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The Honors Program at the Florissant Valley campus of the St. Louis Community College offers its nontraditional students special honors courses, an array of cultural events, and serious research experiences. The goal is to help often older, often underprepared students to acquire academic skills they will need to succeed at a four-year college or university.

Honors at the Edge: Challenges for the Community College

Honors programs recognize and develop the academic potential of intellectually gifted students. Such programs are essential in the comprehensive community college to offer the best and sometimes the only opportunity for higher education to individuals who are unable to take advantage of other colleges and university degree programs. The comprehensive community college promises its community everything from noncredit courses to associate degrees in settings that emphasizes teaching. Some community colleges, through support of honors programs, attempt to meet the needs of intellectually gifted students. Many such students might never have developed their academic potential without the honors experience in which they found self-confidence and affirmation. Honors students often say that discovering and developing their abilities leads them to more satisfying, productive, and empowered lives than they had ever envisioned.

In 1963, the Florissant Valley campus of the St. Louis Community College began to fill a tremendous gap in a city whose educational level was between the 7th and 8th grade in an urban area of more than two million. St. Louis, a heavily unionized town, had always had a wealth of blue-collar jobs in manufacturing but it did not have a "full-service" public university. Both educational needs and the local economy changed significantly over the next fifteen years as automobile plants cut the number of employees or industry moved out of the metropolitan area.

The Challenge of Creating Community College Honors Programs

Demographics and Geography

The three main campus locations in the district were chosen based on computer population growth analyses projected in the early 1960s, and the St. Louis metro area school districts were apportioned among the three campuses. The Meramec Campus is southwest of the city, Florissant Valley is north, and Forest Park is west of the downtown area. While students may attend any campus if they live in St. Louis or St. Louis County, campuses may not recruit students from each other's turf.

Florissant Valley has experienced some uneven enrollment periods. Unfortunately, the district did not act in its own interest when it had an opportunity to extend its boundaries to include St. Charles County, an area that lured many a North Countian out of Florissant Valley's recruitment area. St. Charles County eventually opened its own community college and in fall 1997 enrolled 5000 students. Eighteen percent of the Florissant Valley student population once came from St. Charles; in fall 1997, 3% are from the St. Charles area. St. Charles County Community College may recruit students in the 14 high schools served by Florissant Valley. The St. Louis Community College Chancellor agreed, however, that Florissant Valley would not recruit in the St. Charles area.

Of the 5000 students now at St. Charles, 3.5% are minority students and 50% of that number are African American. Florissant Valley's minority population is now 42% and expected to rise to 43%. The minority population of the Florissant Valley campus in the 1980s was between 22% and 26%. This rapid change has brought about increased efforts to hire more minority faculty and student services staff. Since many minority students attended high schools in less affluent areas, their reading and writing skill levels have increased the need for developmental courses. Entering skill levels of all students have also declined since the 1960s, when one-third of entering students needed some help in reading, writing and mathematics. Now students needing remediation in writing and reading constitute about 45%; those needing mathematics remediation approach the 60% level. As the realities of student needs became apparent, very few faculty or administrators were then concerned about a challenging program for bright students.

Honors History and the Role of Liberal Arts

The Mission Statement of St. Louis Community College has been in development since its inception in 1963, but the college promised its constituents it would offer transfer, career, and developmental courses to enrollees, using a number of set curricula. Moreover, it would also offer noncredit courses in many fields. Enrollment has always been open to all, but the college has reserved the right to require placement tests. The college has systematically assimilated students, working to accommodate physically handicapped students as well as those with diagnosed learning problems.

In the first master course catalogue, there were honors numbers created for Introduction to sociology, English composition I, English composition II and American

history. Campuses were free to offer the courses, but no formal honors program was created, and in the face of ever increasing budget pressures, it did not seem possible to develop such a program.

In addition to meeting students needs, the fear of elitism, losing the cream of the crop, and fewer transfer sections made honors controversial among the faculty. As they saw it, honors would lure the few "good" students from their classes. Then a quirk of fate intervened. In a major catalogue revision, the entire Liberal Arts Curriculum was abandoned. Those who were responsible for this change defended their decision by saying that a general education curriculum could replace the need for liberal arts. This omission sent up an uncharacteristic howl of protest from the humanities faculty on all three campuses, and a district committee was convened to reinvent liberal arts.

Funded by a Carnegie-Mellon grant, the committee actually produced a rigorous curriculum including a foreign language requirement and suggested a liberal arts seminar that allowed a changing topic. But the committee went further and proposed an honors program as a tool to serve intellectually-gifted students and support the revised liberal arts curriculum. The faculty maintained that the colleges must remain comprehensive and offer a rigorous program to prepare students for transfer to colleges and universities that were tightening entry standards.

