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Community Building at Honors Programs in Continental Europe

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INTRODUCTION

Many universities in the United States and Europe offer honors programs to meet the demands of gifted and intelligent students (Hébert & McBee; Wolfensberger). One of the standard goals of these programs is to build an intellectual learning community (Stanlick; Koh et al.). McMillan & Chavis define a community as a “feeling that members have, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (9). A more specific definition of a learning community is “a group of people engaged in intellectual interaction for the purpose of learning” (Cross 4). Learning communities are known to have a positive impact on students so that they spend more time on their schoolwork (Tinto), receive higher grades (Tinto; Baker & Pomerantz), have a better attitude towards their courses (Wilson et al.), feel more satisfied about their college experience (Baker & Pomerantz) and

finish their studies more quickly (Eggen). The presence of a community also provides students with skills they will need in their future work environment (Wilson et al.), gives them academic and social support (Tinto; Van Lankveld & Volman), causes them to feel less isolated (Hébert & McBee), provides a social context in which to learn during their courses (Wilson et al.), and leads to greater retention (Wilson et al.; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap). Honors communities are therefore seen as essential to the success of honors programs (Van Eijl et al., “Honours”; Van Eijl et al., “Ondersteuning”).

Establishing a community can be difficult (Koh et al.) because it requires that students show an active attitude and initiative (Stanlick). Wilson et al. state that leadership, facilitation, and support are necessary to establish a community, and Shea supports that idea, stating that the presence of a teacher is crucial for the formation of a community. Stanlick thinks that the introduction of an honors code and service learning courses also support the formation of a community.

Wilson et al. designed a list of features that facilitate the establishment of a community, as displayed in Table 1. Van Ginkel et al. did similar work that focused on Dutch honors communities with commuter students as shown in Table 2.

Many different and conflicting strategies have been proposed for establishing a community, and honors coordinators can have difficulty deciding what strategy to use. Strategies have been based on literature (Stanlick; Wilson et al.) or on specific cases (Koh et al.; Shea). Only Van Ginkel et al. have studied several honors communities and created an overview, but they limited themselves to Dutch honors programs with commuter students. For honors programs in other countries, no such studies could be found. Furthermore, most studies focus on the underlying reasons that certain factors are important for community building without providing specific examples that support these factors.

Our study identifies not only elements that stimulate community building in honors programs but also specific examples of each element in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands, using interviews with key persons in each program. The study focuses on the question “What elements foster successful community building within honors programs?” The answer to this question expands on current knowledge of the factors that foster community building in honors and highlights specific examples of success in accomplishing each factor.

METHODOLOGY

In investigating the connection between different factors in organizational structure and community building, we focused on qualitative studies of nine honors programs. We interviewed key people to find out which factors had an important influence on community building. These people, who included students, student ambassadors, coordinators, and alumni of honors programs, are described in Table 3.

The sample of programs is intended to represent the population of honors programs in Europe, so we selected the programs based on the distribution of honors programs across Europe as described by Wolfensberger. We also chose different types of honors programs, disciplinary and interdisciplinary, in order to create a representative sample. We intentionally interviewed a relatively small sample of programs so that we had time to get in-depth information from the interviews.

TABLE 1: FEATURES FOSTERING SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY BUILDING

Wilson et al. (2004)
Shared goals
Safe and supporting conditions
Community identity
Collaboration
Respectful inclusion
Progressive discourse toward knowledge building
Mutual appropriation

TABLE 2: FEATURES FOSTERING SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY BUILDING

Van Ginkel et al. (2012)
Matching students based on willingness and capabilities to cooperate
Programming challenging teamwork activities that are student-regulated
Facilitating students' initiatives without taking the lead
Creating an intense period of interaction to deepen and enhance bonding
Organizing a series of interactive activities during the program to stimulate the community
Highlighting the performance of a teacher as a role model for development of talent and as a coach for community building
Involving community activities in feedback procedures and student evaluations

We used a grounded theory approach because we were working in a relatively young field of research. The collection of the data and the analysis were constantly referring back to each other, and the generation of concepts was an iterative process.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with the key people in order to obtain information about community building, giving the interviewer some freedom to focus on certain elements and ask follow-up questions (Bryman). In addition, the respondents had the opportunity to ask questions when they did not understand an open question fully (Bryman).

