

Laurie McFadden

With honors

Librarians benefit from teaching in honors programs

Maple syrup. Guerrilla girls. Storytelling. What do they have in common? On the surface, not much. In reality, these diverse topics were all the subject of three semester-long seminars in the Alfred University Honors Program, and each was taught by a librarian. Offering to teach in the honors program has many advantages to librarians. Jimmy Ghapery (Virginia Commonwealth University) recently wrote about an information literacy (IL) class offered by his library as part of the school's honors program.¹ While teaching IL is certainly a worthwhile and necessary endeavor, librarians, with our wide-ranging backgrounds, have much more to offer. We can contribute to honors programs by proposing classes that revolve around our personal research interests or hobbies. Not many other professions can say their members come from all walks of life and have degrees in basically every discipline. Other seminars that could easily be taught by my fellow librarians might be centered on quilting, classic cars, Iceland, horses, or mountaineering.

Honors programs

The National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) lists 831 colleges as members; its mission statement, in part, states, "Through the Honors experience, participants realize enhanced personal, social, and intellectual development."² Participants in this case are not only the students, but also the faculty.

Librarians at Alfred University (AU) have full faculty status and are able to submit proposals for the honors program each fall and spring. The seminars, which meet once a week throughout the semester, are small

(15 students maximum), discussion oriented, and often "off the beaten path." Since they do not fulfill general education requirements (they're electives), faculty can experiment and propose classes on just about any topic. The call for proposals encourages creativity by stating: "Whatever their subject, our most successful seminars have provided an opportunity for faculty to teach something they love, and to discuss/debate it with a small group of underclassmen."³

Students who graduate from the AU honors program must successfully finish four seminars, have a final 3.2/4.0 GPA, and complete a senior thesis. They are from all four undergraduate levels and have themselves a variety of academic majors in the fields of art, engineering, liberal arts, and business. While the seminars are the core of the program, the students are additionally afforded social and cultural opportunities through get-togethers and trips. A serious and well-respected program on our campus, the honors program also has a light-hearted side with an official seal (the walrus), a motto ("Time flies like an arrow, fruit flies like a banana"), and a riddle (How do you get down from a horse?).⁴

Advantages

So why teach such a course? Librarians certainly have enough to do already without tacking on the work involved in creating and teaching a semester-long course that doesn't cover library topics. I believe the benefits

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that follow far outweigh any reasons for not doing it.

- The opportunity to work with students on an extended basis is perhaps the best reason. The standard librarian-student meeting may only be a one-time interaction. We do a good job in that short interlude, but becoming more deeply involved with our students speaks volumes to them about their library and their institution. Giving students a chance to interact with librarians outside normal work venues allows them to see us in a different perspective; and, through relationships developed in class, they're more likely to visit the library and ask for research help.

- The faculty status of librarians is further validated with other faculty and the administration.

- The academic curricular offerings are broadened; typically our hobbies and personal research interests are not covered in the classroom. For example, living in the Northeast means I'm able to make maple syrup in the springtime. It's a process that involves science, history, retail knowledge, physical work, and good food—and it's been an optimal focus for a seminar. I've taught it twice and each time the course quickly filled to capacity during registration.

- It gives librarians the chance to experience classroom teaching problems and situations; plus it offers the practice of creating a syllabus, working with the registrar's office, and using the library from the classroom faculty perspective. It's refreshing to design your own course and assignments compared to the sometimes stifling experience of relying on the wishes of another faculty member who brings a class to the library for instruction on research methods.

- Students can help conduct research. I previously taught an honors class that investigated student life 100 years ago⁵ and, as university archivist, I was able to use the resulting research compilations to augment the university's understanding of its history. While the students chose their own topics, I was delighted to be left with their results.

- Teaching an "outside the box" course is certainly good publicity for the library and a strong addition to any promotion and tenure documentation.

- Receiving extra compensation for teaching a seminar isn't bad either!

Conclusion

Honors programs offer the ideal opportunity to share our diversity of knowledge and areas of personal interest with students while reaping our own benefits. Since teaching is already a large part of an academic librarian's normal duties, why not try a semester-long course? You just might like it!

Notes

1. Jimmy Ghapery, "There's an 800-pound gorilla in our stacks: An information literacy case study of Google," *C&RL News* 65, no. 10 (2004): 582–84.

2. The National Collegiate Honors Council Web site can be found at www.nchchonors.org.

3. Information about the Alfred University honors program can be found at www.alfred.edu/academics/html/honors_program.html.

4. Riddle answer: You don't get down from a horse, you get down from a goose!

5. Laurie L. McFadden, "Making history live: How to get students interested in university archives," *C&RL News* 59, no. 6 (1998): 423–25. ¶

(*Writing the literature review* cont. from page 527)

3. Anne Sigismund Huff, *Writing for scholarly publication* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1999).

4. Charlene Kellsey and Jennifer Knievel, "Global English in the humanities: A longitudinal citation study of foreign language use by humanities scholars," *College & Research Libraries* 65, no. 3 (May 2004): 194–204.

5. Jennifer Knievel and Charlene Kellsey, "Citation analysis for collection development: A comparative study of eight humanities fields," *Library Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (Apr. 2005): forthcoming. ¶