

Community collaboration for underserved schools: A first-year honors service-learning seminar approach

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Abstract

This article describes the development and design of a first-year honors seminar which requires over 500 students to volunteer in underserved schools annually. This project aims to facilitate their transition into college and develop their leadership skills and civic responsibility, while concurrently addressing the lack of social studies instruction in the host classrooms are highlighted.

Introduction

First-year college honors students are academically talented learners that have been accepted into the honors program of a four-year postsecondary institution. Although requirements for admittance into an honors program differ by institution, invitations are generally sent to students that performed well in their high school classes, ranked in the top 10 percent of their graduating class, and earned top percentile scores on college admissions exams (e.g., SAT, ACT). Once in college, honors students tend to continue to exhibit a greater inclination toward academics. Their academic success has been attributed to good study habits, efficiency and promptness, and high levels of motivation that they developed early in their academic careers (Day, 1989; Mathiasen, 1985).

Transition relies on a student's ability to become academically and socially integrated and this integration matters most during the first year of college (Astin, 1984; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). In their delineation of elements that

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characterize “good practice” in higher education, Gaff and Ratcliff (1997) summarized that curricula and pedagogies that provide active, integrative, collaborative, and engaged learning opportunities, particularly in the “early years” are the best and set the stage for future success. In contrast to earlier work (Pflaum, Pascarella, & Duby, 1985), Astin (1993) found that enrollment in an honors program was one student-involvement measure that explained variability in 82 outcome measures. Honors students’ likelihood to meet with faculty members, discuss career plans with class members, and discuss social-political issues with other students outside of class were found to set apart honors and non-honors students and hypothesized to be linked to transition and first-year retention (Shusok, 2002, 2006; Slavin, Coladarci, & Pratt, 2008).

In spite of these strengths, college honors freshmen are not without their struggles. Retention among honors students, especially women, remains a challenge for many universities. In a comparison between honors, non-honors, and academically-talent/non-honors students, Cosgrove (2004) found that only three out of four honors students completed the requirements to graduate with honors. This finding questions the previously accepted relationship of academic ability to subsequent retention and graduation rates (Murtaugh, Burns, & Schuster, 1999), and highlights the need for further investigation into programs/approaches that support both the initial and longitudinal transition of honors undergraduates.

Service-learning has been touted as a pedagogical approach to ease the transition from high school to college (Furco, 2002) and to increase retention and interpersonal engagement (Gallini & Moely, 2003). Unfortunately, the first year of college is when students most likely turn away from service (Vogelgesang, Ikeda, Gilmartin, & Keup, 2002). Colleges and universities must continue to promote the values of citizenship, democracy, and civic engagement (Battistoni, 2002), and first-year courses have been identified as excellent venues through which to initiate such value learning, character development, and civic involvement (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003; Whiteley, 1989). In its 2003 Annual Service Statistics publication, Campus Compact reported that only 19% of its responding member institutions had service-learning as part of their honors programs, which had only increased by 1% from the previous year’s survey. Perhaps even more telling is that despite the yearly publication of these statistical reports, no data on service-learning in honors programs or honors courses have been included since 2003.

This article describes the development and design of a first-year honors seminar which requires over 500 students to volunteer in underserved schools annually. The project aims to facilitate their transition into college and develop their leadership skills and civic responsibility, while concurrently addressing the lack of social studies instruction in the host classrooms are highlighted.

First-Year Seminars

Freshman seminars have been present in colleges and universities in the United States for over 100 years with the first “for credit” orientation seminar offered in 1911 at Reed College (Fitts & Swift, 1928; Hunter & Linder, 2004). The utilization of seminars escalated in the mid-70s, however, when colleges and universities experienced an influx of non-traditional students, decreased retention during the first two years, and external pressures over the quality of undergraduate education (Hunter & Linder, 2004). First-year seminars have grown steadily since and are now considered an effective curricular structure for addressing issues specific to first-year students. In 2000, almost 75% of 2,539 four-year institutions that responded to a survey about their first-year programs employed first-year seminars (National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2002). Commonly, these more personal, manageable curricular approaches include an introduction to university services, co-curricular activities to connect new students to one another, faculty, and community members, and college academic survival skills (Bonstead-Bruns, 2007; Hunter & Linder, 2004).