We transcribed the interviews using open-coding, categorizing the codes to identify the different elements of community building mentioned in the interviews. Two researchers examined the transcriptions separately, comparing and discussing the individual analyses to reach consensus on the quantity and definitions of the elements.

Using the elements found, we created a scheme for every interview, after which we compared all the elements. When elements of the schemes were similar, the finding was deemed reliable and involved in the final scheme. In this way the schemes were combined through cross-case analysis to one final scheme covering all elements influencing community building.

INTRODUCTION TO CASES

As we tried to find as many different kinds of successful community building as possible through a cross-case analysis, we studied a variety of programs in different countries: disciplinary and interdisciplinary programs, programs that build their own community, and programs that interact with businesses and society. All chosen programs had commuter students. Table 3 shows each country we included, the key person interviewed, the kind of program, and the number of students of the program.

Program descriptions and significant details below show the relevance of the programs to our research.

- Honors at TU Delft, the Netherlands: The Technical University of Delft has a separate room where honors students can meet.
- Honors at University of Leiden, the Netherlands: At this university a large-scale interdisciplinary honors community includes teachers and students. There is a student association and various committees to coordinate activities.

- Honors at University of Groningen, the Netherlands: The program has its own student association, led by students.
- Honors at Utrecht University, the Netherlands: The honors program in biology consists of a small group of participants. They produce a magazine or book each year.

TABLE 3: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE HONORS PROGRAMS THAT ARE STUDIED

Honors Program of:	Country	Interviewed Key Person(s)	Disciplinary/ Interdisciplinary	Total Number of Participating Students
TU Delft	The Netherlands	Student ambassador	Interdisciplinary	390
University of Leiden	The Netherlands	Student	Interdisciplinary	555
University of Groningen	The Netherlands	Student + student ambassador	Interdisciplinary	790
University of Utrecht	The Netherlands	Coordinator	Mostly disciplinary for biology	35–60
Elite Network of Bavaria	Germany	Coordinator	Interdisciplinary	1000
CBS University	Denmark	Coordinator	Disciplinary	108 (36 from CBS University)
Vienna University of Economics and Business (two programs)	Austria	Coordinator	Both interdisciplinary	80/250
Vienna University of Technology	Austria	Alumnus	Interdisciplinary	60–70
University of Antwerp	Belgium	Coordinator	Disciplinary	24

- Honors at the Elite Network of Bavaria, Germany: In the development of honors programs in the U.S. and Europe, there are not yet many networks connecting programs. The Elite Network of Bavaria is a good example of such a network. The network organizes activities for students of different programs.
- Honors at the Copenhagen Business School (CBS): The CBS University offers the Globe program to International Business students. The program is organized in collaboration with partner universities in Hong Kong and North Carolina. Students from all three universities form an honors group for two years.
- Honors at Vienna University of Economics and Business, Austria: There are two honors programs at this university: one for bachelor's students, motivating participants to strive for top academic achievements and the other for master's students, involving a triangle of participants (students, supporting university staff, and businesses).
- Honors at Vienna University of Technology, Austria: This program consists of coordinators, teachers, students, and companies, all cooperating closely.
- Honors at the University of Antwerp, Belgium: This program is an example of a small-scale program that was set up recently. The program is currently very actively trying to create an honors community.

RESULTS

Comparing the elements of schemes created from transcripts of the interviews, we identified six different elements fostering community building. These elements are displayed in Figure 1, and then each is discussed separately.

Social Contact among Participants

The first important element for building community is social contact between the participants in the honors program. When students work together and get to know each other, a connection between them grows. Students can help one another and are consequently able to benefit from each other. Activities such as workshops or informal conferences stimulate contact between students. To encourage students to get to know each other, an

orientation meeting at the beginning of the program is helpful. The coordinator of the Elite Network of Bavaria said:

