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Pockets of Connection:

Creating a Sense of Community at a Large Urban Community College

Building connections among students and faculty is a difficult challenge at a large, urban community college. This article examines one programmatic effort, the Honors Program at the Community College of Philadelphia. It describes the origin and development of the program, emphasizing the evolution of faculty thinking and programmatic decisions. The central features of the Honors Program are identified as a set of practices that build an intellectual community among faculty and students. These include an integrated, interdisciplinary curriculum, seminars and writing groups, the overlapping of first and second semester student groups, and a collegial model of faculty development.

Ironically, one element community colleges often lack is a sense of community. Building connections among students and faculty and developing a common sense of purpose are difficult challenges at any school. But it is certainly so in a large urban community college. Careful planning and constant struggle are required to create and sustain the conditions for connection and community.

Community colleges have always been hampered in their ability to initiate students into collegiate life. They lack the most powerful mechanisms used by those institutions most successful at involving students—dormitory life and large blocks of time for student engagement in clubs and informal activities. However, community colleges will never have those features of traditional academic life, and so they must be much more creative in developing alternative strategies appropriate for the reality of their students' lives. This article describes one programmatic effort to think through the challenge of building connections that promote academic achievement in nontraditional students at a large, urban community college.

The Honors Program at the Community College of Philadelphia was begun in 1979, supported by a

grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and led initially by Martin Spear, Professor of Philosophy. Over the years it has served as a site for pedagogical and curricular innovation and faculty development, as faculty have struggled to find ways of better preparing nontraditional students for transfer and academic success. Members of the honors faculty have maintained an experimental orientation toward the program, trying new approaches and assessing outcomes. Throughout the course of these efforts we have developed a deeper understanding of the problems of educating nontraditional students. In this article we will briefly sketch the development of that thinking, and the programmatic structures and processes that flow from it.

Developing the Honors Program

Initially, the development of the Honors Program was shaped by two major trends in community college development and scholarship. Like most urban community colleges, CCP experienced a great increase in underprepared students during the late 1960s and 1970s. The college's response was to modify the traditional curriculum by developing what became an ever expanding set of remedial programs. While this was a necessary response to the needs of many students, some faculty felt that the traditional curriculum did not serve transfer students well, either, and needed to be rethought in light of these students' needs as well. This faculty group also rejected the emphasis placed on demographics and psychological factors in the emerging literature on community college students; they preferred to focus instead on the historic import of open access higher education.

To understand the faculty's thinking, we have to remember what community colleges were like twenty years ago. Before 1960, access to a college education was quite restricted, which denied opportunity to many minority and lower income students, but also simplified the educational task. Students, of course, have always varied in their motivation to learn and their willingness to accept the goals of the curriculum. Until the massive expansion of higher education in the 1960s, though, students and faculty tended to come from backgrounds similar enough that even the most "collegiate" students knew the value system they were rejecting by engaging in the social rather than the intellectual life of the college. There was a rough correspondence between faculty and student expectations, values, and attitudes towards education. Between 1960 and 1970, however, college enrollment doubled, going from roughly 3.5 to 7 million students. This tremendous

surge in enrollment, which undergirded the growth of community colleges, also severed the supposition that teachers and students shared a common world of expectations, values, and interests. While the entrance of formerly excluded groups was a historic success for democratic education, it produced new educational challenges that were not being recognized by policy makers, administrators, or many teachers.

The Evolving Theory of the Honors Program

Like other honors programs at community colleges, the program at CCP has been controversial. Most typically it is criticized by faculty who argue that it is elitist and hold that college resources should not be directed to the "most talented" of the students. However, the Honors Program, despite its name, was never conceived as merely a program for the best students at the college. Instead, it began as an attempt to respond to the challenge of educating nontraditional students. The faculty group that designed it saw it as an experiment in rethinking general education for nontraditional students who expressed a desire to transfer to four-year institutions. Drawing on their classroom teaching experience, the faculty began to think of their task as one of helping nontraditional students who tended to lack the attitudes, patterns of thinking, and modes of behavior needed to enter intellectual and professional life.

Most of the transfer-oriented students they worked with had little in their backgrounds that modelled intellectual activity. Even the most able often did not take themselves seriously as learners of something worth learning, but rather viewed themselves as engaged in a kind of certification process. In consequence, the faculty felt that the Honors Program had to be much more than an enriched version of existing courses. If nontraditional students were to successfully transfer, the program had to be transformative, helping students make substantial changes in their styles of learning and their attitudes toward education. Therefore, the program was initially designed to initiate students into intellectual life, with the structure and content of the program organized to promote the types of transformations needed for nontraditional students to perform well at high caliber universities and graduate and professional schools.

