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Building Community and Fostering Excellence through the Writing Process

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The purpose of this article is to share a successful model for incorporating community building and academic achievement into an honors program by creating a public forum for honors students to display their work. According to what Roger McCain has described as a fundamental humanistic view of a university honors education, each student possesses a hierarchy of needs, which includes the need for individual value to be “recognized and confirmed, so that the individual [student] develops a sense of his or her own unique identity” (2). I suggest that honors writing courses, in particular, can foster what McCain contends is the “central objective” of an honors program: “the academic challenge needed by students of excellent academic ability and motivation, and concurrently *the recognition of their success in meeting that challenge*” (McCain, my emphasis). Creating an academically challenging curriculum to meet the needs of university honors students is the charge of honors programs, but beyond good grades assigned to student work and the honors designation conferred upon graduation, how do we acknowledge student success in those programs? The following briefly outlines the symposia that our Honors Writing Program, which includes a core faculty of seven and a student population of approximately 150 first-year students, developed to recognize just such student success beyond the classroom. These symposia serve not only to expand our concept of the “writing process” but simultaneously redefine our Honors Program community and meet the specific humanistic needs of our honors students.

Writing is a process, not a product. This is the mantra of college writing instructors whose intent is to cultivate a sense of both intent and capability on the part of the writing student. After all, we contend, a successful academic writer has developed skills that allow her to approach any writing assignment, evaluate its requirements, and compose and revise (and revise and revise) a paper that attends to and reflects those requirements. We spend precious course time discussing the various forms of writing—summary, expository, analytical—and the research methods within these differing genres. We offer rhetorical strategies for identifying key points of argumentation, which concurrently provide a historical trajectory of the writing process. We delineate the basic structure of composition, isolating thesis statements, transitional

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phrases, and introductory and concluding paragraphs, allowing students to see their work as moveable, alterable elements. We further provide tools for recognizing various writing forms and styles, and, most often, we measure the students' acquisition of such skills in, yes, their own writing products.

In the honors writing classroom we are particularly challenged by students who have, many times, come to us as already successful writers; indeed, many are in our programs because they have met or exceeded our written requirements for entry. Teaching writing to the writer who has already experienced success can be difficult, but when we rely on our adage of "process, not product" we are able to take the already capable writer and show her how to refine her work through critical inquiry and revision to become even more capable and successful. Frequently what the successful high school writer has yet to experience is the *intrinsic* motivation to write. One of the goals of our writing program is to shift the student's motivation from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation. It was our belief that the 'academic challenge' McCain suggests as central to the honors experience will establish the foundation for intrinsic motivation because students will inherently desire to rise to the challenge presented by our core writing classes.

Indeed, when our Honors Writing Program faculty began meeting to discuss tools for program assessment, we also began to look at student papers from our classes that reflected both mastery of process and lack thereof. We were easily able to determine which papers, and therefore which students, needed more attention, in turn allowing us to design our Writing Program curriculum around a specific aspect of the writing process, be it structure, analysis, mechanics, development, or style. However, we also noted a number of students who had indeed produced fine examples of academic writing. Although many of us had individually recognized the strength of some of our writers, collectively we realized that we had some fine writing on our hands that warranted more than a final grade to acknowledge its excellence. We discussed a possible forum for presentation of this work and decided to implement an Honors Symposium. In order to reinforce the process of writing, we decided that all of our first-year students should have the opportunity to present their work at the Symposium, not just the students who had already produced fine work. The emphasis on process allowed us to frame the Symposium in the context of revision and delivery; all students would benefit from the revision process and from adapting their written papers for oral presentation. In this way, we created an inclusive model of writing excellence which was available to everyone, not just a select few.

Our goals were multi-fold: 1) we wanted students first and foremost to be able to showcase their work in a supportive environment; 2) we wanted to stress the community aspect of our program by involving as many students in the process as possible, inviting all our students to be involved in some capacity, either as peer editors, as audience members, as moderators, or as presenters; 3) we wanted to reinforce the process of writing so that, whether students

received a high grade on their papers or not, the paper would benefit from revision for presentation; and 4) we wanted our first-year students, many of whom were already thinking about graduate school, to have a conference-like experience to help prepare them for such presentations in the future.

In the spring of 2003, in the second semester of a two-semester first-year writing course program requirement, we asked our students to look at their final papers from the first semester and decide whether they wanted to revise the work for presentation at the Symposium. We could not anticipate the response. Could we expect our students to participate in the mandatory Saturday revising workshops, do the revisions, practice their presentations, and then overcome nerves and actually present their papers at the Symposium? As usual, our honors students impressed us with their dedication and hard work, committing themselves to an event that had no significant tangible reward beyond a sense of confidence and accomplishment. They were already reinforcing our overarching programmatic goal of creating a shift from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation.

Approximately twenty-three first-year students chose to present their work at the Symposium, and over eight additional first-year students, more than half of the first-year students as a whole, participated as peer reviewers, mock-audience members, session moderators, and actual audience members. The honors faculty collected papers and coordinated appropriate thematic sessions for the Symposium. We scheduled six sessions and each student was given twenty minutes for presentation with a fifteen-minute discussion period at the end of each session. Students read their papers, worked from note cards, or, in several cases, created power-point presentations to accompany their work.

