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Student-Guided Thesis Support Groups

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STUDENT-GUIDED THESIS SUPPORT GROUPS

According to the Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors College, an honors thesis should be required of honors college students. The benefits of completing an honors thesis are numerous and include the opportunity to work one on one with a faculty mentor, to move one's discipline forward, and to add an entry to one's résumé. For the vast majority of students, the thesis will be the first occasion they have to work on an academic project that requires a large amount of independent thought and motivation. One role of faculty mentors is to help students through the process, but students often need more help than a faculty mentor can provide. In such cases, students can benefit from the support and guidance of other students. To that end, a group of honors college students at Texas A&M University-Commerce created a thesis support group. This essay explores ways that a support group can be helpful, provides a potential structure for a support group, and suggests how to increase the support group's efficiency.

RATIONALES FOR THESIS SUPPORT GROUPS

An honors thesis can seem like a monolithic undertaking for a student at any university, and the challenge is exacerbated in a new program like the Texas A&M University-Commerce Honors College, which has no extant body of successful theses to provide as models for those who will set the precedent for the program. Our students are uncertain of the appropriate scope for an honors thesis; some think that an honors thesis is like a slightly longer class paper, and others think they have to solve all of the world's problems in one bound manuscript. Although faculty mentors know the appropriate scope and can try to guide students toward the appropriate goal, students still struggle with the question "How much is enough?" Even if students understand the goal, they may still find themselves unsure how to begin; one student borrowed the phrase "How does one eat an elephant?" The task often appears so large and multifaceted that students become paralyzed with indecision. Then, once students do get started, they often wrestle with feelings of isolation and loneliness. Working on a thesis is a fairly independent and solitary process. We often

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explain to students that their goal should be to become experts on their topic, and spending exhaustive amounts of time engaged in research can make students feel that nobody understands what they are going through. All these concerns together can lead a student to feel stressed and overwhelmed. A thesis support group can help alleviate all these concerns.

Support groups are useful in a variety of ways. While mid-twentieth-century research seemed to indicate that group activity carried with it negative factors such as confusion, frustration, and time loss, modern research negates that research (Hall & Watson). Not only are group dynamics no longer viewed as inherently negative in their impact, but group synergy often exceeds the effectiveness of individual work (Johnson & Johnson). Groups can see mistakes that individuals miss (Ziller), and group members bring varied skills, talents, and resources to a task (Denton). These group characteristics may be useful on a large scale when a student runs into a dead end in a project or at the more mundane level of proofreading and editing. The fresh perspectives of other group members can help the student see the project in a different way. Further, as a student gets closer to completion, the group can act as an audience for a practice run of a defense or conference presentation. The aid of fellow students increases efficiency, allowing honors scholars to maximize the productivity of meetings with their advisor. Finally, the emotional support provided by one's peers should not be undervalued. The extant literature indicates the importance of social support in multiple avenues of life (Cohen & Wills).

HOW TO ORGANIZE AND STRUCTURE A THESIS SUPPORT GROUP

The benefits of a support group can be numerous. However, a poorly structured group can be counterproductive and waste time. While there is no one correct way to structure a thesis support group, the honors students at Texas A&M University-Commerce adopted a format that worked successfully for them. Students spread the word about the group through the student listserv and on flyers placed around the honors residence hall. Next, students met as a large group to clarify their goals and determine the best way to organize the support group. After discussion the students decided that dividing into smaller groups (three to five members) would be more efficient than trying to run one large group. The group dynamics literature supports this decision, indicating that smaller groups are preferable to larger groups, maximizing the interpersonal interactions between group members, increasing accountability, and strengthening cohesion (Kerr). Next, the students decided that the groups did not have to center on specific academic disciplines as long as group members shared interests and at least some understanding of the area. The logic was that the faculty advisor was there to help with the content and that the students were there to provide support. The students decided to break into groups based on how far they had progressed in the thesis process. The hope was that being at similar points in the process would give students a common ground and a

shared set of understandings whereas grouping students together who were at different points in the process might lead the more experienced student to “babysit” the less experienced student. Finally, the group members decided that meetings should be held once a week to provide some external motivation for accomplishing goals and adhering to timelines.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AN EFFECTIVE SUPPORT GROUP

Based on their experiences, students offer the following recommendations for maximizing the potential of student-guided thesis support groups:

- Determine individual strengths and weaknesses early on, and use them to the advantage of the whole group.
- Begin meetings by discussing progress that was made during the week, thus providing motivation to get something done and also positive reinforcement for having done so.
- Create individual project timelines early on (by the second or third meeting) in order to provide a good starting point and to help guide the weekly meetings.
- Make weekly individual goals, breaking the project into small, concrete components that make it more manageable, less overwhelming.
- Hold each other accountable for those goals.
- Have some kind of “check-off” system, which—though it might seem juvenile—provides the satisfaction of checking off your weekly goals.
- Don’t form a group with your close friends.
- Keep gossip and small talk outside your meetings.
- Share advice from your own advisor with your group members so that everyone, including yourself, can benefit from the knowledge of all the advisors.
- End meetings by setting goals for next week’s meeting.

CONCLUSIONS

The honors thesis provides a formidable hurdle for students regardless of the skills they bring with them. Although students can tackle this challenge without the help of their peers, it stands to reason that getting help from others should ease the burden. However, putting a group of students together does not instantaneously make it a support group. Many formats can work for these groups, but the structure and goals of the group should be carefully designed to avoid its becoming a drain of time and an additional source of stress. The model developed by honors students at Texas A&M University-Commerce

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provides one way to create an efficient group and help students complete their thesis projects.

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