The liberal arts proposal, including the honors program, was approved by the Board of Trustees in 1984. The committee included an outline for honors program in the proposal to ensure that the programs would be implemented without further need to gain board approval for each standard. The format provided three hours of release time on each campus for an honors coordinator, mandated classes sizes of 20, and an agreement that a student could graduate as an Honors Program Scholar if s/he had a 3.5 GPA and at least twelve credit hours in courses numbered 100 and above in which they had enrolled for honors and received an A or B. Entrance to the program was to be based on ACT, SAT, FV Asset scores, or a 3.5 GPA in at least 12 hours of college level courses. The coordinator on each campus also was given discretionary power to admit students to the honors program who did not meet standards if the students showed abilities.

The Carnegie Mellon committee had created the program and made implementation the next step. The founding document also offered each campus some choices in implementing the program. In a multicampus community college, these choices are necessary to meet the differing needs of students on each campus. For example, Forest Park has offered more individual contracts than Meramec, which offers more honors sections of general education courses, while Florissant Valley offers fewer sections than Meramec, which has a larger honors-eligible student pool, and more contracts.

Implementation

The Florissant Valley Coordinator realized that many issues would have to be settled quickly to support honors programming. For instance, how would honors classes and contracts be funded, how could an interdisciplinary course be organized across division lines, how could technical students be included, and how would the new program be advertised?

The coordinator sought the advice of the Honors Coordinator at Richland Community College in Dallas because that campus closely resembled the demographic mix at Florissant Valley. After the Dallas visit, the coordinator developed a blueprint for implementing the program.

Negotiating the Campus Honors Protocol

The blueprint included an Honors Office computer for advising and student record retrieval, funding of contracts from the adjunct/part-time faculty budget, a payment process, and a small budget for recruiting first time students through an ACT mailing list. The coordinator published faculty names and information on the kinds of honors contracts the faculty would offer. She became active in the National Collegiate Honors Council and The Great Plains Honors Council, which provided a wealth of ideas and help. She also set up an Honors Steering Committee with several associate deans and key faculty members from all divisions on the campus, including a representative from the library reference staff. This group has been exceptionally helpful through the years.

Other protocols took longer. It took eighteen months to annotate student transcripts with an "H" to designate an honors course and to have Honors Program Scholar placed on the official transcript.

Budgets were also a problem. Without the budget line, the coordinator had to beg for every cent that was taken out of a larger pool. With an assigned budget, the coordinator is now able to make decisions and take advantage of special opportunities, such as low airfares for meetings or specially priced St. Louis Symphony tickets. Besides the released time for the coordinator, FV has around $7300 for operating the program and travel for a year. Contracts usually number between 100 and 120 per semester, costing between $4300 and $5200 per semester.

As the program grew, competent clerical help became essential. There is now a part-time clerk who works 20 hours a week throughout the year. The Honors Assistant keeps the database each semester, sends out publicity about special events, helps coordinate events, and often drives a school van to special events. Without that help, the coordinator would waste an enormous amount of time with clerical tasks.

Three hours of released time is inadequate to run an honors program, but the issue of released time is very sensitive on all community college campuses. In 1989, The Florissant Valley coordinator assumed responsibility for the Liberal Arts and General Transfer Studies curricula and gained an additional three hours of released time. Having honors and the liberal arts under the same direction has made it possible for Florissant Valley to offer a variety of interdisciplinary academic experiences without getting bogged down in interdivisional politics.

Problems can arise if the coordinator does not have access to the highest levels of administration. At Florissant Valley, the coordinator reports to the Executive Dean. It is necessary to have support when offering interdisciplinary courses and working out pay for special courses. Since the official negotiating agent for the district faculty is the National Education Association, there have occasionally been some attempts to stop unusual arrangements such as paying two faculty members half the salary for a

three credit hour course. The NEA has also interfered when faculty have been offered more than half-time released time. It remains very difficult to work around these obstacles. One solution is to take special courses on overload pay which is more easily adapted to less than three credit hours. Occasionally, when a course must be used as part of full-time faculty load, one team member has given up payment with the understanding that the next time the same course is offered, the other faculty member will be a "volunteer."

Since the Carnegie Mellon Committee invented honors, using a district-wide blueprint, the multicampus nature of the district has not created obstacles because the coordinators have all worked well together and agreed to develop the honors program to meet the differing needs on each campus. Occasionally, however, the campuses have had different needs and compromises in course offerings have been made.

Honors and the City of St. Louis

City-County Issues and Partnerships

Florissant Valley rests on three sharp edges, geographically, demographically, and socially. The first edge is its geographic position between a troubled metropolitan area and a conflicted suburban-exurban area that lacks reliable public transportation and whose local governments are often at cross purposes. Demographically, the North County area has experienced a significant rise in African American population beginning with the cities of Normandy and Berkeley in the 1970s. Socially, the older Caucasian population has struggled in processing the influx of a rising middle-class African American population. As a result of housing patterns, some areas of North County have a much higher percentage of African Americans than others. This situation mirrors the housing patterns in the city of St. Louis.