Over the years, the faculty of the Honors Program has focused on deepening its understanding of the challenges of educating nontraditional students and initiating them into academic life. It has been almost a twenty-year

experiment in identifying the activities and practices that best promote the initiation and transformation of nontraditional students.

Early—and Basic—Objectives

At first the faculty thought in terms of promoting three types of changes in by enhancing and altering their basic repertoires of knowledge, their cognitive styles, and their attitudes toward education.

The Repertoire Objective

The repertoire objective was initially thought of in terms similar to those that became known as cultural literacy. Faculty believed that their students came without the background needed to operate successfully at a university. Few had done well in high school, while some had never even earned a high school diploma but had entered with a GED. Many were returning to school after many years. Thus, the faculty thought that their first objective was to help students accumulate and understand basic cultural references and be able to place them in an appropriate context. However, faculty recognized the danger that, with this strategy, the students might think of intellectual activity merely as compiling isolated facts. Thus, the second objective emerged: students should have a model of the relations between data, principles, and theories sufficiently complex to provide a meaningful context for new experience and information.

The Cognitive Objective

While the repertoire objective is primarily concerned with information, still students must ultimately engage in much more sophisticated tasks than just remembering what they are told. In broad terms, they must learn how to handle information, to do something with it, to rethink, reconceptualize, challenge, evaluate—in short, to engage the intellectual community according to the rules of rational discourse. However, few of our students had ever been asked to operate above the memory level before. The faculty saw their task as helping students see texts, theories, and claims—indeed information—as historical and rhetorical artifacts. Faced with the work of others, they were to be prepared to listen and read with self-conscious attention to unstated matters behind and within the text. Further, they were to learn to construct their own written and spoken work with a careful eye on their audience.

The Attitudinal Objective

The faculty strongly felt that students' prospects are conditioned as much by how they orient themselves to their studies as by their ability and training. Higher-level cognitive goals are simply unattainable unless students fully engage themselves as members of the community they are joining. Thus, faculty also saw the program as having a powerful moral component that community colleges had almost entirely neglected. In the original formulation, the program was to become a true intellectual community. To be successful, it must become the type of setting that would be attractive to students and capable of drawing them in, so that students would come to see themselves as people of learning, as well as capable of enjoying the effort of intellectual activity.

Implementing the Honors Program

The first programmatic decision was to dissolve the traditional three-credit course into a thirty-hour, two-semester program taught by an interdisciplinary six-member faculty team. The original faculty group agreed that they must truly function as a team and make all decisions about teaching content, processes, and evaluation as a group. This decision permitted a high degree of integration of subject matter and, more importantly, it encouraged faculty to collegially examine the pedagogical and programmatic processes that would have the greatest impact on student transformation. The key program elements were identified as lecture sequences, seminars, and a writing program. The lectures were thought of as carrying the repertoire agenda in an efficient manner, because they were linked together in an interdisciplinary framework. The seminars, where students learn the arts of close reading and careful discussion of primary texts, was seen as carrying the cognitive agenda. Student groups of thirty-five to forty per semester were divided in half for seminars held twice each week, with teachers modeling styles of close reading and careful analysis, students trying again and again in a setting simultaneously tense and relaxed, threatening and supportive.

Another early programmatic decision to have two faculty lead each seminar, which turned into both a powerful pedagogical technique as well as a major vehicle for faculty development. One faculty member is charged with carrying the academic agenda of the seminar, leading the discussion, while the other has primary responsibility for the process. The second role was

clearly the most challenging, for it required the instructor to watch and wait, evaluating the proceedings, looking for student misapprehensions, unappreciated remarks, underdeveloped but important themes. The responsibility of the professor in this second role is to step in as needed, and then hand the discussion back to the leader. For this to work, the two faculty members must trust and respect each other, accepting redirection, amplification, and qualification as critical components of the learning process. This was the most powerful way in which the traditional isolation of the classroom was broken down. The two faculty were forced to reflect on their mutual efforts, and many seminars led to extended conversations as the two tried to process what went well or badly in the discussion.