First-year seminars can be classified into three larger sets: extended orientation seminars, academic seminars, and other (Hunter & Linder, 2004). Extended orientation seminars are the most ubiquitous type of seminar and aim to acclimate students to higher education and the host institution. Academic seminars may have uniform content across all sections, or topics may vary according to the expertise of the instructional team and/or interest of enrolled students. The last type of seminar encompasses professional, discipline-based, or basic study skills courses that are offered for first-year students as an introduction to college survival skills and/or as foundational to future disciplinary studies. Because first-year seminars are adaptable, they have become popular to address the needs of specific entering student subpopulations via learning community models (Laufgraben, 2004). The most common special sections include academic majors, academically underprepared students, honors students, students in a learning community, and non-traditional adult learners

(The National Resource Center for First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2002).

Regardless of classification, seminars are typically small, credit-bearing classes that are applied to general education or elective requirements. In order to increase student-faculty interaction, seminars are designed so that students may more easily develop a relationship with a faculty member and peers. With strong interpersonal relationships, first-year students theoretically will realize that they are not alone in their struggles, confusion, fear, and anxiety, and feel more comfortable seeking assistance when needed (Crissman, 2001). Research has found that students who had taken a first-year seminar reported higher grade point averages, stronger peer support systems, more out-of-class contacts with faculty, were treated like adults, were more academically had integrated, more campus involvement, and tended to use campus resources more because they were more informed (Fidler, 1991; Maisto & Tammi, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Rice, 1992; Tinto & Goodsell Love, 1995; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). Barefoot and Fidler (1996) have summarized the characteristics of effective seminars:

- Are offered for academic credit
- Are centered in the first-year curriculum
- Involve both faculty and student affairs professionals in program design and instruction
- Include instructor training and development as an integral part of the program
- Compensate or otherwise reward instructors for teaching the seminar
- Involve upper-level students in seminar delivery
- Include ways of assessing their effectiveness and disseminating these assessments to the campus community

The Burnett Honors College: History & Student Demographics

Established as a program in 1980 and accorded college status in 2002, The Burnett Honors College (TBHC) at the University of Central Florida (UCF) aims to provide a challenging academic program and a foundation for future achievement to UCF's most academically talented students by combining the intimacy of a small liberal arts college with the benefits of a large, metropolitan research university.

The College strives to create a diverse learning community that fosters the pursuit of excellence, a sense of social and civic responsibility, and a passion for

life-long learning. Students are asked to participate in the learning experience instead of merely observing it, thereby developing their intellects in a way that will enhance them as thoughtful, productive, and creative individuals. These aims are succinctly stated in the College's goals:

1. achieve national prominence in Honors education;
2. foster academic excellence, personal growth, and civic responsibility in our students;
3. be UCF's premier program to foster intellectual curiosity, creativity, and undergraduate research; and,
4. become more inclusive and diverse.

In affiliation with the National Collegiate Honors Council, TBHC is designed to attract and challenge students who have demonstrated an ability to achieve academic excellence. Two distinct programs of study, University Honors and Honors in the Major, are offered.

The University Honors Program provides a special course of study to the most promising undergraduate students at the university. The program is a four-year course of studies that requires a minimum of 21 hours of Honors courses. These courses include Honors sections of UCF's General Education Program, upper-level Honors courses, and interdisciplinary seminars. Students are also required to attend Freshman Honors Symposium in the semester in which they are admitted. Students who successfully complete the program with at least a 3.2 GPA (overall) and 3.0 GPA (Honors) graduate with University Honors distinction on their diplomas and transcripts.

Honors in the Major is a two-year program designed to encourage the best junior and senior students to undertake original and independent research in their major field under the supervision of a faculty committee. This research culminates in a thesis or creative project. Because of the diversity of student interests, academic departments regulate Honors in the Major course work.

Honors freshmen are admitted in the fall semester of each year and 530 Honors students were admitted in fall 2008. The mean total SAT score for this incoming class was almost 1400 and the mean high-school grade-point-average was 4.03 (unweighted). In fall 2008, TBHC enrolled more than 1,700 students representing all majors. The largest concentration of majors is in the College of Arts and Sciences and the College of Engineering and Computer Science.