We coordinated that first Symposium with our annual Honors Week and invited parents, faculty, and administrators to attend. Many did. Several Honors faculty held additional office hours to review papers and make suggestions for revision. We held a mandatory workshop, facilitated by the Honors Program's Associate Director and an Honors Writing Program faculty member, during which we discussed key points for revision and particularly for oral presentation, trained students in constructive feedback, and then teamed students into groups of three to four peers to read papers and make revision suggestions. Once revisions were made, students practiced their presentations in front of peers or instructors, working on eye contact, breathing, internal quotations, and rate of speech. We instructed students in appropriate conference dress and held the Symposium in several of our university's premier conference rooms, with snacks and drinks, to reaffirm the significance of the event. We printed programs for the event and gave presenters a printed certificate acknowledging their participation. Following the Symposium, we published the papers in a bound volume, which each presenter received.

As we analyzed the success of that first Symposium, we realized that we had in fact achieved our stated goals for the event. A supportive environment was created because most of our students, depending on the degree of their

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involvement, had a vested interest in the Symposium. For example, peer editors became part of the successful presentation of the paper they reviewed, and audience members had been exposed to the same curriculum that inspired most of the papers and so were able to engage with the content and ask thoughtful questions. Further, this supportive environment helped to create and foster the Honors first-year community. With an eye toward recruitment and retention for our Honors Program, and understanding that “sense of community” is a significant reason that honors students stay in our program, we applied for, and received, a grant through our university’s recruitment and retention office to offer a suite of symposia, one in the fall and one in the spring.

Trusting that the community we established in that first Symposium would generate interest in a second, we held another Symposium in the fall of 2003, this time for returning honors students (sophomores, juniors, seniors) to present work from previous courses across disciplines, and we had our then first-year students serve as peer reviewers, pre-audience members, audience members, and session moderators. Again, approximately twenty-five students revised and presented papers, this time with an interdisciplinary focus. The first-year students worked in conjunction with returning honors students in the fall; in the spring we held a Freshmen Honors Symposium with the roles reversed: those who had presented in the fall served as reviewers and mentors for the first-year presenters.

As our honors faculty received abstracts for paper presentations, we further realized that our students’ scholarship represented the diversity and breadth of our Honors Program curricula. Session titles included *Ecology, Eco-criticism, and the Environment*; *Monsters and Masters in Literature*; *Leadership, Heroism, and the Art of Decision-Making*; *Historical Perspectives on War, Music, and Science*; and *Reconstructing Identities through Narrative Voice*. In one session, creative writers read their poetry and short stories while in another session presenters discussed First Amendment rights and racism in public policy. As we watched our students adeptly field questions from parents, students, and faculty on their particular topics, we knew we had not only extended the writing process but had expanded the teaching process as well.

Turnout for the symposia has dramatically increased as the events have become annual. Our last Symposium, in the fall of 2004, had over thirty returning honors student participants, and again over half of our first-year student population participated in supportive roles. Encouragement from faculty in the first-year writing courses continued to increase participation at all levels, and we were able to separate our revision workshop into two Saturdays, one focused on revision of the written paper for oral presentation and the second on practicing the presentation in front of faculty and peer reviewers.

Moreover, although we cannot isolate the symposia as the sole reason for higher student retention figures, we feel confident that students who participate in the symposia experience a greater sense of community and satisfaction within the Honors Program.

However, the greatest benefit of the now annual and co-convened Honors Symposium, at least for those of us teaching writing in the Honors Program, is the reinforcement of the *process* of writing. We are able, through the Symposium, to carry honors students' final papers beyond the final grade and the end of the semester to further revision. We also add another step to the process: presentation. The students who choose to present their papers see their work as scholarship; they are intimately familiar with their topics and answer critical questions about their work and ideas confidently. In addition, the humanistic needs that McCain discusses are met through engagement in the Honors Symposium: the students who participate at any level test their skills as writers, editors, and public speakers, and ultimately they are rewarded with a sense of satisfaction that far exceeds any tangible incentive. In other words, their motivation becomes intrinsic. Further, the students who participate as reviewers and audience members are part of a community of honors students who challenge themselves personally *and* intellectually. As McCain asserts, "community-building is the first order of importance [in honors programs]" (1).

The Honors Program community is not only reconfirmed through the symposia but also, like the writing process, expanded beyond the classroom to include parents, faculty, and administrators. Parents, some of whom have been honors students themselves, are able within the symposia sessions to engage in an intellectual conversation put forth by their children. Faculty and administrators witness the pedagogical possibility inherent in interdisciplinary educational methods. Hence, the Honors Program community begins to reflect a larger community of support and interest that is manifested through participation, at whatever level, in the Symposium.

Although the size of our university Honors Program provides for intimacy among faculty and students, the Symposium model is easily adaptable across community-college and university programs of various sizes. The key to the success of the Symposium model is not the size of the student population but the sense of community created among the students. Students who participated in the Symposium did so because their peers—as fellow presenters, editors, and audience members—supported them, and that support enabled students to move beyond the extrinsic motivation of class grades to the intrinsic motivation, outside of the classroom experience, of academic excellence through hard work. Smaller honors programs might be able to pool resources with larger programs and create regional or statewide symposia. Alternatively, these symposia could be linked to a capstone honors experience that emphasizes the students' majors. Again, however, the benefit of the Symposium for our Honors Program has been the success each student involved in the process has experienced.

Meeting the academic and intellectual needs of honors students is the mission of university honors programs. However, once we meet these needs, we are further challenged to meet the more humanistic needs of our students by creating opportunities for students to achieve self-confidence and self-fulfillment. Further, we hope to build a sense of community that encourages students

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both to embrace their own uniqueness and to come together collectively in support of one another in an educational community. The symposia discussed here expand the parameters of the writing process, reconstruct the model of an honors community, and allow our students to rise to a new level of scholarship and personal success.

REFERENCE

McCain, Roger. "Notes Toward an Apologia for Honors Education." *The National Honors Report*, Fall 1991.

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