Forces for Positive Change: Preparing Leaders for the 21st Century in an Undergraduate Honors Program*

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Abstract

Leadership education is offered in myriad ways at many institutions of higher education (Borgese, Deutsch, & Winkler, 2004). This article highlights the West Chester University Honors College (WCUHC), a highly selective, four-year program for undergraduate students. The WCUHC instituted a liberal education, interdisciplinary approach to leadership development that emphasizes the application of leadership through scholarship and service. WCUHC envisions that leadership involves a shared responsibility for creating a better world in which to live and work which manifests in a passion to engage others in bringing about purposeful change. One major challenge was designing a program that meets WCUHC goals while still working within the constraints of the larger state university system (14 schools total). The following article outlines a program that meets all of these important goals: leadership development using liberal education while working within larger institutional goals, an interdisciplinary perspective to leadership development, and the meaningful application of leadership skills in the classroom and in the community through scholarship and service.

Introduction

"To be honorable is to serve." – (West Chester University Honors College Motto)

Employability skills – such as communication and teamwork -- are interdisciplinary and relevant for any position desired (Coers, Williams, & Duncan, 2010). Expectations of today's college graduates continue to emphasize leadership, as top entry-level positions carry high standards for students regarding strong transferable skills in order to be competitive. Employers want potential candidates to have polished communication skills, leadership skills, teamwork skills, initiative, interpersonal and social networking skills, problem solving skills and analytical skills (NACE, 2010). More than most other topics, leadership cuts across disciplines, job titles, and community issues (Huber, 2002). Thus, for several decades, leadership programs have continued to multiply across the nation's colleges and universities (Greenwald, 2010).

Common components of many leadership programs include service learning, leadership curriculum, mentoring, and skills-based workshops (Hackman, Kirlin, & Tharp, 2004). In addition, the study of leadership in combination with liberal education

often helps individuals acquire the intellectual, affective, and behavioral foundations that support effective leadership (Colvin, 2003). Designing and evaluating leadership programs requires asking and answering important questions about why leadership development is important to the program, the institution, and the surrounding community (Hackman et al., 2004). University administrators and community leaders alike tend to agree that helping students evolve into effective leaders benefits both the campus and broader community. In addition, students often demonstrate significant positive changes in their perceptions of leadership from pre-college to their final semester of college (Dugan & Komives, 2007). This is important because, in order to attract a diverse pool of students for the program, they must understand the role that leadership development plays in enriching their undergraduate experience, empowering them (and others), and giving them an increased sense of control over their lives and futures (Astin & Astin, 2000).

WCUHC Philosophy

Perhaps foremost, it is vital for program staff and faculty to consider the various definitions of leadership and agree upon on a definition that will serve to guide the program (Hackman et al., 2004). The purpose of leadership education is to prepare people to be responsible, together, in an increasingly interdependent and ever-changing world (Huber, 2002). WCUHC aims to provide an inviting environment for academically gifted and highly motivated students to interact and form a learning community of peers, faculty, administrators, and staff that will challenge and enrich the students' college experience. WCUHC believes that leadership involves a shared responsibility for creating a better world in which to live and work which manifests in a passion to engage others in bringing about purposeful change. WCUHC provides an interdisciplinary focus in order to develop students' natural intellectual abilities and to challenge them to employ those gifts on behalf of the larger community. The curriculum prepares students to discover their own giftedness, to see the value of team approaches to problem solving, and to expose students to the components necessary to enact real change.

Background, Criteria and General Program Information

WCUHC is a four-year, undergraduate leadership development program, designed for high academic ability students, comprised of two tracks. The first is the *Honors Core Program for Incoming First-Year Students*, which limits seating to around 40 students. The second is the *Honors Seminar Certification Program* and is geared toward external transfer students and students who did not enter the Honors College during their first semester. For the purpose of this article, only the first program, geared toward incoming first-year students will be outlined.

Since its inception in 1979, over 600 men and women have participated in the program, and over 100 faculty members have participated in Honors seminars and governance. In 2006, the university administration named Honors as its own college. For the 2013-2014 academic year, 43 students were accepted – 29 females and 14 males, with just over 16% representing ethnic minorities and representing 23 different academic majors. The gender balance is reflective of WCU which has nearly 70% females and the

diversity is slightly above the university's average. Over the years, Honors has accepted students from over 61 different academic majors.

Incoming, first-year students already accepted to WCU are invited to apply to the Honors College if they demonstrate a minimum SAT score of 1200 (combined math and verbal scores) and at least two of the following: minimum high school GPA of 3.5, top 20 percent of graduating class, and record of achievement in high school Honors/AP courses. Application materials also include essays describing involvement in co-curricular activities, commitment to leadership development, and fit with the Honors College philosophy. After a committee reviews applicants, qualified applicants are interviewed on campus.