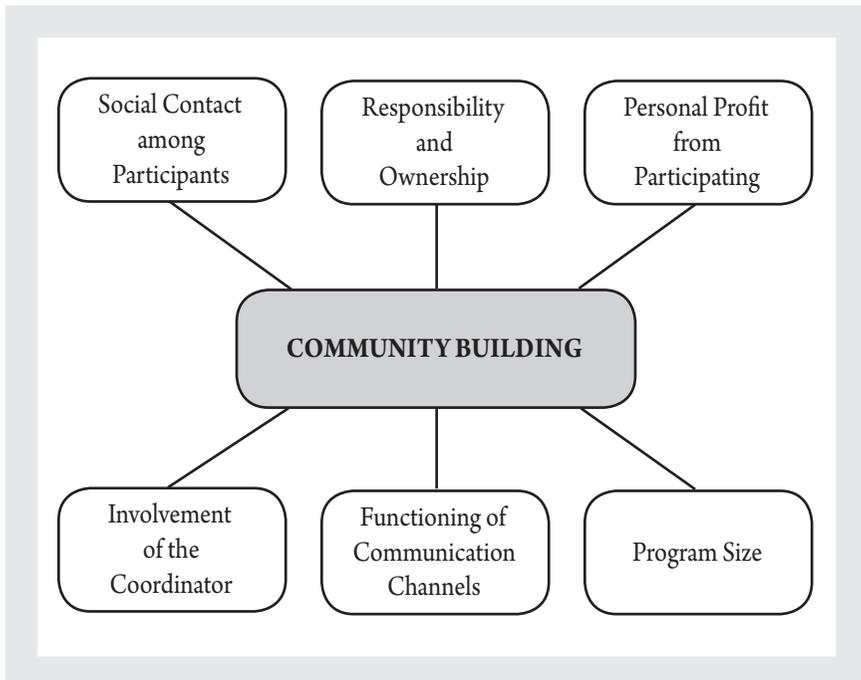
So every year we have a get together for everyone who is new in the program. Just an informal meeting, so that they can have a chat.

According to the coordinator of the Vienna University of Economics and Business, social contact is one of the most important aspects of an honors program. She stated that students find it important to exchange experiences:

I think the whole system, that they can talk to the older students, is one of the most important things in our group. The networking is very important. I think the exchange of experience is the most important for our students.

Students can work together during the program's projects, but also while organizing conferences and study trips. A study trip is a good method to work together and to get to know each other. The coordinator of the biology honors program in Utrecht stated:

FIGURE 1: VISUALIZATION OF THE DIFFERENT ELEMENTS FOSTERING SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY BUILDING



There is a great difference in seminars before and after the study trip. A big difference! Students talk to each other more easily. The different disciplines mix up in the classroom instead of forming little groups of a specific discipline.

A study trip is important as well at the honors program of the University of Groningen, as stated by one of the university's students:

Within the program it is mandatory to go to summer school with a couple of students where you follow lectures with them. I am going to New York for example. It might enforce the establishment of the community.

At the honors program of CBS University in Denmark, a number of activities are organized to stimulate community building. As the program consists of fifty-four students from three different countries, it is important for them to get to know each other, and this is accomplished by organizing an introduction program, case competitions, study trips, and travelling together to the three different universities that participate. The coordinator stated:

It is very important; we see it creates special bonding, which we do not see among normal students. Also because it is a small group.

Responsibility and Ownership of Students

Responsibility plays a major role in community as well. When students feel responsible for their program, for each other, and for their behavior, they become more active and interactive. The fact that students have to find a solution to a problem together can make the students more like-minded, according to the coordinator of the program in Antwerp:

Giving a certain responsibility to the students helps stimulating the students to work out something and to reach agreement.

Responsibility ensures that students are committed to the community. In a one-year project of the biology honors program of the University of Utrecht, the element of responsibility is said to play a key role. The program's coordinator stated:

I think that if there is no community building students will drop out more easily. I do not mean that they quit the honors program, but they will not

take their responsibility any more. With a community, the students keep each other together and inspire each other too.

A possible way to give students responsibility is to let them organize their own activities. An important incentive for the students to participate is their personal development as they organize events, but according to the chairman of the student association in Delft, it can be useful as well in spreading word about the program:

We see that students are really enjoying it when they organize an event. You can see them thinking: "I am an honors-student, and I may represent the honors program." Furthermore, we see them learning and developing. At the same, they tell their peers, which causes the program to be vivid, leading to bigger communities next year . . . and more community feeling amongst the students.

Responsibility can maintain a community, and it also can foster development within the program. Participants can create innovative events and services, as at the University of Groningen, where a student association was established in order to support the community. Founded and managed by students, the association is an important part of the honors community, creating ownership for the students. The chairman of the association stated:

I really think it is distinctive of honors students. They are ambitious. For them it is not enough to just be part of it; they want to be part of the organization as well.

