Rae Rosenthal

A highly individualized admissions process allows this community college honors program to identify talented and motivated students whose prior academic work might make them ineligible for honors at other institutions. The curriculum is designed around innovative honors sections of regular courses that challenge students intellectually and help prepare them for the transition to a four-year institution.

An Honors Program for an Open Admissions Community College

I have long been convinced that I have the best job on my campus, Essex Community College, and that is because a large part of my job is to enable students to succeed and then to brag about their success. Three favorite stories make the case. One is of student A, a Caucasian female, returning student who left her Baltimore County high school pregnant, became a welfare mother of two, earned a GED, later enrolled at Essex while working and raising her sons, quickly impressed her teachers, who then advised her to take honors, earned an AA degree with Dean's Highest Honors, received a full scholarship to the University of Baltimore, and is now completing her bachelor's degree in accounting.

Student B is an African American male student of traditional age who had poor high school grades at his Baltimore city school, low SAT scores, and an awareness that he was gradually getting sucked into a negative social environment. After deliberately removing himself to his grandparents' home near Essex, he registered at the community college (one of the three Baltimore County community colleges), began to reinvent himself as a student, steadily improved his academic performance, and decided his long-term goal was to become a high school teacher. After being encouraged to join the honors program, he registered for credits and continued to excel each semester. He was then selected to participate in a special honors program exchange with

Western Maryland College, a nearby small, private liberal arts school, and was awarded a transfer scholarship to Western Maryland, where he is now about to complete his bachelor's degree in education.

Student C is a Caucasian male, returning student who came to Essex with an abysmal high school record from a Pennsylvania high school, an earlier failed attempt at college, and a blurred memory of at least ten years of his life as a result of his alcoholism. After becoming sober, he reenrolled in college, did well in his first semester, was recommended for the honors program, took one third of his coursework in honors, earned his AA degree with Dean's Highest Honors, transferred to Brown University, graduated, and was accepted to Yale Law School. He is now running his own business in Baltimore.

As these stories show, the greatest challenge in developing an honors program at a large urban/suburban community college has not been finding qualified students, but rather deciding how best to define "qualified" with reference to our student population, many of whom are first generation college, nontraditional age, underprepared, and/or have not had previous periods of academic success. Clearly, traditional indicators would not work, and our program was developed with these institutional realities in mind.

Origins of the Program

The Essex Honors Program was launched in the mid-1980s in response to concerns about the ability of the college to meet the varying needs of all of its students. In an effort to address these concerns, the Dean of Instruction created two committees: the Developmental Education Committee and the Honors Committee. By 1988, the Honors Committee had set up a course approval process, recruited a handful of students, obtained a modest budget, and developed a job description for an honors program coordinator. At the time I was appointed coordinator, I was a new member of the English Department and was excited about the possibilities of developing an honors program at an open admissions institution, especially one in a large urban area with an increasingly diverse student population.

Standard philosophy among NCHC folks is that the most effective honors programs are ones that provide a contrast from the overall nature of the institution. As a national honors organization, NCHC offers years of experience and expertise in the area of honors, and the Essex program often makes use of their advice and guidelines. Accordingly, while Essex is a fairly large (8,500 students), open admissions two year school, the Essex Honors Program is relatively small and selective. The honors program is administered by the coordinator and an honors committee that consists of six faculty members, an academic counselor, the advisor to Phi Theta Kappa (a two-year college honor society), a Division Chair (a title particular to Essex that is roughly equivalent to a Dean, for example, of Arts and Humanities), and several student representatives. The program had originally been designed to be administered by a committee, but the committee quickly found that centralized information and an individual for

students to identify with were essential, hence the creation of the honors program coordinator position.

The honors program usually offers 12-15 honors courses per semester, some being honors versions of existing courses and others being specially designed honors seminars, but all limited to 15 students per section. After years of disastrous experimenting, we no longer offer honors contracts. We have approximately 90 members in the program, with numbers shifting slightly each semester as students transfer and graduate. We have approximately 130 students registered for honors credit, the difference stemming from our policy that allows nonmembers to enroll in honors courses.