Atrophy of Social Studies in Florida's Underserved Schools: Addressing a Need

To prepare its students as socially responsible young women and men who fully understand the importance of being civically engaged and to facilitate their smooth transition into college, TBHC sought to engage their 500+ first-year honors students in a service-learning experience. The difficulty was locating a community partner that could absorb such a large number of volunteers while providing service-learners with an authentic opportunity to address a real need. Because of their budget reductions and loss of teaching assistants, K-12 schools were identified as possible partners. These settings were further viewed as positive milieus in which new honors students could serve. Having just graduated from high school, freshmen undergraduates were familiar with the school environment, were within the same generation as those that they would be serving, and would serve as academically talented models for younger students thereby supporting the development of their own academic self-image.

When asked by TBHC what needs they had and could be addressed by undergraduate honors volunteers, elementary teachers expressed the need for assistance in meeting state social studies benchmarks. Florida's Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) assesses K-12 students' knowledge of Reading/Language Arts, Science, and Math. Content areas not tested receive less teacher emphasis, instructional time, and student effort. Recent legislative mandates requiring elementary schools to offer 150 hours of physical activity each week have further reduced instructional time for non-FCAT subjects. Such reductions additionally impact schools that were identified as struggling, as determined by previous years' FCAT scores. These schools feel added pressure to increase their standardized test scores or risk state-levied penalties, including reduction in operating budget, terminations, or even closure. These schools are typically comprised of majority at-risk or minority student populations.

Coggins (2007) surveyed 1,766 elementary school teachers (K-5) to determine the extent to which there has been a substantial reduction of instructional time in Social Studies in Florida. Sixty-seven percent (67%) of respondents reported that they devoted only 0-2 hours a week to Social Studies while 21% spent 3 hours, and 11% spent 4-6 hours a week. In contrast, instruction in Reading averages 8 hours, Math 5 hours, and Science 4 hours a week. Since Science was added to the Florida's Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), 72% of teachers felt that 1-4 hours of instructional time each week that had been previously devoted to Social Studies instructions. When teachers were

asked whether they thought that the reduction in instruction on Social Studies was connected to the introduction of the FCAT, 61% agreed or strongly agreed.

The implications from Coggins' study are more troubling than teachers are emphasizing content areas that are tested on the FCAT while de-emphasizing those subjects that are not tested on the FCAT. By de-emphasizing Social Studies, we risk the atrophy, or even worse, the absence, of a civic understanding and associated behaviors, including civic participation.

HERO/JA Program and Freshman Honors Symposium

With K-12 partners identified, TBHC struggled with how to manage their Honors Educational Reach Out (HERO) volunteer opportunities. The image of involving such a large number of students for immediate service activity proved daunting. TBHC therefore partnered with Junior Achievement of Central Florida which provides structured, standards-aligned lesson plans on the roles individuals, consumers, and workers play in an expanding cultural environment that extends from the self and family to global relations. Implicit in these lessons is that every student has the potential to succeed in life, regardless of his or her background or economic status. Junior Achievement maintains a database of K-12 teachers that have requested a volunteer and, therefore, could facilitate placement and training.

To prepare honors students for their service activities, representatives from Junior Achievement provided an orientation to the organization and training workshop on the curricula for the honors students during the third week of classes. At that time, honors students were walked through each of the five lessons in their curricular packets, so that any misunderstandings could be addressed at that time.

To transport hundreds of students to various elementary schools around the county was a more daunting task, however. Many students were new to the area, and others did not have their own transportation. Knowledgeable about the importance of interpersonal connections for first-year students, as well as potential unstructured reflective moments for meaning-making, program administrators secured the assistance of American Coach Lines to transport students to their school placements. Ironically, American Coach Lines participates in Junior Achievement as well, which made securing the no-cost assistance much easier.

