



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Rethinking Honors Programs for Community Colleges

The traditional model for a community college honors program, analogous in focus to most honors programs at four-year institutions, centers on providing the best and the brightest students with an enriched education, generally in a rarified academic environment—that is, in special classes and/or sections with only honors students enrolled. In the late 1980s, San Juan College introduced such an honors program, and by 2004, the average enrollment in the four or five honors courses was only in the low 30s. A transformation over the past decade, which resulted in a fall 2014 enrollment of 458, was the direct result of a change in the program's philosophy. The new mission centers on discovering outstanding students and nurturing and preparing them for their futures—a model that can be successfully employed at any two-year college.

Two central components—open admissions and a focus on embedded classes—have been central to the growth and success of the honors program. In both areas, the rationales underlying our choices have been pragmatic and philosophical, and were instituted while the honors program graduation requirements were raised twice during this period of growth.

Open Admissions

Unlike many other programs, the honors program has no admissions requirements. Any student wishing to take an honors course can simply enroll in one as easily as any other course at the college. Our focus is not on students' academic pasts, but rather on their future potential—what they can accomplish by the time they graduate. To graduate as a San Juan College Distinguished Scholar, which requires completing the requirements of the honors program, students must complete 12 hours of honors courses with no grade lower than a B, and achieve a minimum GPA of 3.25 in honors and other courses. (See footnote 1.)

Thomas Edison once said, "Genius is 1 percent inspiration, and 99 percent perspiration." Following that insight, we have learned that a student's past does not determine his or her future. A 26-year-old single mother with a GED may have taken an alternative route to college, but that past does not limit nor necessarily predict her academic promise. The validity of this choice is confirmed by the success of our graduates. In 2014, of the honors graduates who began their college careers at San Juan College, 78.5 percent of them had taken at

least one developmental education course. (See footnote 2.) These students, in addition to having successfully completed the honors program requirements, had an average overall GPA of 3.56. In 2013, the numbers were 76 percent with an average GPA of 3.5. The concept of open admission—the belief that a student's past should not dictate his or her future—is at the heart of the community college's mission, and we believe that an honors program should embody that value.

Embedded Classes

Most San Juan College honors courses are embedded with non-honors and honors students concurrently enrolled, with the latter group held to higher standards and/or required to do more in-depth work. This emphasis solved an honors scheduling issue. For the first 16 years of the program's existence—when Honors courses were generally "special topics" courses—sections were frequently cancelled due to low enrollments. Routinely cancelling honors courses negatively impacted students' perceptions of the program. With the embedded model, if only one student enrolls in a course for honors credit, the honors option is still available as long as the regular course is not cancelled. This has allowed San Juan College to offer a wide range of honors courses in many disciplines, at a wide variety of times, and in face-to-face and online formats, which opens the program up to a much larger potential audience. For example, in fall 2014, honors options were available for 75 courses with 122 sections in 28 different disciplines.

From an administrative perspective, embedded classes represent a more efficient use of faculty, since instructors are potentially teaching more total students per section. With the total number of students enrolled in an embedded class normally being higher than a stand-alone honors class, the cost per student can be quite a bit less (i.e., an embedded class with a total of 30 students, five of whom are honors students, versus an honors-only section of 18 students). In addition, this option opens the door for more creative and potentially cost-effective means of compensating faculty for teaching honors classes. Instructors can be compensated based on the additional effort they devote to honors students—a savings for the institution and potential extra income for faculty members. At San Juan College, faculty members teaching honors students in embedded classes accumulate credit in their "leave bank" (i.e., for every 20 honors students taught, an instructor "banks" one hour of leave).

An honors program that focuses on embedded classes may also make special-topic classes more attractive to

students. With a larger base of honors students, there are more students vested in the program who may find an occasional special topic class attractive and a good option for fulfilling their honors requirements. Pedagogically, embedded honors classes offer some positive elements in comparison to honors classes with only honors students enrolled. The virtue of the traditional option has always been creating a more rarefied intellectual environment for highly motivated students. Certainly, this is a valid approach. On the other hand, the San Juan College honors program is built on a more democratic marketplace approach—one that draws inspiration from the Greek philosopher Socrates who spent his time in the Athenian marketplace engaging a wide range of people. In the traditional honors model, the best and the brightest are often intellectually segregated from other students, which lowers the intellectual discourse in non-honors sections by removing some quality students from the discussions. The traditional model also creates an environment for honors students that may not mimic the world in which they will eventually work. Non-honors students may also benefit from the embedded model as honors students bring the insights they gain from their more in-depth work to the classroom dialogue, thereby raising the quality and enthusiasm of discussions. Faculty members often remark about the noticeable difference between their classes that do not have honors students enrolled in them compared to those that do.

The embedded model has lent itself to other potential innovations, most notably the Honors Service Learning option—an experiential opportunity for students to apply the lessons of the classroom in a manner that benefits the community. For example, students studying Spanish as a foreign language are able to earn Honors Service Learning credit by tutoring people who are trying to learn English as a second language at a community center. In such cases, students and the community are enriched.

The success of the San Juan College honors program has been, in no small part, a product of the belief that students want recognition. The open enrollment program provides students—many of whom have never been recognized for any academic or, in many cases, any achievement at all—with a type of reinforcement that lays the foundation for an array of future successes. Honors graduates have “Distinguished Scholar” recorded on their permanent transcript and are recognized at graduation. In addition, each year an Honors Reception and Forum is held where student projects are showcased and graduates receive a framed certificate, a personalized graduation medal, and a \$200 to \$300 award, thanks to the support of the San Juan College Foundation and the generosity of a local donor. While the money puts an exclamation point on their achievement, recognition is the key. It is not unusual to hear a student say, “This is the best thing that has ever happened to me!”

A few years ago, we realized that honors students were pushing themselves well beyond the minimums of the program. So, the college implemented another feature that recognizes honors students’ successes. A new graduation category—Merrion Master Scholars (named for the program’s local benefactor)—was created. Students have to complete a minimum of 18 hours in honors courses with a minimum of a 3.6 GPA. While this put students in the higher dollar award category, more importantly, their names and date of graduation are permanently engraved on a plaque in our Learning Commons Lounge. In the first year, we anticipated that two or three students would achieve this distinction. We were pleasantly surprised when 14 students “made the wall.” Three years later, 25 students have received this recognition. The success of this additional level of recognition has confirmed our belief that students at community colleges do want recognition and that they will excel when given the opportunity to do so.

The embedded model has also provided the flexibility to expand the honors program into many other community college disciplines in which such an option traditionally does not exist. We have achieved great success in health sciences, and we have plans to extend the program to trades, technology, and energy. Our mission as a community college is not only to train and educate our future workforce, but to provide them with the experiences and opportunities to excel in their chosen field. Graduating higher quality nurses or diesel mechanics, because of the Honors Program, makes perfect sense.

While the San Juan honors program has grown tremendously over the past decade, we realize that we have only scratched the surface. Our growth will continue as we expand into other disciplines and experiment with new options based on our successes.

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Footnotes

1 In 2004, requirements for graduating from the San Juan College Honors Program were completing 12 hours in Honors Courses with no grade lower than a B. Subsequently, the requirement of an overall 3.0 was added. Later, the current standards were added.

2 Those remedial courses are in English, Reading, and Math.