

2009

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Networking an Honors Community out of Fragmentation

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CONTEXT

What makes an honors program a community? And how does one build a vibrant honors community at a commuter community college? In the City University of New York's LaGuardia Community College Honors Program, we have been grappling with such questions especially because ours is an urban, non-residential campus that serves a diverse, non-traditional student population. Our student population is roughly 38% Hispanic, 21% Asian, and 20% Black; in 2007, 58% of our students were foreign born, 19% took evening classes, and 46% were part-time students. How can we provide the program with a sense of cohesion without the infrastructure of a residential college, and with most of our students holding jobs (part-time or full-time) and/or taking care of family? Furthermore, having no dedicated space, budget, or administrative support for managing the day-to-day affairs of the honors program makes it difficult to sustain an active program, let alone grow it and build an engaged honors community.

The above factors mean that we have had to be creative and innovative in the way we conceive of an honors community at LaGuardia. The appointment of the current Director of the Honors Program in the fall of 2006 afforded honors faculty the opportunity to informally assess the program's goals and strategies. Since its inception, LaGuardia's honors program has undergone a few incarnations. In the late 1980s and 1990s, the program's vision centered on offering students a "non-program honors experience," as noted by Joanne Reitano (26). At a time when the very place of honors programs in community colleges was controversial, this model—which offered honors sections but did not track honors students, and did not establish an independent honors curriculum or honors contracts—gave students a taste of the honors experience without requiring many resources or changes in curriculum (Reitano 25). In 1999, the Honors Program Planning Committee proposed "transforming our current honors experience into a formalized honors program with a required honors curriculum leading to an 'honors diploma'" (October 19, 1999 memo from the committee). This fundamental change provided structure for the

program and brought to focus the goal of nurturing students' success in their applications for major scholarships and transfer to selective colleges. However, precisely because no new resources were provided to complement the broadening of the program's agenda and to address the specific challenges of growing a true honors program on our campus, the work of realizing this new vision remained an uphill battle and ultimately became unsustainable. Hence, despite years of success at the college, by 2006 the program's presence on campus had been significantly diminished, even at the level of maintaining the number of honors sections offered each semester.

At this juncture the new program director and the core honors faculty began brainstorming ways to revive and re-imagine the honors community concept. Chief among our priorities were the following:

1. ensure that honors sections become a staple in the college's course offerings each semester;
2. provide curricular continuity for honors students as they progress towards degree attainment in their major;
3. develop program activities that foster a sense of community among honors students and faculty; and
4. implement honors curricula so that students are stronger transfer candidates.

HONORS CURRICULUM

In reviewing the honors curriculum, we concluded that, while the existing curriculum provided some structure for the attainment of an honors diploma on completion of seven honors courses, nothing was in place to provide honors students a sense of belonging to a program or community while they were taking honors courses; indeed, an honors student was truly in the program only when s/he had completed the curriculum requirements. Furthermore, the curriculum was created to meet the needs of liberal arts (social sciences and humanities) majors but not those with mathematics, science, or business majors. Throughout the 2006/07 academic year, we reached out to all thirteen academic departments on campus to learn how each department could contribute to and benefit from participation in the honors program. Our consultations with each department chair and departmental curriculum committee chair were time-consuming but illuminating, providing us with invaluable lessons in negotiating campus politics while keeping the interests of honors students foremost in the conversations. After much negotiation and over twenty drafts, in April 2007 the new honors curriculum was approved by the college-wide curriculum committee and the college senate (Appendix A).

The revamped honors curriculum offers a more streamlined course of study for honors students in the liberal arts by creating two tracks—one for the humanities and social science majors and another for mathematics and science majors. Importantly, we also created a new program for honors business majors. Since the new curriculum came into effect in the fall of 2007, we have seen a steady increase in honors course enrollment. We have grown from

running six honors section in the fall of 2006 to thirteen in the spring of 2009 and these sections are running at the full capacity of twenty students per section, with overalls for some sections (Appendix B).

The ratification of a business honors curriculum—done in collaboration with the Department of Business and Technology—has enabled us to draw in more honors students. Significantly, however, although we understood that business students have curriculum needs and interests different from those of other majors, we did not want to create a separate honors program for business majors. We wanted to integrate these honors students (out of approximately four thousand business majors) into the college's overall honors community. Thus, the business honors curriculum is not significantly different from that of the honors liberal arts majors; we simply modified the latter slightly to include requirements of the three largest degree programs for business students: business administration, business management, and accounting. We believed it important that business students take honors classes not only in their major but also in courses throughout the liberal arts curriculum.