The third component—writing—came to be seen as increasingly important to achieving program goals. Faculty developed a writing across the curriculum program in which all members of the faculty team work intensively with student writing.

Revising the Program

Over time the repertoire objective (the cultural literacy component) became devalued by the faculty and largely dropped. On the one hand the faculty came to feel that it had been too guided by a traditional agenda that was largely irrelevant for a diverse and multicultural group of students. On the other hand, while students certainly came with critical information gaps in their education, they also arrived having experienced a lifetime of being lectured to, and thought of learning largely as writing down and remembering what they were told. This realization led the faculty to place greater emphasis on offering the students compelling and sophisticated models of intellectual activity, and to take care that students never experience any feature of the program as trivial. To the extent that the repertoire objective was retained at all, it was rethought by organizing the curriculum in terms of traditions of thought. The work of Alistair McIntyre was helpful in offering a conception of intellectual traditions as conversations that, to be recovered, required that thinkers be put in relationship to one another. This was useful as a guide to curriculum revision, emphasizing the need to explicate how writers continued, refined, or challenged specific traditions.

Faculty were influenced in their thinking about the cognitive agenda by Richard Richardson and his collegues in *Literacy in the Open Access College* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1983), whose study spoke to our own experi-

ence by emphasizing the challenge of democratic higher education. They described how the influx of large numbers of nontraditional students into institutions unprepared to serve them produced a weakening of the academic culture, and that this was expressed in the classroom by a leveling down of the norms of literacy. In their terms, this was a move from "texting," the comprehension and composition of sophisticated texts, to "bitting," as students read textbooks instead of primary works and faculty substituted evaluation devices such as true/false and multiple choice questions for the more sophisticated use of essay exams. The trend was particularly harmful because it was not the result of explicit policy decisions, but was produced through the informal process of negotiation between students and faculty in the classroom. As teachers committed to traditional chalk-and-talk information transfer encountered students with declining levels of academic preparedness, they typically responded by simply watering down requirements: they both conveyed less complex information via lectures and demanded much less literate behavior from students by replacing term papers and essays with check marks on multiple-choice exams. Further, Richardson's work showed that what begins in the individual classroom ultimately alters the entire intellectual climate of the school as norms of literacy decline and the rigor of academic work is negotiated away.

The Honors faculty found this analysis helpful in rethinking the design of the program. They came to think of the central cognitive task as "raising the norms of literacy." In consequence, Honors Program curriculum revision was thought of as emphasizing opportunities for sophisticated language use in writing, talking, and thinking. This accelerated the work of curriculum integration as individual faculty members became less concerned with holding on to their own material and more willing to collegially rethink the overall cognitive aims of the program.

The focus on sophisticated language use ultimately led the faculty to pay greater attention to the students. If literacy norms were to be renegotiated then agreements had to be reached with the students, which brought the nature of an intellectual community in an open access community college into bold relief. Each year—actually—each semester, faculty and students had to reestablish a viable community as faculty explained their aims and expectations and worked with the students to reach agreements about their common work. Over time a series of practices emerged as most important in establishing and sustaining the Honors Program as an intellectual community.

Central Practices in the Current Honors Program

In reaction in part to much of all-too-easy talk about standards, educational goals, and ideals with which they have been surrounded for years, Honors Program faculty have tried to focus discussions among themselves on the issue of practices. This focus raises such broad, tough questions as:

- What exactly is the intellectual activity in which a particular practice asks students to engage?
- What picture of academic and professional life does the practice present?
- What intellectual and social relationships among students does the practice encourage?
- What are the relationships between faculty and students?
- What are relationships among faculty?

The intellectual framework within which such questions are used in evolving practices is fairly conventional: in a year of full-time study, students read, discuss, and write about European thought and artistic expression from ancient Mediterranean cultures to the twentieth century. That framework has continued to change since 1979, of course, and now more attention is paid, for instance, to European encounters with non-European cultures and with its own others, especially women. In any case, the subject matteris not nearly as important to the character of the program as the practices that carry that subject matter.