TBHC students volunteered in one classroom in an underserved school where they taught five themed lessons: Ourselves (K), Our Families (1st), Our

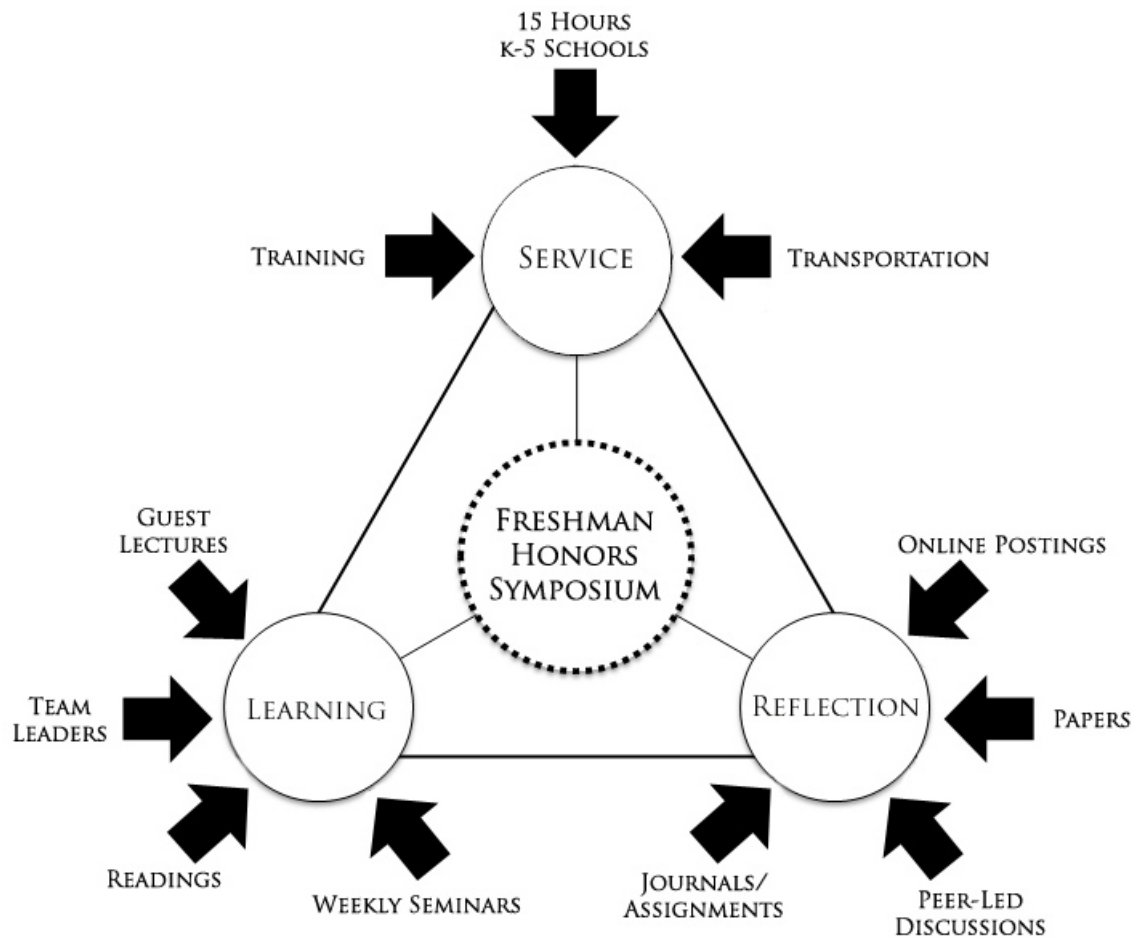
Community (2nd), Our City (3rd), Our Region (4th), and Our Nation (5th). Students made six visits. The first visit was to orient the students to the school and hosts, and the K-12 students to their service provider. The remaining five visits were to teach each of the Junior Achievement lessons. Total volunteer time was 15 hours and included the teaching of the lessons, visits to the schools, and preparation. Only about 5 hours were devoted explicitly to direct service-learning activities (i.e., teaching lessons, helping in class).