HONORS COMMUNITY AS NETWORK

With the honors sections up and running, the honors program planning committee could then turn its attention fully to co-curricular programming to foster community, a trickier undertaking given the institutionally fragmented context in which the honors program is situated. In order to provide the program with a sense of a center where there had not been one, the committee first focused on creating effective channels of communicating to students and faculty regularly. In addition to maintaining an updated database of honors students' email and home addresses, we developed an online presence with a website that includes not only information about ways to participate in the program, honors faculty guidelines, honors courses offered each semester, and an online application form, but also material on upcoming honors events, scholarships, blurbs from honors students, and photos of honors classes and activities (lagcc.cuny.edu/honors). Establishing this presence enabled us to reach out to current and potential honors students as well as the general college community since the latter is a crucial partner in our work. In conjunction with our college's chapter of Phi Theta Kappa (PTK), we launched a blog for the honors community to create a virtual space where students can discuss connections between their honors classes and the honors co-curricular activities (ptkbarbaricyawp.blogspot.com). Soon to be launched in the coming semester is a Facebook presence to foster another kind of user-generated, networked honors community.

THE HONORS CLASSROOM: LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR THE NETWORKED COMMUNITY

We believe that the goal of an honors program is to create opportunities for human minds to come together and create a kind of educational magic, an intellectual community of faculty and students committed to academic excellence and service to the institution and the world beyond. Therefore, honors classes at LaGuardia are conceived of as vibrant intellectual communities, cohorts of reflective thinkers who are exploring important ideas and working together to achieve mutual goals. The work of building a college-wide honors community in a diverse and fragmented environment begins in the classroom and branches out from there, networking with other communities in the college.

One essential networked-community partner is Alpha Theta Phi, the college's chapter of PTK. While PTK is its own distinct entity as a national honor society, it is also integrally connected to the honors program. Not only do these two overlapping populations prize academic excellence, but the service and leadership initiatives of PTK are also linked to the honors program. For example, the current PTK honors study topic, "The Paradox of Affluence: Choices, Challenges and Consequences," generated a memorable fall 2008 event that featured the Venezuelan Consul General in New York City and several other distinguished panelists. Entitled "The Paradox of Wealth in Latin America: Perspectives on Venezuela," the event was attended by honors and non-honors classes. Emphasized at the event was the theme of our membership in the world community, a theme best captured by the exhortation in the Consul General's presentation, "Human rights are not negotiable." The event generated articles posted on the honors student blog. Additionally, themes from the event were explored in several of that semester's honors classes. For instance, one Honors Ethics and Moral Issues student observed:

The classroom is not the only means of learning; there are many kinds of ways that we can learn. This event was enlightening for me due to the little knowledge that I had about Venezuela. For instance, before this event I could neither pronounce "Venezuela" right nor point out the geographic location of this country on the globe. My ignorance and unawareness toward this country made me feel embarrassed. That is why I appreciate the opportunities that Phi Theta Kappa and the Honors Program have provided for me.

Such co-curricular events help us build an honors program that is based on a model of community-networking and consciousness-raising.

In addition, during that fall 2008 semester, we paired honors Macroeconomics with a college-wide student project: preparing LaGuardia's team in the national College Fed Challenge competition, an annual contest held at local branches of the Federal Reserve Bank in which teams of students

present their analysis of the U.S. economy and give their recommendations for whether interest rates should be increased, decreased, or kept the same by the Federal Reserve Board. The concepts and issues these students confront are highly complex. Beyond making sense of the current crisis regarding sub-prime mortgages, the 2008 student team, by putting themselves in the role of the Federal Reserve Board, contemplated and examined such issues as Congressional bail-out proposals, the global impact of the U.S. crisis, and the effect of the latter on labor markets.

These issues and the College Fed Challenge were brought into the fall 2008 Honors Macroeconomics course, in which students explored economic and financial concepts in relation to what was happening in the world. In turn, the students took this project out of the classroom and into the general college community. The honors program sponsored a college-wide event at which these honors students presented their work on the College Fed Challenge team and their research on the current economic issues; this also led to the publication of student blog articles on the economic crisis, which added yet another dimension to the virtual discussion on the previously described honors study topic, "The Paradox of Affluence."

