking.”

“I am thrilled by the improvement in my writing over the course of this year. I know I will carry the skills and new understanding of myself as a writer, throughout my writing for the rest of my time here at Endicott and beyond.”

Students were also asked to select the written assignment they had completed during the year that they felt best reflected this objective. The essays

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were published in a newly established journal, *Exploring Culture*, which published writing by Endicott Scholars.

Inclusion of the essay in the journal documented the best of their academic writing throughout the year.

### **LEARNING OBJECTIVE 6: SERVE AS MODELS OF INTELLECTUAL SERIOUSNESS AND COURAGE**

Participants in the Endicott Scholars program are also expected to be models of academic excellence on the college campus. Such excellence is defined by the required 3.5 GPA as well as their commitment to learning and their willingness to take intellectual risks.

Seventy-nine percent of the students in the first year of the program maintained the required 3.5 GPA. While this percentage was lower than anticipated, it also reflects the academic challenge of participating in an honors program.

In the self-reflective portfolio students were asked to “Describe 2 concepts/readings/ideas from this course that you found especially interesting—that made you want to learn more or led you to think about the world around you differently. In a 3-4 page essay, describe each concept/reading/idea and demonstrate how it impacted you and your ways of thinking.” Responses included the following:

“Looking back at all that I have learned this year in the Endicott Scholars Program, I have discovered one consistent finding: I have become a much more confident student.”

“The honors program has prepared me in so many ways for the challenges I will face as I move through my college career.”

### **LEARNING OBJECTIVE 7: ASSUME LEADERSHIP ROLES IN AND OUT OF CLASS**

Finally, Endicott Scholars are expected to be engaged in the college community, not only in academics but in other areas of campus life. Students were surveyed at the end of the first year of the program to assess the types of leadership roles they had assumed and to determine what percentage of them were participating in such activities.

Eighty-nine percent of first-year students participated in at least one leadership role outside of class. Examples of such roles included resident assistant, student activities board member, peer mentor, athlete, student nursing association member, community service volunteer, oratory society participant, model United Nations participant, chorus member, and admissions volunteer.

## CHALLENGES

As with the implementation of any new program, a number of challenges arose during the first year of the Endicott Scholars Program and in teaching the HON100, HON150 sequence for the first time. For example, students must maintain at 3.5 GPA throughout their tenure in the program. If they don't maintain this average, they have a one-semester grace period to raise their grades before they are dismissed. At the end of the first semester, 68% of students had met this requirement and 32% had to use their one-semester grace period to remain in the program. By the end of the first year, 79% of students had met the required GPA. In the program's second year, two changes were implemented to improve these percentages. First, the initial selection process whereby students are invited to apply to the program was changed. Instead of inviting accepted students who earned over a certain SAT score to apply, a larger pool of accepted student admissions files was reviewed to ensure that those who were invited to apply to the program had the highest possibilities of being accepted. Second, during the midpoint of the semester, students in the second year of the Scholars program were requested to check in with all their professors and obtain an estimate of their class grades so that students who potentially were in danger of not making the required GPA could be identified with enough time to raise grades.

As professors teaching the first-year sequence, we initially were a little too ambitious in our syllabus. We had not allowed enough time for students to process, think about, and apply some of the theoretical concepts to which we were introducing them. We had to make some adjustments as we progressed through the course, and in the following year's syllabus we built in more time for working with and discussing challenging concepts and readings. We also were not initially aware of just how frustrated students were with their first paper grades, which were mostly Cs. Upon reflection we realized that, because students were engaged in the intellectual work of struggling to make sense of and apply some theoretical concepts that were new to them, their paper writing efforts were solely focused in this direction. As a result, the organization, sentence structure, and synthesis of ideas in their first papers were extremely weak. To confront this issue directly, we altered the syllabus to talk more about the process of writing and built some peer-criticism days into the semester. In the second year, we kept the practice of dedicating time to teaching writing and working with drafts and added a shorter first paper that was not worth a high percentage of their grade to introduce students to the kinds of papers expected in the seminar. At the end of the first year, we also asked for feedback on the program in general and used this to fine tune the class for the next year.

## CONCLUSION

A newly developed honors program chose the field of cultural studies as its foundation based on the interdisciplinary nature of the discipline and its ability

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to challenge students to connect theory to practice. Through a thorough program assessment at the end of the first year, the cultural studies curriculum succeeded in meeting the program's six learning outcomes. Students demonstrated increased skills not only as readers and writers but as able readers of cultural texts. Their heightened understanding, observation, and inquiry into the world around them were repeatedly evident in their papers and reflective portfolios as well as in their growth as individuals and scholars. Although we encountered a few challenges in the program's first year, we have made some tailored adjustments to better the program as it becomes more integrated into our College. We are looking forward to developing it further as the years progress.

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The authors may be contacted at  
[squay@endicott.edu](mailto:squay@endicott.edu).