Personal Profit from Participating within the Honors Community

One of the main goals of an honors program is to stimulate students to attain better academic results. Being in a community gives participants easy access to academic help from other participants who are excellent students as well. A coordinator of the Elite Network of Bavaria said:

They are quite different and it is important for us to bring them together and let them learn from each other.

A letter of recommendation by the Rector Magnificus of the university, which is given to successful program participants, is an example of the physical profit that students receive when they are part of the community, and participation

makes a curriculum vitae look better. The Elite Network of Bavaria also give honors students special access to different facilities, which can be an incentive to be part of the community, and students receive financial support for setting up honors-related events.

We also give them the opportunity to organize their own events for their peers. We give financial support and support the organization of the event.

Establishing contacts with companies can also be a powerful tool to provide the students with personal profit. For example, an alumnus of the Vienna University of Technology sees contact with established companies as an important contribution to career opportunities:

What you gain, basically, is that you receive lots of workshops . . . by professionals and by companies that are very high qualified. And of course the biggest gain you get as a student is the personal connection to your colleagues from different fields which you wouldn't have met otherwise, as well as the connections to the representatives of companies which open a number of career opportunities.

The honors program in Delft uses network-days to establish contacts between students and companies. The chairman of the student association believes participating in such days can help students as follows:

We make partnerships with companies that can pay the student's study or provide scholarships to the student. . . . We visit such companies, sign contracts and organize a scholarship program or a network day. We try to connect the students and companies this way.

Involvement of the Coordinator

Often students need some guidance from coordinators to establish a community. A student of the honors program of the University of Groningen stated:

I would say that is the most natural situation to let the students form their own community, but this is difficult because the program is so diffuse.

A coordinator also connects students by informing them about activities within the program where they can meet each other. A coordinator cares about the students and helps them with simple things. A coordinator of Elite Network of Bavaria said:

So it is really important that you have somebody located at the university who cares about the students and advises them.

When students are having an argument, the coordinator can play a role as a mediator, not judging the situation or the individual participant of the community but bringing them back together. An example is the biology honors coordinator in Utrecht:

We try to bring people back together, try to clear things up, to stop the jarring. We really do that by mediation, not by saying who is right and who is wrong.

Often the community starts with a coordinator, but when the honors community has had its kick start, the role of the student becomes more important, as stated by the coordinator of the program in Antwerp:

I think for a coordinator it is important to set up relationships at the beginning. When that is alright, and there are motivated students, it will be taken over by them.

Functioning of Communication Channels

The level of communication between coordinators, teachers, and students was another topic during our interviews. The presence of well-functioning communication channels within an honors program is necessary to foster community building, as stated by the coordinator of the program in Antwerp:

I believe communication is one of the key elements of community building. Avoiding misunderstanding and using the right words is essential. A community based on cooperating with each other and communicating with each other. If that fails, I believe community building will fail as well.

Communication within an honors program could be about upcoming events and activities or about previous events. The coordinator of the program in Delft explained:

We focus on announcing successful collaborations between students and companies. . . . We ask students to write an article about their project, take good pictures and show that it was something successful. Hopefully this creates a positive vibe.

A student in the honors program of the University of Groningen claimed that he had too little knowledge about the activities performed by the board of the student association of the program. The head of the association claimed that he noticed this flaw in the program and agreed that a failure of communication has a negative influence on the process of community building. In this example, the reason for communication failure was caused by the absence of a member list so that the board was unable to send emails to all the members of the program. A student of the honors program of the University of Groningen said:

Suddenly this association for honors students appeared. I do not really have the idea that many of people are actively involved with this association. There is not a lot of promotion going on for the program.

On the other hand, the Elite Network of Bavaria claimed to be in good touch with the participants using a well-functioning webpage:

There is an informative webpage, but also a page for members. And they get into it quite often to get in touch with each other. There are online discussions, they set up meetings and connect via the internet.

Program Size

The size of an honors program can influence the community building process. Respondents mentioned that being part of a small group is important for successful community building. Having a small group is particularly important at the beginning of the program so that students can get to know each other well. The coordinator of the Vienna University of Economics and Business said:

In the beginning it is very important to interact in small groups because they get to know each other very quickly. You have to learn the names, in which studies they are and where they come from. The simple questions are easier to talk about in a small group in the beginning.

Smaller honors programs are also important to create more student participation and interaction in lectures, as stated by the coordinator of the program of CBS University (Denmark):

I think the size of the group is very important for those programs. As they get too big they will lose the community aspect. It makes that they can all know each other and follow classes together. The fact that there is a small group in a lecture does not necessarily make the quality better, but it does give students the opportunity to participate more in the lectures and interact.