NETWORKING THE HONORS PROGRAM WITH OTHER DEPARTMENTS/DIVISIONS

The honors program's collaboration with the business department mirrors the connections we are forging with other academic programs, including philosophy, English, and biology. In the case of philosophy, the honors courses Ethics and Moral Issues, Introduction to Philosophy, and Philosophy of Religion form a keystone of the philosophy program, and the activities of the philosophy area serve to support and energize the honors program as a whole. For example, the visit to LaGuardia by the influential Princeton philosopher Peter Singer in 2007 to speak on the subject of world hunger was a dynamic event attended by a full house that included many students of the honors program. Themes from the evening were then further explored in honors classes through assignments and discussions, and students' articles, like "The Morality of Eating," were posted on the honors student blog.

In addition, the honors program has a long-standing collaboration with the office for transfer services based on our mutual commitment to supporting students in their transfer efforts. This collaboration has taken the form of a jointly-run transfer workshop series each fall semester. Workshop topics include: how to begin the transfer process; identifying transfer colleges that are good fits; how to solicit strong letters of recommendation; drafting the personal essay; and researching transfer scholarships. Together with giving students the tools with which to move successfully to the next step in their academic career, these workshops also enabled honors students to make connections with each other. *Ad hoc* mini-peer-support networks of workshop attendees have emerged as a result of these workshops.

Our efforts to provide increased educational opportunities for students in this area have met with encouraging results as an increasing number of students have been awarded major scholarships by, for instance, the Kaplan Educational Foundation Leadership Program; participated in summer transfer programs such as those hosted by Vassar College and Barnard College; and been accepted with financial support to a widening circle of selective four-year institutions.

HONORS COLLOQUIA

The inaugural honors colloquium was held in the spring of 2008. Our idea at the time was to bring together students and faculty from the different honors courses to share their experiences of that semester. Because our co-curricular activities are always open to all students, such an event would also help us reach out to the general student population. Interest ran high at this event, teaching us that there is a hunger among students to connect with each other through the exchange of ideas. Consequently, we organized the fall 2008 honors colloquium so as to maximize the opportunities for students to do precisely that. Because of the fall 2008 events described above, honors faculty that semester had the chance to discuss the PTK honors study topic in their classes. Naturally, we used “The Paradox of Affluence” as the theme around which to organize an end-of-semester colloquium featuring a student panel and a town-hall discussion.

Honors faculty selected seven students, including a moderator, from across that semester’s honors classes. Prior to the colloquium, these students shared ideas about “The Paradox of Affluence” in preparation for the moderated panel discussion, which would be opened up to a town-hall discussion during the second part of the event. We billed this as an “intellectual and social gathering,” invited the University’s Director of Student Awards and Honors to give the closing remarks, and, thanks to a donation from the Department of Natural and Applied Sciences, bought a “green” token for each student participant. The discussion that afternoon reflected, indeed encouraged, a diversity of perspectives and ranged from John Rawls to the prevailing economic and financial crisis, from the rising costs of education to learning from cultural differences. During those couple of hours, students met, listened, debated, broke bread (so to speak; we supplied modest snacks), and, we hope, left the event intellectually invigorated and having a new friend or two. Certainly, we were encouraged to see pockets of colloquium participants lingering on to continue their conversation even as the meeting room was being cleaned up for the next event.

CONCLUSION

Our experiences in networking an honors community have been heartening, and we plan to continue building on the foundation established these last couple of years: increasing the honors course offerings and the number of students completing the various honors program curricula; fostering community through the honors program website and blog; enriching our honors community through a

diversity of co-curricular activities such as guest speakers and colloquia; and promoting students' success in their applications for major scholarships and transfer to selective colleges. We also dream of a dedicated space for the program, a budget, and meaningful administrative support. But we also know that dedicated teachers and students are finally the central ingredient in creating a vital and intellectually dynamic honors community.

Over twenty-five hundred years ago, Plato contrasted the model of education that seeks simply to transfer information with that which has as its goal the enlightened transformation of the individual. The latter, "the art of . . . turning around," "is not the art of putting the capacity of sight into the soul; the soul possesses that already but it is not turned the right way or looking where it should. This is what education has to deal with" (232). The LaGuardia Honors Program aspires to this goal and sees the work of community-building as crucial to the realization of this vision. However, we have had to look at the concept of community from a fresh perspective. Ours is an approach that gradually develops an expanding honors consciousness, not unlike how the networking of the neural connections in our brains creates a personal consciousness, a sense of our "selves." Certainly, to the extent that this approach has enabled us to reinvigorate the honors program and significantly raise its profile among students and the general college community, it is a model uniquely adapted to an urban commuter-college experience, transforming the challenges of fragmentation and diversity into strengths of dynamic and creative community networking.