Writing Seminars and Groups

The practices in CCP's writing seminars and groups are undoubtedly the most powerful in transforming the ways in which students handle themselves academically, and has certainly been the most widely imitated at CCP. In the seminars, each two hours long and held twice a week, students are asked to analyze a primary text (e.g., Gorgias' defense of Helen, a selection from Augustine's *Confessions*, an excerpt from Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*) in a setting that demands careful listening and thoughtful speaking. For many students it is the first time in their lives that they have been asked, why do you think that? as a normal, rather than a hostile, question. And having to articulate just how they are reading the text so that they articulate their understanding of the reading is a disturbing but transforming experience for all

students in the seminar. But there is still one more ball that seminar participants are asked to keep in the air: students are pressed by the faculty to place every comment in a clear relation to the particular direction that the discussion is taking at the moment. "Do you take yourself to be in agreement with what Joan has just said? In disagreement? Extending her view? In what way?" Transfer institutions regularly report that after a year of such seminars, CCP Honors Program students are able to handle themselves in classroom discussions in ways that set these students apart from their peers, and points them towards successful graduate study.

Students in the Honors Program typically write two major papers during the semester, each one on an assignment common to the whole group, and each requiring two public versions before the final draft is turned in. The early public versions become the subject matter for what were original small writing groups (approximately six students and one professor) that met once or twice a week. Over the years these groups have evolved into writing seminars of up to twenty students and, usually, two faculty, and the student papers are treated very much the way texts are in regular seminars. The author remains silent; the text alone speaks. The seminar participants are pushed by the faculty to describe what the text is doing, rather than what it is not or should be doing. Some of the benefits from such writing seminars flow to the author, but most go to the participants who struggle to articulate just what a text accomplishes rhetorically, how it is accomplished, and how various puzzles raised by the text-in-progress might be explained. Such student analyses of student papers have proved to be portable: in the course of a year, students are more and more able to take their analyses home and apply them to the texts they themselves are creating, now from the point of view of what it must be like for their readers to read the texts that they are writing.

The Overlapping of First and Second Semester Student Groups

One fortuitous feature of the Honors Program started with its second semester (Fall 1979): adding students at midyear, an addition that resulted in at least half of the students each semester being new to the program and half, the old heads, having been around for a semester. Quickly, and with very little encouragement from the faculty, the old students enculturate the new. This enculturation is crucial, for the program depends on immense good will

from all the students who, week by week, are asked to do high-level intellectual work even before they understand quite how or why to do it. But first-semester Honors Program students see their nontraditional second semester peers working hard, making sense of the difficult readings, talking their way through the intellectual puzzles that seminars present, and offering various kinds of help, including the all-important "That's exactly how I felt at this time last semester, but then things began to make sense—that'll happen for you too." Such support is offered in the breaks between classes, in the Honors Program lounge (the outer office for three of the six program faculty) before and after the school day, and in the student-formed student groups that run throughout the semester, especially during the weeks prior to mid-semester and final examinations.

Community Rituals

Some of the support is of the traditional academic sort, but some also takes a more social form, providing part of the focused extracurricular life that helps traditional students at four-year colleges see themselves as belonging to a purposeful community. So it is that stories about faculty and former students are passed down from one Honors Program student generation to another. The storytelling is aided not only by the overlapping of first and second-semester student groups, the informal gatherings just described, and the existence of the student lounge, but also by two somewhat more formal end-of-semester gatherings: a New York City bus trip and an end-of-semester party. The rituals involved in the latter include serious awards given by faculty to students (e.g. Most Improved Student) and many nonserious (e.g. Student Sighted in Class Less Often than Elvis). Students also respond with awards and gifts to—and some devastating imitations of—the faculty. Such rituals help hold the group together and are part of the social and emotional support necessary in a program that immerses its students in a year of intense, intellectually demanding academic work.

An Integrated Curriculum

The shape of its integrated course of study is the one feature that most strongly sets CCP's Honors Program apart from other honors programs. Instead of being a collection of enriched individual courses, it is a unified program, the content and activities of which are collegially determined by the faculty each semester. Students receive credit for individual courses in the

humanities and social sciences. And the Honors faculty, drawn from those two broad areas, certify that the study done by students in the program is the equivalent of work required by the individual courses for which the students receive credit. But the mix of lectures, seminars, writing seminars, writing assignments, and examinations is created by the six faculty jointly and is expressed not as the activities of separate courses, but rather as activities that are part of a single course of study in which each faculty member has had a specialized role (e.g., conducting a lecture/discussion session on Sappho's poetry) and a general role (e.g., leading seminars).