St. Louis and St. Louis County together remain one of the most highly segregated metropolitan areas in the United States. The movement to the suburbs of African Americans has occurred mostly in the Northeast portion of St. Louis County. While St. Louis has never had a major race riot or incident, it has also never addressed its problems with race. Its schizophrenic personality one day presents a picture of itself as the "Gateway to the West" and the fulfillment of the democratic dream, and on the next day as the bastion of the Old South. Racist attitudes have become more subtle, but there are still deep divisions between the races in this area.

The racial tensions have a strong undercurrent in the honors program, too. The program has actively recruited African American students and honors courses have diverse content. African American and Hispanic students have privately expressed their appreciation for having "their" literature or history included as an integral part of interdisciplinary courses. Minority and Caucasian students study each other carefully during the first weeks of a class, and then relax as they begin to exchange ideas and personal goals. Most of these students have never discussed their deep personal values with a person of another ethnic or racial background. But it would be naive to say that these classes forever changed everyone who took them, although some sturdy bridges have been built.

Racial bridges are not the only needed infrastructure in St. Louis. The community college campus is the mirror of its wider community, but at Florissant Valley, a study discovered that many of the students who lived in North County never ventured into the city or knew its cultural institutions. Many lacked a sense of ownership in the tax-supported institutions like the Missouri Botanical Garden, the St. Louis Zoo, the St. Louis Art Museum, or the Missouri Historical Society, all of which are located in the city limits. And many knew about the St. Louis Symphony and the St. Louis Science Center, but did not think themselves capable of understanding music, art, or science. At the same time, the St. Louis City and County studies showed that these very same cultural institutions were just as vital in keeping St. Louis a viable place for business and growth as professional sports teams. The honors program thus found another mission: honors students needed an introduction to St. Louis' cultural milieu because most of the employers in St. Louis support the arts and expect their employees to do the same.

Unfortunately, no St. Louis Community College official served on a major cultural board in the city, which meant that the Coordinator had to make personal contacts in order to plan activities for honors students. Arts tickets, like sports tickets, are expensive, and some excellent theater groups are not able to offer tickets at prices that students could or would pay for. The St. Louis Symphony, mindful of its mission to bring music to the whole community, provides tickets at $10 for students. The Missouri Historical Museum offers internships, and the St. Louis Art Museum has been generous in setting up special lectures and tours. Students who have crossed the cultural barriers come back with enough self-confidence to take families and friends back with them.

Metropolitan Honors Students and Pedagogy

The honors students represent the population at large. Most feel challenged and sometimes defensive, but they are able to test themselves in a nurturing atmosphere. Honors students on the Florissant Valley edges are often returning students. There is also a fair share of bright traditional students who were not counseled into a precollege curriculum in high school or did not have support to plan beyond high school. Many traditional students have never written a research paper or evaluated a source. Most honors students have multiple responsibilities. They work, raise families, or help support their families, volunteer in their churches or communities, and come to Florissant Valley. It is an exhausting life for most, and instructors must respect the often onerous conditions their students work under. This means that honors classes and contracts need to aim for quality, not busywork.

For instance, students in AAS curricula are often able to combine a practicum with an honors contract. One dietetic technology student developed and tested a diet for oncology patients during her rotation at a local hospital while another suggested recipes for better tasting diets in a geriatric setting. Nursing students can develop a research project in a short summer course that they finish in the practicum of their choice. Paralegal students developed information booklets on wills and divorce for law firms.

There is a Catch-22 with older students. The average age of students in 1997 on the campus was 28, down from 29 in 1996, but many of the honors students are in their 30s or 40s. It is tempting to assume that these older students have all the critical thinking skills they need to cope with challenging academic work. But a "freshperson is a freshperson is a freshperson," to paraphrase Gertrude Stein. Many students have been away from the classroom for a long time and are overwhelmed by the new information retrieval techniques necessary to use the modern library. Most students do not handle research projects very well on their first attempt. Many have never completed a complex academic argument in their secondary experiences. In short, age does not necessarily guarantee academic skills.

Computers often frighten even honors students into a kind of stunned paralysis, so patient introduction and good technical support are always necessary. The evaluation of source materials is also a problem for many of today's students. Many cannot discern an author's bias and are too willing to assume a published author tells the truth. Citing sources is also a skill that requires patience on both the student and instructor's parts. Teaching experience and student feedback have taught many of us that directed research is perhaps the most important component of honors education at the community college because students need these skills to survive at a senior institution. Critical thinking skills alone are not enough to help students make a successful transition to the university.