## APPENDIX A

### SAMPLE CULTURAL STUDIES READINGS

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## APPENDIX B

### SAMPLE CULTURAL STUDIES ASSIGNMENTS

#### **Text Analysis Paper**

We have spent some time exploring what it means to read a “text,” including the ways in which texts influence people to think and act in certain ways. We have also discussed how texts can be sites of struggle over meaning, or places where different cultural beliefs compete to be heard. In this assignment you will be a detective in search of meanings in a cultural text of your choosing. Your first task is to select a cultural text from the list provided. Next, you will begin to interpret the text, describing specific ways in which the text influences people’s beliefs. In doing so, you will need to discuss ways in which the text is a site of struggle for competing meanings. What are those meanings? What elements in the text record their presence? Which meaning is dominant? How does that dominance reflect cultural beliefs, including tensions, in society more generally? Throughout this paper, you must use the language of semiotics and ideology as discussed and applied in class.

#### **Shopping Paper**

This assignment invites you to explore the “culture” of three different stores: Old Navy, The Gap, and The Banana Republic. Please visit each of these establishments and try on (as if you were considering to purchase) a pair of khaki pants and a button down shirt. While in each store you will want to note its culture: consider the layout, the lighting, the presentation of clothing and other items, the prices, the changing rooms, the staff, the assistance offered to you or asked for, etc. Keep track of your experience looking for and trying on clothes in each store. Note any similarities and differences. Consider how these aspects of the stores’ “cultures” can be interpreted using the concepts discussed in class and in the readings. Please also complete some research on these places of business—look at their websites and conduct a library search to see what has been written about them in professional and academic publications. Throughout this paper, you must use the language of semiotics and ideology as discussed and applied in class. In a 5-7 page paper compare and contrast the cultures of each store, drawing upon your experiences and observations to support your main points. Use outside research to contextualize your findings and summary descriptions. In your analysis of Old Navy, The Gap, and The Banana Republic, be sure to utilize concepts and vernacular discussed in the course readings and class discussion. You may use first person voice to write this paper, but the tone should be formal and all outside research should be appropriately documented using APA style.

#### **Ethnography Paper**

Please complete an ethnographic, cultural observation and write up an 8-10 page analysis of the observation using critical discourse and tying in course

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content and a brief (3 pages) personal reflection about how this course has influenced the way you now view the cultural event. A cultural observation should be made of some common occurrence in our society (examples: a visit to McDonalds, observation of the prom dress department at a department store, observation of how listening stations are used at a music store, a visit to an arcade, club, movie theater, book group, etc.) You may use direct observation (observing and taking notes without any interaction) or participant observation (observing and taking notes while you participate in the event or activity). Both observation methods will be reviewed in class. You should also complete at least one in-depth interview with a participant who frequents your location. Interviewing methodology will be reviewed in class. You must have your site approved by us.

## APPENDIX C: REFLECTIVE PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT

### **Learning Objectives 1 & 3**

*Develop the habit of intellectual curiosity*

*Identify ways of thinking and knowing within academic and professional disciplines*

*Assessment:* Describe 2 concepts/readings/ideas from this course that you found especially interesting—that made you want to learn more or led you to think about the world around you differently. In a 3-4 page essay, describe each concept/reading/idea and demonstrate how it impacted you and your ways of thinking. (30%)

### **Learning Objectives 2 & 6**

*Understand the concepts of “culture” and “theory” from a variety of academic perspectives*

*Serve as models of intellectual seriousness and courage*

*Assessment:* Throughout the year, we have read many different theories about culture and have applied these theories to different texts. Choose two of those theories and write a 3-4 essay that: 1. summarizes, in your own words, the main ideas of each theory; 2. describes how each theory can be used to understand culture; and 3. compares and contrasts what happens when a similar cultural text is read through the lens of each theory. (30%)

### **Learning Objective 4**

*Comprehend challenging readings in primary and secondary sources*

*Assessment:* Look back at the readings you were asked to complete as an Endicott Scholar this year. Re-read Lindlof’s “Cultural Studies” essay, and an additional essay that you found particular challenging. Consider what aspects of the essay you understand at the end of the year. In a 1-2 page essay, describe your growth as a reader this year. Compare and contrast your confidence and comprehension from September to May. Identify 1-2 ways you can challenge yourself to be a better reader in the future. (10%)

### **Learning Objective 5**

*Write academic papers that are intellectually sound and stylistically proficient*

*Assessment:* Choose three papers you wrote this year and in a 3-page essay describe how each registers your growth as 1. a student and 2. a writer. These papers do not have to be your best. Rather, they should be turning points in your understanding of yourself as a learner and as a writer. Feel free to draw on

the in-class writing you did as evidence of your growth. At least one of the papers should be from the first semester. (20%)

**Learning Objective 7**

*Assume leadership roles in and out of class*

*Assessment:* Thinking back on your transition to college, it is important to note how you created a place for yourself in the Endicott community. In a 1-2 page essay, tell the story of your transition to Endicott and how you have built connections. Pay particular attention to leadership roles you have taken on this year—*through in-class contributions and out-of-class activities*—and set 2-3 goals around leadership for next year. (10%)