Others, though, believe that a large number of participants should not be a problem and have divided the group into smaller groups to stimulate community building. For example, the coordinator of the Vienna University of Economics and Business stated:

Our whole cohort is about 100 students and a too big group to get in touch, and the interaction will not be as good as it should be. So in the small groups they have the chance to really interact and talk about problems.

Dividing the whole group into smaller groups fosters a bond between students since they have met before, a strategy advocated by the student of the University of Groningen:

You should bring students together. You should bring them together in smaller groups in order to let them work together. It will create groups of people who have met each other before.

Subdividing the whole group into smaller groups however, can result in a lack of community within the program as a whole which is a problem at the Vienna University of Technology:

There are multiple small communities, which are given by the groups that are participating at one company. So from the whole 60 students in the program, for example, 17 participants will be in the group of one specific company, so they are a kind of sub-community. There is no community transcending the program. The most established communities are ones enforced by the companies as they interact on a regular basis.

CONCLUSION

Of the six elements extracted from our semi-structured interviews, social contact had the strongest influence on community building. Responsibility and ownership were also mentioned most often by the respondents as fostering commitment to the program. The third major element was personal profit, which was an incentive to enter the program in the first place and made the students want to behave actively and take initiative. The respondents also mentioned the role of the coordinator as important in creating the program and being an informant for students. However, the coordinator was not always the only leading figure for community-building events. Ideally honors students showed an active attitude and took responsibility in organizing events as well, stimulating the concept of community building among themselves. Properly working communication channels had a good influence on community building, and communication failure was mentioned as an opposing force. Lastly, the size of the honors program influenced community building with smaller groups stimulating participation and interaction in lectures and enabling students know each other better and build a sense of community.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study have both theoretical and practical implications. Previous research identified many different and conflicting elements that foster successful community building. These studies often did not focus on honors communities or focused only on a specific country or case. The results of our study can test existing identification of important factors in building community in honors. The factor “functioning of communication channels” was identified by Wilson et al. and Van Ginkel et al. Van Ginkel et al. Also recognized the factors “social contact among participants” and “responsibility and ownership of the students,” and he factor “involvement of the coordinator” was recognized by Shea. These four factors can therefore be assumed to play a role in community building with more certainty. The two elements proposed by Stanlick—“formulating an honors code” and “providing service learning courses”—did not come forward in our study and thus need to be further investigated for their relevance to honors communities. “Personal profit from participation” and “program size” are novel additions to the literature.

We noticed during the interviews that many honors programs are still struggling with community building and that most honors programs have only recently started to focus on it, so the ideas suggested by the respondents

are sometimes based on short and limited experience. The respondents might therefore not always have been able to identify reliably which elements worked best in stimulating community building. Still, their experience in setting up an honors program and community is valuable.

Another limitation was the small number of universities studied and of persons interviewed. Different people might have perceived the effects of community building differently. Further research might focus on giving a more complete image of each program by interviewing more members. Future research can also combine results of this and other studies to give a more complete overview. In this way, the theoretical base can be tested and enhanced more thoroughly.

One topic of particular interest was the ideal size of an honors program. Many respondents stated that small programs are desirable, but the ideal number of students was unclear. The coordinator of the Vienna University of Economics and Business mentioned that a group of 100 students was too large and had to be divided into smaller groups of perhaps 25 students per group. The coordinator of CBS University in Denmark stated that groups of 54 students should not grow larger, implying that 50 might be an ideal number. Depending on the goals and content of the honors program, then, one might surmise 25 to 50 students is an ideal number.

Further research is needed to test the newly found elements “personal profit from participation” and “program size” that were extracted from a limited number of cases. The influence of program size on community building should especially be investigated to hypothesize an ideal number of students with more certainty. Further research is also required to test whether the elements proposed by Stanlick are relevant for honors communities since these elements did not come forward in our study.

Despite some limitations, we believe that our study has relevant implications given the wide range of viewpoints we studied and the overview of community building within honors programs that we created.

The main practical implication of this study is that it might inspire coordinators of different honors programs to create successful honors programs. The different elements of successful community building identified by this study and the different examples mentioned of each element can provide guidance for these coordinators in their plans to build community. Our results might also inspire other programs, groups, and organizations that have problems with community building.

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