The addition of an honors program has offered opportunities for all to deal with the major issues of society, including racism. For example, one liberal arts seminar, "Ethnicity and Racial Relations," deals with the peopling of America and the barriers and persecution faced by most immigrant groups. Courses are also discussion-centered and everyone is expected to participate. Moreover, students in technical programs are able to work on special projects that help them prepare for good jobs and new careers.

Philosophically and pedagogically, all of the district coordinators are confident classroom teachers who rely on cooperative learning techniques. Some became "recovering lecturers" through contact with Dr. Craig Nelson of Indiana University who models courses using William G. Perry, Jr.'s *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme* (Holt, 1970). Others have participated in "learning community" seminars or instructional workshops. At Florissant Valley, the honors program has become the laboratory for pilot courses, cooperative learning, interdisciplinary courses, and carefully directed student research.

This kind of teaching leads to an informal but very important part of the honors experience. Faculty, because they are open in the classroom, are asked by students for career and transfer advice. The intensive learning atmosphere also makes the faculty excellent references for transfer and job applications. Moreover, such classroom experiences create enthusiastic ambassadors for honors and the college.

Caveats and More Challenges

Caveats

- Not everyone on a campus will support honors, but if there is strong administrative support for the program and its coordinator, the doubters will grumble privately.
- Counseling and advising staffs need constant encouragement to suggest that entering and continuing students try honors.
- Honors coordinators need to be given a voice in admissions testing and cut-off scores. The tendency is to set impossible standards before the tests are established on campus, and this can wipe out not only the honors-eligible student pool, but the transfer course pool.
- Honors coordinators also need to know when test numbers are changed or groups of students are exempted from testing so that other methods of inviting eligible students to try honors can be implemented.
- Honors programs need to have occasions to spotlight student, faculty, and staff accomplishments.
- College administrators need to be kept informed about student and staff achievements.
- Honors coordinators need discretion to admit students to the program even if they do not meet the entry criteria. For example, bad college transcripts dating years back should not be held against the "reborn" scholar.
- Technical/career students must have opportunities in honors.
- Not every wonderful idea will work everywhere. For example, a "Sleeping-Bag seminar" used on an eastern commuter college campus sounded great, but so many community college students have family responsibilities and work schedules that few could stay overnight. The program is now a one-evening exploration of special topics.
- Honors activities should involve students' families or significant others whenever possible.

More Challenges

- Community college honors programs need to offer merit-based scholarships to honors students.
- Community college honors coordinators must continue to help students make connections to the cultural institutions in their metro areas.
- Community college honors coordinators need to double their efforts to set up transfer scholarship programs with senior institutions and push for specific honors program articulation.
- Honors students have to have strong academic training to survive in senior institutions and qualify for scholarships. They must also be prepared to take full loads at the senior institutions.
- Community college honors programs must help students prepare not only for transfer and careers, but for more satisfying lives.

- Honors course content needs to include the cultural traditions and contributions of American minorities.
- Honors supporters need to look for "renaissance" instructors in selection, interviewing, and hiring processes, as well as recognizing the contributions of such instructors in promotion and tenure decisions.

A Hopeful Thought

Faculty and students alike report that the honors experience rewards everyone involved in teaching and learning. Continuing students enhance the reputation of the community college in the community and in national and regional organizations. Faculty find their teaching is revitalized in honors programs. Honors repays every penny spent by this creation of goodwill for the college and by offering opportunities for improving teaching and learning on the community college campus.

Suggested Readings

Perry, William G., Jr., *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme* (New York: Holt, 1970).

Is your institution a metropolitan university?

If your university serves an urban/metropolitan region and subscribes to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Metropolitan Universities printed elsewhere in this issue, your administration should seriously consider joining the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities.

Historically, most universities have been associated with cities, but the relationship between "the town and the gown" has often been distant or abrasive. Today the metropolitan university cultivates a close relationship with the urban center and its suburbs, often serving as a catalyst for change and source of enlightened discussion. Leaders in government and business agree that education is the key to prosperity, and that metropolitan universities will be on the cutting edge of education not only for younger students, but also for those who must continually re-educate themselves to meet the challenges of the future.

The Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities brings together institutions who share experiences and expertise to speak with a common voice on important social issues. A shared sense of mission is the driving force behind Coalition membership. However, the Coalition also offers a number of tangible benefits: ten free subscriptions to *Metropolitan Universities*, additional copies at special rates to distribute to boards and trustees, a newsletter on government and funding issues, a clearinghouse of innovative projects, reduced rates at Coalition conventions. . . .

As a *Metropolitan Universities* subscriber, you can help us by bringing both the journal and the Coalition to the attention of your administration. To obtain information about Coalition membership, please contact Dr. Art Goven, University of North Texas, by calling (940) 565-2904 or faxing a message to (940) 565-4998.