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Leveraging a Modest Success for Curriculum Development

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Our primary goal as honors administrators is to deliver the highest-quality honors education we can at our institutions; however, this has become more of a challenge since budgets at state-supported institutions have decreased dramatically over the last decade, a situation that Richard Badenhausen characterizes as the new normal. Although he paints a gloomy picture, Badenhausen also suggests that “[m]oney is always sloshing around in the institutional coffers. . . . You just need to know whom and how to ask . . .” (20). As Samuel Schuman wrote in 2006, we learn early in our honors administrative careers that a healthy relationship between honors and higher administration is essential for honors to flourish at any institution. While deans of honors colleges have structural ties to the higher administration, maintaining a strong relationship is often hard for directors of honors programs who do not have a “seat at the table where budget decisions are made” (Railsback 34). Using my own experience as an honors program director, I can illustrate how important a strong relationship with higher administration is to the health of an honors program. Fostering that relationship allowed me

to secure approval for curricular development that has been key to the success of the program. By accentuating the success of an established, low-cost, and popular one-credit-hour honors symposium, I was able to garner institutional support for three-credit-hour general education honors courses.

At Winthrop University, one of the requirements for an honors program degree is that the students take a one-credit-hour honors symposium during the time they are matriculated. This practice was created some time ago as a way to energize the honors program and to encourage honors students to take interesting courses outside of the mainstream. Both students and faculty hold these one-credit courses in high favor and find them enjoyable. The higher administration approves of these courses because funding them is cheaper than for three-credit courses. The symposia are offered under the honors designator HONR, count as electives, and offer topics that vary widely depending on the faculty teaching the course. Faculty members teach these courses as an overload, but they view them as a laboratory for creating a class on a topic that interests them. Because of their popularity with the faculty, the program has no problem offering two or three per semester.

Faculty are remunerated for teaching a symposium, but their incentive is not primarily financial. Instead, as many have expressed over the years, they find it a joy to teach a subject they care about to a group of excellent and enthusiastic students. Consequently, many of the faculty have taught multiple courses on different topics. Similarly, the students rush to sign up for these courses, most of which fill to capacity soon after registration opens. A sample list of symposium topics indicates their variety in content and discipline:

Jazz History—Swing and Bebop (Music)

Amish Culture (Education)

The Concept of Evil (Sociology)

Women in Science (Biology/Chemistry—co-taught)

Insider/Outsider Art (Art)

How to Get Yourself Killed: Socrates and Jesus (World Languages and Cultures)

Devised Theatre Project 2016: The Past and Future Collide (Theatre)

Seminar on *All the King's Men* (English)

Bad Science (Biology)

How to Die (World Languages and Cultures)

Human Face of Poverty (Religion)

Gender and Sexuality in Theatre and Performance (Theatre)

Microfinance, Transformational Entrepreneurship, and 21st-Century Solutions (Finance)

Empire and Education (Education)

Learning to Guide Your Leadership Efforts (Business)

Cults/New Religious Movements (Religion)

These topics are not prescribed but are created by the individual faculty members.

As often happens, hallway chats and discussions over coffee spawn many new ideas, and during one such chat I realized just how much support these one-credit courses had among the faculty. They couldn't speak highly enough about their experiences, giving me anecdote after anecdote of their class discussions and projects. Parting words were typically "Let me know when I can do it again." At about the same time as these conversations, department chairs were becoming more and more reluctant to offer honors courses given their staffing needs and declining budgets, so three-credit honors offerings in general education were dwindling, and many honors students were relying on honors contracts to fulfill their honors and general education requirements. It occurred to me that faculty might be willing to expand their one-credit laboratory courses into three-credit honors courses in general education. When I asked, many of the faculty were excited about the prospect of developing their one-credit symposium into a course with more depth. If this change were to happen, honors students could then take innovative honors courses to fulfill general education requirements.

As honors program director, I do not make decisions regarding the honors budget, so the onus was on me to convince my dean and academic vice president of the value of these general education honors courses for the program and its students. Since the budget did not have funds available for faculty to teach three-credit courses, my argument needed to be a solid one. In the first meeting with my dean, I stressed how successful the symposium courses had been over the years and also underscored the need to create more options for the honors students, particularly in general education courses. I also emphasized that faculty were not only willing but eager to develop fuller

courses from the existing one-credit symposia. We then spent several meetings discussing how to dovetail the honors curriculum and general education requirements by creating three-credit special topics honors courses, which led her to support the endeavor. As Badenhausen claimed, funds did seem available when you knew how and whom to ask.

With the dean now on board, the next hurdle was to bring the case before the academic vice president. During the fall of 2010, my dean and I met with the academic vice president to discuss creating three-credit honors courses in five different general education areas—natural sciences, humanities and arts, historical perspectives, social sciences, and global perspectives—under five different HONR designators. We eventually convinced the vice president of their merit after some discussion about the level at which the courses should be offered (sophomore as it turned out), and the approvals through the governance process of different committees, councils, and conferences were forthcoming.

The first three-credit special topics honors courses in general education were offered in fall 2011 and included courses titled “Apocryphal Gospels: Texts You Won’t Find in the New Testament” by a philosophy and religion professor and “The Psychology of War” from a faculty member in psychology. In fall 2012, an education professor offered “Comics, Popular Art, and Aesthetics” to fulfill a humanities and arts requirement, and in spring 2015 “Shakespeare the Psychologist” fulfilled a social science requirement.

The first courses offered all started out as one-credit honors symposia from a previous semester, but faculty were also willing to create three-credit courses without having taught a symposium first. Little had I known that faculty were clamoring to offer special topics courses outside or on the fringe of their disciplines, and the honors curriculum paved the way for them to do what they already wanted to do. During the spring 2012 semester, for instance, a professor from theatre and dance created “Theory in the Flesh” to fulfill a humanities and arts general education requirement. Later semesters included a variety of other courses that had not been symposia initially:

The Culture of the Cold War (historical perspectives)

The 1960s: A Transformative Decade of Popular Music and Culture (humanities and arts)

Introduction to Global Issues (global perspectives)

Cultural Intelligence from a Global Perspective (global perspectives)

Films of Margarethe von Trotta (humanities and arts)

Prometheus and Punks: Antihero in Western Civilization (humanities and arts)

Study Abroad: Nutritional Biochemistry of the Mediterranean Diet (natural sciences)

The JFK Assassination: Information, Misinformation, and Disinformation (historical perspectives)

Dream in International Cinema (humanities and arts)

As with the symposia, faculty are paid to teach these courses, in many instances now as part of the departmentally assigned course load or as a cross-listed honors course.

My experience illustrates that although creating honors courses on a restricted budget presents challenges, solutions can be found by working with faculty and higher administration to create an exciting curriculum. Expansion of the honors curriculum by transforming one-credit symposia into three-credit special topics courses in honors was the solution we found at Winthrop University. We never would have arrived at this solution if I hadn't paid close attention to those hallways chats. Listening to faculty as well as students can inspire new ideas for structuring a program's offerings, and then shaping those ideas in a way that appeals to higher administrators is the key to creating a stronger program for faculty as well as students.

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