REFERENCES

- Plato. "Book VII: The Allegory of the Cave." *The Republic*. Trans. Francis MacDonald Cornford. New York: Oxford UP, 1963.
- Reitano, Joanne. "Honors Programs and the Community College Mission." *The National Honors Report* (Winter 1997): 24–27.

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APPENDIX A

Students may participate in the Honors Program in two ways. They may enroll in individual Honors courses (*Honors Participation*) if they meet the minimum requirements (see below). Students may also elect to be involved in the comprehensive program (*Honors Concentration*) following the curriculum below.

FORMER HONORS PROGRAM

A.A. in Liberal Arts

Total of 20–22 Honors credits (7 Honors courses) required

- 6 credits of Honors English
ENG102 (or ENG elective for students who have completed ENG102) and
ENG elective
- 3–4 credits of Honors Math or Science
MAT200/MAT201/MAT120
Or
SCB201/SCC201/SCP201
- 3 credits of Honors Social Science
- 3 credits of Honors Humanities
- 3 additional credits of Honors History, Humanities or Math/Science
- 2–3 credits Honors Cooperative Education Internship
CEP151/CEP201

NEW HONORS PROGRAM

A.A. or A.S. in Liberal Arts

Minimum of 20–22 Honors credits (7 Honors courses) required

ELA, English, Humanities and Social Science Requirements

Liberal Arts A.A. majors:

- 3 credits of Honors English
- 3 credits of Honors Humanities
- 3 credits of Honors Social Science
- 3 credits of Honors ELA

Liberal Arts A.S. majors:

- 3 credits of Honors English
- 3 credits of Honors Humanities
- 3 credits of Honors Social Science

Math and Science Requirements

Liberal Arts A.A. majors:

- 3–4 credits of MAT120/MAT200/MAT201 (non-Honors course permitted)
- 4 credits SCB115 (non-Honors course permitted)*

Liberal Arts A.S. majors:

- 3–4 credits of Honors MAT120/MAT200 or above
- 4 credits of SCB115 (non-Honors course permitted for A.S. students with a Mathematics Concentration)*
- 8 credits of Honors SCB201-SCB202 or SCC201-SCC202 sequence (for A.S. students with a Science Concentration)

*Honors students who meet the prerequisites for a 200-level NAS course directly can substitute one of these for SCB115 with permission of the NAS Chairperson and the Honors Program Director.

Honors Electives

- Liberal Arts A.A. majors: minimum of 3 courses with at least 8 credits
- Liberal Arts A.S. with Math concentration: minimum of 3 courses with at least 8 credits
- Liberal Arts A.S. with Science concentration: minimum of 1 course with at least 2 credits.

In addition to meeting the above requirements specific to their degrees, Honors students also take Honors electives offered by the liberal arts departments (ELA, English, Humanities, Math, NAS, Social Science), and/or the following additional Honors electives to complete the program requirements:

- Honors CEP201
- Honors CIS
- Honors Communication Skills
- Honors LIB200
- Honors Urban Studies
- Honors LRC102

Not all Honors electives will be offered every semester. Instead, each semester's offerings will be tailored according to the program's needs.

Appendix B

BUSINESS HONORS PROGRAM

The required courses were chosen in part so that students majoring in any of the three largest degree programs of the AMS Department (AS in Business Administration, AAS in Business Management and AAS in Accounting) can participate in the program.

The required honors courses for Business Honors majors are:

- 3 credits of Honors Writing Through Literature
- 3 credits of Honors Humanities
- 3 credits of Honors Social Science
- 3 credits of Honors Elementary Statistics I*
- 4 credits of Honors Principles of Accounting II**
- 3 credits of Honors Principles of Management**
- 3 credits of Honors Business Law I**

Total: 22 credits

*This requirement may also be fulfilled by taking MAT200 or MAT201 instead of MAT120.

**Additional AMS elective courses may be offered in the future at the discretion of the AMS Department, including Honors Principles of Marketing.