Honors Design Team Report

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April 1, 2012

Introduction

If the average student or faculty member were asked about Mohawk Valley Community College's Honors Program, the response would likely be an "um" or a head scratch. If students and faculty *do* know that a program exists, few possess the specifics of how it functions. Or, they might mistake the little-known program for the better-publicized Honors club on campus, Phi Theta Kappa. Hence, the Honors Design Team was charged with redesigning Honors by evaluating the current program and making recommendations from best practices at other institutions.

Background

Currently, Honors at MVCC is a self-selected, project-based program in which three-five students participate yearly. An interested student chooses a faculty member with whom to work on an independent project, normally taking the faculty member's course simultaneously. They meet regularly over the course of the semester, and the student gives a formal presentation of the research at the end of the semester. "Honors credit" is given if the student completes the project and earns a B or better in the course. If a student completes three such projects and graduates with a 3.0 GPA or better, the title "Graduate with Distinction" is earned. Dr. Robert Jubenville, formerly the head of Honors, recalls only two students earning this distinction in the past five years.

Historically, the sciences have dominated the Honors Presentations. For example, last year's projects included: "Redesign of the Pulse," "Pathophysiology," and "The Effect of Cognitive Dissonance of the Formation of Short Term Memory." Also, since the inception of the Honors Program, no student has ever given a presentation on a humanities-related subject.

Clearly, the current Honors Program is limited in several ways. Perhaps the largest limitation is the small number of participating students. The design team has identified a number of causes for this problem. Primarily, the program is poorly advertised. The only way a student would learn about Honors is through word-of-mouth or through the paragraph about it in the Course Catalog. Not only students lack information, but faculty as well, who should serve as the program's main recommenders.

But even if the program were better advertised, the team proposes that the number of participating students would not increase significantly. This is because the participating students must do virtually every step on their own: from undertaking an Honors project to choosing an instructor to completing the necessary paperwork. They

have little administrative oversight, but more importantly, they have no peer support. Essentially, the design team and the college administration earlier acknowledged that Honors's greatest drawback is the absence of a community.

As a step toward creating an Honors community, three College Seminar (ED 100) classes for Presidential Scholars were created last semester (Fall 2011). Presidential Scholars are students who receive free tuition because they graduated in the top ten percent of their high school class, and there are approximately 40 of them this academic year. The initial idea behind the College Seminar for Presidential Scholars class was that it would serve as the first step in a more structured Honors program. In such a program, the Presidential Scholars would make up a cohort, moving from one step to the next in Honors together. This more visible, vibrant and comprehensive Honors Program does not exist yet, but the Honors Design Team was tasked to create it.

Activities of the Design Team

In November 2011, Vice President Maryrose Eannace and English Instructor Sarah Beck met for a brainstorming session to develop the Honors Design Team, beginning with the charter. (A year earlier, Sarah traveled to Wayne State University in Detroit, MI with President Randy VanWagoner and others to research the university's comprehensive Honors Program. Wayne State offers full-tuition scholarships to eligible MVCC students each year.) With Maryrose's help, Sarah wrote the charter with an emphasis on openness and creativity in redesigning the program. The hope was to not only expand the current program, but to provide Honors students with a "transformative" experience.

Maryrose asked Prof. Maria Ramos (psychology) and Sarah to serve as the team's co-chairs; they met in December 2011 to establish their respective duties and invite other members to join. The team consists of Instructor Lindsey Geary (life sciences), Prof. Bill Hysell (humanities), Prof. Don Kelly (life sciences), and Prof. Jonathan Meeter (psychology). The team met three times (with Maria providing homemade snacks each time), starting in January 2012.

When team members first met, they created a meeting schedule and agreed to each research three Honors programs at other community colleges and four-year institutions. It was decided that special attention should be given to typical MVCC transfer schools, such as Utica College, SUNY Oswego, and Clarkson University, in the research. Team members were given a handout with basic program information and research questions.

For the second meeting, the team discussed their research findings, noting special attributes of the Honors Programs under study. For example, Don observed that all the programs he researched emphasized writing in their curriculum and were members of the National Collegiate Honors Council. Other members, like Jon, noted some of the programs' exclusivity, such as at Clarkson where Honors students live in a separate

residence hall. Don shared the intellectual and creative energy from the Honors students and faculty at the schools he researched. These programs, he said, were the most dynamic places on these campuses because of the profound and interdisciplinary learning taking place.

Before the final meeting, Sarah emailed a list of questions (developed from the previous meeting's discussion points) for the team to consider. At the final meeting, the team discussed and answered most of these questions, and a rough draft of a proposal for the Honors Program was born.

Finally, Don and Sarah met with Maryrose to discuss the team's rough draft. Maryrose made several suggestions, most of which included ways to make Honors more enticing for the participating students. She said she wanted students to be talking about it. There should be a buzz around Honors.

Before every meeting, Maria sent reminder emails. Also, some members raised questions via email, especially after the second and third meetings. Other team members addressed these questions and comments.

Recommendations and Rationale

Overview

The Honors Design Team recommends a three-step Honors Program with the last step developing in two phases. Students must complete all three steps in order to earn "Graduate with Distinction." However, completed individual steps will be noted on the student transcripts e.g. "Intro to Honors."