In order to complete the honors program, students must earn at least 15 honors credits and an overall GPA of 3.5. When students complete the program, they receive an Honors Certificate that guarantees them transfer admission to ten of the area's four-year schools as well as admission to the honors program at whichever of those schools have four year honors programs. Each semester, every member of the honors program receives an Honors Scholarship for one honors course; students may enroll in as many honors courses as they like, but the college will pay for one each semester. While improvements to the program are constantly sought, this overall structure has generally worked quite well for Essex.

The scholarship system that has evolved is quite different from the initial plan. Originally, the Honors Committee had created a subcommittee for the selection of honors scholarship recipients. This process was, of course, time consuming, and ultimately, somewhat arbitrary, as numbers of qualified students invariably applied and some were invariably disappointed. The committee chose to reconsider the scholarship process and created a system that has worked far more equitably and smoothly. Rather than have a few students receive full scholarships, the committee chose to award each member a partial scholarship, equivalent to one course, provided that the member took at least one honors course, earned at least a B in said honors course, and maintained an overall GPA of at least 3.0. This eliminated the need for a special subcommittee, eliminated inequities within the membership, and proved to be a valuable recruitment tool.

Student Selection

Entering students hear that our honors program is not interested in their past but in their present and their future. The program draws students from both Baltimore City and Baltimore County, as well as a few from outside the county and outside the state. The Honors Committee decided early on, after a good bit of heated debate, that the honors program was not a reward for previous performance, but an opportunity to situate students in an appropriate educational setting. Some committee members initially felt that membership should be a prize awarded to those who had been stellar students in the past, but after a lengthy dialogue about the purpose of an honors program within an open admissions institution and about the advantage to students of being placed in the right educational setting, the committee felt comfortable with a

process that focuses more on ability, motivation, current performance, and past performance where useful.

The Honors Committee is looking for students who have two traits: academic ability—regardless of past performance—and motivation. We believe strongly that students lacking in either ability or motivation will not succeed in our honors courses and so they are not admitted to the program, although they do have the right to self-select and register for any honors class that interests them, proving their suitability that way; they may then apply (or reapply) to the program. The application process offers numerous opportunities for students to demonstrate their ability and motivation, and we welcome a wide variety of supporting evidence. Each application packet includes a completed application form, a student essay, three letters of recommendation, high school GPA if there are no college credits, college GPA if there are college credits, and any other materials the student sees fit to include. Some students have included sample essays, poetry, artistic work, and original photographs. Each applicant is also interviewed by a team of representatives from the honors committee, including at least one faculty member and one student.

Recently, the committee took the time to reevaluate our selection process and concluded, yet again, that although it is burdensome in that it requires many work hours and reams of paper, it is effective. We concluded that because of our multifaceted process, we have often been able to see our way to admit students who might, in a more traditional screening process, have been denied; these same students (as in the above stories) have often gone on to great success both here at Essex and beyond. So in the end, other than some minor tinkering in how we schedule and distribute interviews, we left alone what appears to be working well.

Yet, the greatest challenge for our program continues to center around this very issue: how to sustain and protect a selection process that will allow students who have a high likelihood of academic success to emerge from a pool of applicants with a dizzying array of test scores, grades, writing skills, and academic backgrounds. Students at Essex come from vocational schools, from expensive, academically rigorous private schools, and from a range of academic environments in between. Keeping in mind the original mission of community colleges as a source of alternative educational settings, the Honors Committee wisely recognized early on the need to create an innovative, holistic selection process that would not rely on traditional indicators such as high school GPA and SAT scores. While this almost always sounds good in theory, in reality it can be quite difficult.

Our committee has had to work together to learn to identify the potential for academic success in ways that are meaningful for our student population. And we have often chosen to gamble: to admit students who do not have strong skills in standard written English, or who have erratic transcripts, or who have low test scores, but who show signs of promise if we are willing and able to read those signs. Most of the time, our gambles pay off; sometimes they do not. Sometimes I have thought we erred,

only to discover months or years later how right we were. Sometimes, our students disappear—family crises occur; students fall off the wagon; financial emergencies arise—then, suddenly, months or years later, they return, ready to work again, and I mentally move their name from the loss column back to the win column.