Creating and revising reading assignments, writing assignments, and examination questions, reading of papers and examinations, and grading are all done collectively by the faculty. Such collective activities both require and reinforce deep agreements among the Honors Program faculty as to what particular practices really work to transform students during the program's one-year time frame. In general, the practices the faculty have settled on as most powerful are both collective and language-centered, and are designed to promote an intellectual community among students and teachers. The program is distinctive in that, as in the seminars, students do their thinking in public, framing their thoughts in a thoroughly rhetorical setting. Paper topics are in common, so that each writing seminar not only displays the strengths and weaknesses of a particular paper's strategy, but also changes the conversation to which all the students are contributing with the changing public versions of their papers. In such a setting, revising one's paper is not a mechanical exercise, but becomes a serious business of rethinking in response to an ongoing common conversation. Examination questions are distributed a week before both the mid-semester and final examinations, offering another opportunity for public discussion. Student-led study groups and faculty-led seminars provide settings for the careful analysis of questions and strategies for dealing with them. Faculty assume that students may forget many of the details that they learned during their year in the program, but will retain some well-developed strategies for reading, analyzing, talking about, and writing about the material they will encounter when they transfer. In short, they learn how to handle themselves as students.

Faculty Development

The deep agreements among the Honors faculty have not been easy to come by and require ongoing efforts to maintain. The practices involved in

this agreement-centered faculty development include each member giving up his/her pedagogical autonomy, having frequent conversations about both the details and the general direction of the program, and pairing faculty in such key classroom settings as seminars, writing seminars, and examination preparation sessions. In a general faculty culture that prizes individual autonomy, few faculty have been permanently attracted to a program like CCP's Honors Program. So it is that over the years many have tried it out—either the Honors Program itself or its spin-off, the Transfer Opportunities Program—but have decided that they really would rather do their own thing. Few have been willing to submit to a program in which faculty constantly ask their students, their colleagues, and themselves the tough questions, "Why do you think that?" and "What is the point of doing things that way?" But for the more than half dozen faculty who regularly teach in the program, the experience of personal growth—seen in both the students and the faculty—is well worth the price of such unsettling questions. These questions focus on such details as a proposed new examination question, a lateness policy, or an addition to or subtraction from the sequence of seminar readings. Discussion of such details inevitably leads to just how the proposed change relates to the general character and direction of the program. And sometimes that general character is itself the focus of discussion, as when questions about the shape of an entire semester's intellectual agenda arise: "How does the inclusion of non-European texts fit within the structure we have been using, and how might that structure change but still be coherent?" Finally, the pairing of faculty in key classroom settings helps raise questions about relations among faculty and between faculty and students. "In today's seminar, didn't we drift into asking the students to guess what we were thinking?" and "This group really isn't listening to each other; perhaps we should start the next seminar by pointing to that problem," are examples of the pedagogical issues that arise from such pairing.

Conclusion

The Community College of Philadelphia, like most urban community colleges, is experienced by many of its students as a large, impersonal institution: the lines at registration, the widespread practice of drifting from course to course without a clear plan, and the overwhelming numbers of students and staff encountered each day are among the features that can discourage students from continuing on an academic path leading to successful transfer.

But that mass experience can be broken up into coherent individual programs, including ones like CCP's Honors Program, which carefully but aggressively shape every faculty and student practice to transform its students into successful juniors, seniors, and graduate students.

Declaration of Metropolitan Universities

We, the leaders of metropolitan universities and colleges . . .

• reaffirm that the creation, interpretation, dissemination, and application of knowledge are the fundamental functions of our institutions;
• accept a broad responsibility to bring these functions to bear on our metropolitan regions;
• commit our institutions to be responsive to the needs of our communities by seeking new ways of using resources to provide leadership in addressing metropolitan problems through teaching, research, and service.

Our teaching must:
• educate students to be informed and effective citizens, as well as capable practitioners of professions and occupations;
• be adapted to the diverse needs of metropolitan students, including minorities and underserved groups, adults of all ages, and the place-bound;
• combine research-based knowledge with practical application and experience, using the best current technology and pedagogical techniques.

Our research must:
• seek and exploit opportunities for linking basic investigation with practical application, and for creating interdisciplinary partnerships for attacking complex metropolitan problems, while meeting the highest standards of the academic community.

Our professional service must:
• develop creative partnerships with public and private enterprises that ensure the intellectual resources of our institutions are fully engaged in mutually beneficial ways;
• include close working relationships with elementary and secondary schools aimed at maximizing the effectiveness of the entire metropolitan education system;
• make the fullest possible contribution to the cultural life and general quality of life of our metropolitan regions.