Application & Recruitment

Beginning in Fall 2012, all Presidential Scholars will be required to take Introduction to Honors, the first step in the Honors curriculum. They will have the choice to continue or leave the program after completing this course. Other students, both new and matriculated, may express interest in the program by completing a simple application form made available through the Registrar, Phi Theta Kappa, advisors and high school guidance counselors. The application will ask the student to check <u>one</u> of the four criteria that applies:

- High school GPA of 3.5 or higher
- SAT score of 1170 or higher
- Top 10% of high school graduating class
- MVCC or other college GPA of 3.25 or higher

Once completed, the application will be processed at the Registrar, and the student will

be able to register for Honors-designated courses. (The Registrar will generally take students at their word, and only in rare cases will fact-checking occur.) Interested students may apply to the program before the start of each fall or spring semester. If students maintain a 3.25 GPA at MVCC, they need only to apply to the program once.

Honors Program

Step I:

The first step in the Honors Program will be Introduction to Honors (HNRS 101), a one-credit course that will replace ED 100 for participating students. This course will be offered every fall and spring semester, so students will have the opportunity to join the Honors program twice an academic year. The course will have two primary purposes: to build community (a cohort) among Honors students and to prepare students to conduct an independent research project, the second step in the program. To enhance community-building, Honors students will be invited to one social event in the fall and one field trip in the spring. For example, a pizza night and a trip to New York City might be offered one year.

Step II:

Similar to the current Honors Program at MVCC, a student at the second stage will select a faculty member with whom to work on a two-credit independent research project. Students will be encouraged to work with professors whose classes they are already taking and to consider ALL fields of study, even those outside of their majors. Students will meet regularly with the faculty members, and at the end of the spring semester, present their research at a formal reception for the college community. A standardized schedule, outline and rubric will be made available to participating faculty members to help organize and assess these research projects.

Phase I

Step III:

For the final step of the Honors Program, students will take a course outside of their majors beyond the 101 level by choosing from a list of challenging three-credit classes. Some examples include: EN256 World Literature 1 or 2, BM206 Business Ethics, AN205 Forensic Anthropology, CJ202 American Constitutional Law, BI202 Microbiology.

Phase II

Step III:

Ultimately, however, the Honors Design Team foresees the third step as the completion of a three-credit Honors Seminar. Seminars will be intimate (capped at 12

students), interdisciplinary, and discussion-based. They will emphasize deep learning, specifically critical reading and writing. Three different Honors Seminar classes will be offered every semester and taught by a variety of faculty. Here are a few examples: Thoreau's Principles in the Wired Age; Freaks & Monsters: Madness in Modern Literature; Utica under the Microscope: An Artistic and Ecological Perspective. Once the seminars become available, they will likely precede the independent research project in the Honors curriculum.

Necessary Administrative and Budget Changes

A simple but effective first step for the college to embrace a more comprehensive Honors Program is to become a member of the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC). An institutional membership costs \$500. Membership provides access to critical information about developing an Honors Program and opportunities for Honors students, such as inter-collegiate trips and classes.

MVCC can also show support for the budding Honors Program by devoting some campus space, such as a classroom, to an Honors lounge. NCHC recommends that this space be located in a prominent area on campus, but it would not have to be initially. What is important is that students are able to maintain ties to their cohort, even after they finish a class together. The team recommends separating the lounge into two main areas: a place to talk with couches and stuffed chairs and a place to study with tables, chairs, a few computers, and a printer. Honors students will take turns monitoring the lounge.

Moreover, the team feels that it is vital that an Honors Liaison be hired to oversee the Honors Program immediately, even before reaching Phase II. This position should be compensated with a reduced course load or salary. NCHC recommends that no aspect of the program should function entirely out of good will, as this is a finite resource. The organization also suggests that a dean (reporting directly to the Vice President of Learning and Academic Affairs) should fill the liaison position, and that the Honors Program should have the same autonomy and campus presence as an academic center. The Honors Design Team did not discuss the position in these terms, but it was clear to everyone that the Honors Liaison should be compensated, as well as the instructors collaborating with students for independent research projects. MVCC instructors are paid \$160 for every independent study, and the team felt the current stipend was sufficient for now. The Honors Liaison should also have his or her own office and be supported with a paid assistant.

To recruit new students and build enthusiasm for the new Honors Program, Maryrose recommended that colorful glossy postcards be made to announce the program and provide the application information. Ideally, all academic advisors would have a stack of these postcards on their desks to discuss with student advisees. She also suggested that a web burst on the college homepage be made this summer to advertise the Honors Program.

To launch the program this fall, numerous items need to be addressed this summer; one of the most pressing will be to change and designate new course codes for the Honors courses and get them approved. For example, ED 100 should be changed to HNRS 101. Also, it is crucial that the courses required for Step III in Phase I bear the same credit and fulfill similar requirements in Degree Works and Banner as the Honors Seminars for Step III in Phase II. Honors students need to progress smoothly forward in the program even as the college makes systematic changes.

Finally, the Honors Design Team would like to serve as an advisory board to the Honors Program beginning in Fall 2012. If any changes to the program are recommended, the team will review and discuss them before passing them to the Curriculum Committee.