When recruiting students to the honors program first began, the naysayers insisted that we did not have enough honors students to fill a class, much less a whole program. This, of course, depends on how you define "honors," and according to traditional demarcations, it is true. Our feeder schools, in fact, send us relatively few students with outstanding GPAs and high SATs, although at times such students do come our way. But, because of our definition of "honors"—students with ability and motivation regardless of past performance—we have a sizable population. In reality, what I have found is no shortage of honors students, but an enormous shortage of students who think of themselves as honors students. As coordinator, I often spend an inordinate amount of time persuading students who have college GPAs in excess of 3.5 to apply to the honors program. Having never thought of themselves as being academically talented and having never been encouraged to pursue academic goals, their newly acquired academic success seems to them a fluke, an aberration, and they stare at me politely but with great skepticism as I suggest honors. Because our students so often have abysmal high school transcripts and have only recently begun to experience success in college, they are understandably quite uncertain about their ability to succeed in honors courses. They tend to fear that their newfound success will disappear in the honors classroom.

This fear of failure in the honors classroom is actually one of my greatest recruiting obstacles. Once having obtained a transcript of which they can be proud, often for the first time, many students are reluctant to take any steps that might jeopardize their progress. But in fact, I have generally found that their greatest fear—the fall of their GPA once in honors—does not materialize. In fact, the opposite generally proves to be true: members of the program often earn better grades in honors courses than in their regular courses. This difference generally can be attributed to the overwhelmingly positive effect of sitting in a classroom with fifteen other students who are both capable and motivated. As all the research suggests, students rise to the expectations around them.

Lessons Learned

In the process of creating the community college honors program that has been briefly outlined, we have learned a great deal, and, as is so often the case, our most important lessons have been learned from our mistakes.

Day/Evening Differences

Like most metropolitan colleges and universities, Essex has a large evening population (28% exclusively evening; 17% some combination of day/evening), and, as is often the case, our evening population tends to be older, employed full-time, goal-

oriented, serious-minded about school, and highly grade conscious. Our day population, on the whole, tends to be younger, employed part-time, in search of a goal, serious about school but equally serious about sustaining a social life, and less grade conscious. In the process of creating the honors program, we initially tended to overlook these differences. We assumed, unthinkingly, a sameness that does not exist and made no special arrangements or provisions for evening students. As a result, our evening enrollments have been consistently low and erratic. Realizing our error, we have now slowly been developing a strategy for attracting evening students that includes shifting our evening honors courses from two nights a week to the preferred format of one night a week (day students tend to prefer more frequent classes of shorter duration), broadening our evening offerings, and including the hiring of a part-time evening coordinator as one of our long-term goals. We hope that special attention to the needs of this growing population will lead to our offering services that will better meet their specialized needs.

Diversity

As in most urban areas, diversity is a daily reality in Baltimore, and in keeping with this contextual reality, many of the honors program's goals relate to diversity issues in terms of items such as recruitment, curriculum, and programming. In terms of membership, common NCHC wisdom is that honors programs should aim to recruit a percentage of students of color roughly equivalent to that of the institution as a whole: if your institutional enrollment includes 22% African American students, the program should aim for the same percentage. For Essex, I have always thought this formula to be inappropriate because of the low (in fact, surprisingly low) percentage of students of color in the overall enrollment (12% African American, 3% Asian, 1% Hispanic).

One of the advantages of teaching within a large metropolitan area might be thought to be student diversity, but that depends on where within a metropolitan area you teach. Despite our location just east of Baltimore, for a variety of historical, political, and social reasons, the African American student population at Essex has only within the last few years climbed into double digits. For these reasons, I have aimed, and at times succeeded, to have greater diversity within the program than in the college at large. My mistake, though, came in perceiving this particular goal as a one-time effort.

