Chapter 9

Conflicting Worlds or Unique Partnerships:
When Online Learning and Undergraduate Honors Education Collide

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Although enrollment in online courses has continued to increase annually, outpacing enrollment in traditional, face-to-face environments, there is one area of the undergraduate arena in which online learning has not been welcome. Negative views towards online learning have permeated the undergraduate honors landscape, particularly at the national level. This case incorporates the perspectives of five early adopters of online honors education from different institutions in the state of Florida. Through these perspectives, readers will understand the challenges and successes of teaching an online honors course. An overview of these teaching experiences, as well as recommendations for further adoption within the honors community, is included in this case study.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Undergraduate Honors Education–A Historical Overview

One of the primary predecessors of honors education in the United States can be found in the British educational system, namely through Oxford University (Rinn, 2006). The Oxford tradition included a rich tutorial system, a pass / honors approach, and the implementation of the Rhodes Scholarship. Through the tutorial system,

students were required to have tutors who served as educational advisors. Individual work and guidance, coupled with intellectual discussions in small groups, were hallmarks of that system (Rinn, 2006).

The pass/honors approach was developed in the early 1800's, whereby students were required to take a comprehensive final examination before graduation. Extraordinary examinations were given to students to separate themselves academically. Finally, the Rhodes Scholarship was developed to provide opportunities for students from the United States to study at Oxford. Created in 1899, the Rhodes Scholars were exposed to Oxford academic traditions, including the tutorial system and pass / honors approach. Those scholars then brought the Oxford traditions back to the United States, where many aspects were implemented within American higher education (Rinn, 2006).

Early attempts at an honors education similar to that found at Oxford were made in the United States, namely at Harvard University, the University of Michigan, Princeton University, and Columbia University (Rinn, 2006). Honors education as a field, however, developed in the early 20th century, starting at Swarthmore College by then-president Frank Aydelotte (Honors Program, 2011; Humphrey, 2008). Aydelotte modeled this new program in the 1920's after the tutorial system at Oxford University, with the intent to provide Swarthmore's "best students" with a richer educational experience. Aydelotte himself had been a Rhodes Scholar (Rinn, 2006). Key components of Swarthmore's honors program included close interaction between students and faculty, an emphasis on independent learning, and challenging coursework (Honors Program, 2011).

Aydelotte (1925), through the National Research Council, published a report of the emerging field of honors, noting the types and characteristics of honors programs developing in the 1920's. In this report, Aydelotte noted the great need for high achieving students to have an opportunity to be pushed academically – something not necessarily found through their regular studies. His plan for American universities included a distinction between students "who are really interested in the intellectual life and those who are not" (p. 7), as well as the ability for those high achieving students to take more ownership over their intellectual pursuits. Honors courses and programs, he believed, were the embodiment of those plans.

National Organizations for Honors Educators

By the 1930's, more than 100 honors programs had developed in the United States (NCHC, 2013). The 1940's saw an emphasis on the "superior" student as institutions continued to focus on the educational enrichment of academically talented students (Humphrey, 2008). In the 1950's the Inter-University Committee on the Superior Student (ICSS) was formed as a national organization to distribute information

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