Volunteer experiences were linked to “The Evolution of a Community” Freshman Honors Symposium. This course, required of all Freshman Honors students, examines the historical, cultural and psychosocial development of “community” with a particular emphasis on how traditional notions of community have been defined and redefined in the context of American history. Another focus of the course is on the responsibility of the individual citizen in a democratic society and how the proper exercise of that responsibility is important both for those who contribute to and who receive the benefits of community service. All students meet once per week in a lecture class for two hours with the course instructor and team leaders. The role of group leaders was to help incoming students to adjust to campus and college life, facilitate post-lecture discussions and encourage student involvement, and to lead meaningful reflective activities about service experiences. For the first hour, all students met for a lecture by a guest faculty member. Students then divided into their small group led by an upper class honors team leader. Thirty minutes of the small group meetings were used to discuss the preceding lecture and connect it to service-learning experiences and course readings. The remaining time was then devoted to first-year orientation topics (e.g., services on campus, wellness issues, study habits). Group leaders presented topics as well as answer questions from students. To facilitate the socialization process at the beginning of the semester, each group went on a fieldtrip exclusive of course content.

Several assignments were related to service-learning activities. Throughout the semester, students had to complete service-learning reaction reports. Each report stemmed from a different prompt that required students to reflect critically on their experiential activities vis-à-vis course readings. At the end of the semester, students were to complete a summative reflection paper that synthesized their experiences, reactions, and readings across the entire semester and tie these conclusions to civic engagement and school reform. To ensure students’ understanding of class readings, weekly online reaction postings to selected readings were required. These reactions were to enable students to

move to a more critical discussion of their service-learning experiences in the reaction reports. Three texts were selected to address each of the main course themes. First, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America* by Barbara Ehrenreich (2004) was selected as a foundation on poverty, class, and the working poor. The need for school reform in low-income schools was covered in Jonathan Kozol's (2006) *The Shame of a Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*. Lastly, the importance and impact of civic engagement was framed around selections from *The Impossible Will Take a Little While* by Paul Loeb (2004). The Burnett Honors College Freshman Honors Symposium is visually represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Burnett Honors College Freshman Honors Symposium



Final Thoughts: Impacts from the Model

To date, the HERO program is the largest Junior Achievement Partnership in the world. For the 2008-09 academic year, 529 UCF honors students contributed almost 3,200 service-learning hours to 10,000 students in 20 elementary schools through JA programs. The model has won various awards highlighting its unique design and service to the community, including *MetLife Foundation Entrepreneurial Award*, *Community Builder Award*, "Leading Example in the Nation" by Campus Compact, "The Best Student Volunteer Program" by Florida Leaders Magazine, and *Outstanding Community Service Award* at National Philanthropy Day.

More importantly has been the impact on participating honors students. Several empirical studies on the HERO program have captured changes in participating honors students' general self-efficacy as mediated through gender (Stewart, 2009), feelings of social dominance (Stewart, in press), and community service self-efficacy (Stewart, 2008). And as noted as needs of ideal programs previously, students have highlighted how their involvement has affected them interpersonally, built their identity as a citizen leader, and eased their transition as a first-year undergraduate. Below are selected quotes from students, as evidence of these themes.

- "My favorite part of JA is knowing I'm involved in my new community and in the students' lives, even if just for a few minutes a week."
(Female, Journalism Major)
- "After class, I felt like I had really accomplished something. These kids think I'm so cool no matter how goofy I feel. I'm looking forward to really learning from these kids--- they seem to have a lot to share."
(Female, Health Sciences Major)
- "The moment stands out most would have to be the opening night of Honors Symposium. Here I was, first day of college in an auditorium with a few hundred other people, and I didn't feel nervous in the slightest. I knew from the first second that Honors was the place for me. I am now the President of the Honors Congress and I owe it all to that first day of class." (Male, History Major)
- "Honors has offered me the opportunity to be a role model to young students in the area schools of Orlando. Doing Reading Buddies and

Junior Achievement with K-5 children has engendered within me a sense of civic engagement and responsibility. The experience of teaching first graders how a community works has made me a more responsible individual, more aware of social inequality and has lit the fire of determination within me." (Female, Interdisciplinary/Information Technology Major)

- "[At the end of Symposium last year,] I think we had all realized as a group what a great team that we had all made together." (Male, Molecular Biology/Microbiology Major)

Clearly, as more institutions of higher education consider service-learning, but question the possibility of infusing authentic and educational service-learning projects in large first-year seminars, HERO/JA offers a successful model on which they can design their programs.

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