I early on spent a good bit of time recruiting students of color, arranging for guaranteed transfer admission for our graduates to Morgan State College and Coppin State College (two historically black colleges in Baltimore), working with faculty on infusing diversity into the honors curriculum, and developing a series of honors events with a diversity focus. Eventually honors participation became increasingly diverse, with the percentage of students of color exceeding that of the college as a whole. However, within a short time, as students graduated and transferred, the numbers diminished, and I realized my error: diversity needs constant attention. I now maintain as

part of my yearly schedule all of my prior diversity activities, as well as regular meetings with the Director of Minority Affairs, direct mailings to students of color, participation in our annual Thurgood Marshall scholarship selection process, and regular visits to meetings of the Black Student Union.

Curriculum Design and Course Development

Changes in our course development plans have been made. Initially, we offered three ways to obtain honors credit: honors contracts, honors versions of existing courses, and specially designed honors seminars. Although a number of institutions have contract systems that work well for them, we quickly found contracts to be highly problematic and chose to eliminate them. The problems with contracts proved to be numerous: they were a bureaucratic/paperwork nightmare; they were less educationally challenging than honors courses because they lacked the stimulation of other honors students; and, because of their inherent flexibility in scheduling (they could be arranged in conjunction with any class), they began to dip into honors course enrollments. Since the elimination of the contract option, we have continued to offer honors versions of existing courses and honors seminars. The seminars, however, have proven to carry their own difficulties, and these difficulties are directly related to certain institutional realities generally associated with community colleges in urban areas.

A national trend in honors is to create spectacular sounding courses with highly specialized topics. These courses range from close examinations of specific historical events (Vietnam courses, Bicentennial courses, Gulf War courses), to environmental courses with a large hands-on component, to popular culture courses (soap operas, science fiction, rap music). On my campus, each department has a special designation for such unique courses; in the English department, we have a series of "English 290: Studies in Literature" courses that vary in topic from semester to semester. Such a one-time arrangement allows faculty flexibility and efficiency in that such courses do not need to follow the long and complicated course approval process and so allow for a short passage from invention to fruition, seemingly a perfect arrangement for honors seminars. However, the complex and ever present issue of transfer makes such courses problematic.

In the Essex student body as a whole, 43% declare themselves as preparing for transfer; in the honors population, 100% of the students are preparing for transfer. These students wisely refrain from enrolling in any course that has a questionable or difficult transfer pattern, and because these specially designed honors courses vary frequently, have esoteric titles, and often have no corresponding match at the transfer institution, their transfer rate is uncertain at best. All community colleges wrestle with these issues to some degree, but because Essex is in a large metropolitan area with over a dozen four-year institutions for transfer students to choose from, the question as to which course will transfer and which will not is never simple. Given this situation, not surprisingly, we have not seen the enrollments in specially designed honors seminars

that the same course might attract at a four-year school or at a community college located near a single four-year institution, where transfer agreements tend to be more stable.

As a result, we offer fewer and fewer honors seminars, but choose rather to focus our creative energies on the development of innovative honors versions of existing courses; we have found that those frameworks can allow for both creativity and smoother transitions for our students. In addition, when the program does choose to offer an honors seminar, generally because of the exceptionally intriguing subject matter, because of keen student interest, and/or because of the instructor's enthusiasm for the topic, the program works with the College's Transfer Coordinator and with the individual student's transfer institution to insure the smoothest transfer of credits possible.

Future Challenges

When looking towards the future of our program, two issues loom large. First, the honors program, since its inception, has been looking for a home beyond what I can provide in my faculty office. As a commuter school where students are often a long bus ride and/or many miles from home, we would like to provide them with an academic home, a place where they could study, sleep, converse, or as they would say, hang. Essex, however, currently suffers from extreme space limitations, and there is no identified honors space. There are plans, though, for a new building that will include an honors center with two seminar rooms, office space, and a student library/study. For a community college honors program, this would be extraordinary luxury, but luxury that will no doubt add immensely to the quality of the program and to the collegiate experience of each honors student.

Second, program leaders would like to further develop and support its diversity course. At Essex, the issue of how to bring diversity into the general education package has been a long-standing debate within the larger context of our ongoing struggle with the revision of our general education requirements. One of the goals of the honors program has been to provide space for faculty to experiment with new information, new approaches, and new courses that might then be applied to the broader curriculum. Keeping in mind the ongoing general education debate and the goal of honors as a pedagogical lab, the honors program developed and piloted the College's first diversity course in the fall of 1994, a course that was then titled "Ethnic Studies 290: Diversity Honors."

This course was designed to explore a range of diversity issues through a variety of sources, including historical accounts, autobiography, literature, and the arts. In its efforts to examine the experiences of nondominant groups in the United States and the problems they face, the course also involves a collective search for effective means to create a more egalitarian, inclusive society. In keeping with the pedagogical philosophy of the honors program, the course was designed to be interactive and collaborative; the course requirements include oral presentations, identity projects, field trips,

and, most difficult of all, open and civil class participation. After a successful trial run under honors, the course was proposed as part of the new general education package.

Not surprising to anyone who has had any experience with general education revision, the subsequent debate was at best heated and protracted; at worst, polarizing. Central to the debate was the issue of what knowledge our students must have in order to be successful in the world beyond Essex, both academically and professionally. There was a good bit of discussion about the changing demographics of Baltimore, where diversity within the population continues to increase and about the growing need for those in the work force to have an understanding of, an appreciation for, and an ability to work with people of difference. Faculty on the pro-diversity course side of the debate argued vehemently, and ultimately successfully, that a diversity course that would enable students to understand a wide range of life experiences, to talk across cultural/racial divides, and not only to accept but value other world views might be just the most valuable course any college could offer, especially a college in a highly diverse metropolitan area such as Baltimore. The course was also believed to be essential not in spite of the relatively low but growing number of students of color at Essex, but actually because of those small numbers.

The course was felt to be even more essential, in many ways, for Caucasian students, who often have less experience with and knowledge of the issues of diversity than do students of color. This evaluative course approval process allowed members of our academic community, which as a community college faculty has a necessarily strong tie to our local area, to consider at great length the needs of our local area. Through this process, many of us came to feel that a required class that would involve the intellectual examination of issues of equality and disparity would be a significant, lasting contribution to the good of our surrounding community. When the new general education requirements finally emerged, the diversity course had been slightly reconfigured as "American Pluralism 101: A Search for Justice" and had been adopted as part of the general education package. Currently, the college continues to offer both regular and honors sections of this course each semester, with steady growth in enrollments. The honors program is especially proud of its role in creating the diversity course and considers continued support for this course to be one of its long-standing goals.

Summary

In the fall of 1997, Essex Community College celebrated its fortieth anniversary. The institutional reflection started by this celebration helped us to realize that Essex is experiencing many of the same assaults as the academy at large, and the turmoil has taken its toll here as at other institutions. At the moment, Essex has a new president, an interim chancellor, and an interim dean of instruction, all the result of an ongoing reorganization begun by a Board of Trustees that has long sought the elimination of tenure, sabbaticals, and faculty release time. This political turmoil, though local, has been intense, much of it played out in the newspapers and the state legislature, which

controls the Board of Trustees. Faced with the prospect of losing tenure and other benefits, the faculty have sought legislation allowing for faculty unionization and the appointment of trustees who have knowledge of and experience in higher education. The trustees have repeatedly described the faculty as unreasonable and dissatisfied and have asserted their commitment to reshaping the college according to "business" guidelines. At an institution that only a few short years ago was one with consistently high morale, a school with steadily increasing enrollments (to the point where a few years back the dean of instruction was expressing a need to look into ways to limit enrollment at an open admissions institution), and a wide-ranging reputation as an exceptional community college, morale is now low, college-wide enrollments are down, and our reputation has been tarnished by excessive negative publicity.

During this storm, there has been talk, within the framework of an extensive reorganization process, of either eliminating, reducing, or drastically altering the honors program, but thus far the program has been left intact, for a variety of reasons. First, the program certainly has had great student success, and these students are vocal about their experiences in honors. Also, colleges in general like to brag about their honors programs; they are excellent recruitment and PR tools. In addition, within the larger picture, the honors program is not a big ticket item. But the storm has not yet subsided, and the program continues to be on the defensive, trying to emphasize both its success and its relative low cost. Hopefully, as a small enterprise within the larger chaos, the honors program will be allowed to continue pursuing its mission—that of providing an appropriate educational setting for the college's most academically talented and motivated students.