All WCU students participate in 45 credits of general education comprised of 12 foundational credits in composition, oral communication and mathematics, 3 credits of interdisciplinary work, 9 credits of directed electives, and 21 credits of typically 100 level courses distributed between the humanities, social sciences, hard sciences, and fine arts. The university's general education is grounded in the liberal arts tradition to give students the "knowledge and perspectives as well as specific competencies necessary to them as citizens of the state and of the world" (WCU General Education Program, 2011).

The Honors Core provides students in that track of the Honors College an alternative approach to general education. Grounded in the liberal arts tradition of general education, the Honors core incorporates nine 100-, 200-, and 300-level courses which, along with an additional course in mathematics or the hard sciences, meet the traditional general education courses and address the general education competencies established by the university. The first three courses at the 100/200 level, which students complete during their first year in Honors, focus on: personal development (physical and psychological well-being), communication, and ethics and morality in a technological age. Courses at the 300 level, completed by the middle of the student's third year, build upon the self-knowledge and address broader perspectives of community and social change. Students study significant historical and contemporary figures, literary works, and the context in which they helped model society. Students become aware of the economic realities that impact change, and they discover ways educational and political structures, science, and the fine arts influence society. Honors certification is awarded upon completion of: (a) the core 27 hours; (b) a course under advisement in mathematics or the hard sciences; (c) two upper-level, cross-disciplinary honors seminars; (d) and a capstone project. Without question, the cornerstone of the WCUHC is the curriculum. The content and sequencing of the courses address what Kipling and Ferren (2000) claimed as vital elements to the success of general education programming – being designed to meet students' developmental needs.

To give a more comprehensive view of the program, however, the "generic" sequence of the 27-hour core (although individual advising sheets have been created for each of the major programs on campus) would include: (1) **HON100 Self-Awareness & Development** where students focus on a holistic approach of methods for developing skills in the physical, cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of life. Students focus on

the role of reflection and critical thinking through experiential education both in a traditional classroom and an outdoor classroom; (2) **HON211 Decision Making & Public Discourse** in which students examine the role of ethical dialogue and debate in public policy making. Consistent with the emphasis on the public forum, students will develop public speaking and critical listening/thinking skills; (3) **HON212 Ethics & Moral Choice in a Technological Age** during which students learn approaches to ethical recommendation and moral decision-making processes using the scientific approach to examine case studies from genetics, ecology, physics, chemistry, and computer science to allow students to confront ways traditional views of ethics and moral decision making apply to a contemporary world; (4) in **HON310 Theories & Strategies of Community Change**, students are exposed to a spectrum of approaches to social change and significant figures who make these changes possible by discussing biographies and autobiographies of key figures as a basis for understanding how thinkers of the past identified key issues and articulated solutions to problems; (5) **HON311 Stewardship and Civic Responsibility** provides foundations of market and nonmarket economies as they relate to good stewardship and civic responsibility by fusing literature and economics, the values and limitations of market capitalism and command socialism; (6) **HON312 Educational Systems & Social Influence** is an introduction to philosophy, history, and sociology of American education including the evolution of the school as an institution in a democratic society; its relationships to issues dealing with race, class, gender and ethnicity; the geographical implications the school has for the community and vice versa; the degree to which school should and/or can serve as agents for social change; (7) **HON313 American Government, Democracy & Public Opinion** examines the role of public opinion in a democracy by examining how individuals form opinions and how those opinions influence government and public policy making; (8) **HON314 Science, Technology & Environmental Systems** where students study in a lab setting the impact of technology and the environment as forces of influence on communities; and (9) **HON315 Community & the Arts** in which students investigate the how the arts in history and in contemporary society serve as agents of social change and influence.

In addition, all Honors students must take two upper level HON seminars. Typically, four different special topics course with an HON prefix and a number above 320 are offered each fall and spring term. Subject matter rotates and seminars become generated through competitive submission from University faculty. Seminars are designed to be interdisciplinary and writing intensive. Most first year students enroll in HON 352 – Personal Leadership Development: Lessons from South Africa, taught by the program director, which introduces students to the study of leadership as an interdisciplinary academic area within a global context. Finally, all students enroll in a capstone course (**HON 490**) which involves the application of theory and scholarship into a service-based project.

Rationale and Application of Leadership Education Principles
to the Program

Liberal Education

Education grounded in the liberal arts has been associated with the development of many positive attributes, including magnanimity and justice (Hill, 1994), truth and humility (Cronon, 1999; Spaeth, 1986), and active citizenship (Rosenfield, 1985). Colvin (2003) identified a pendulum swinging back, citing trends for liberal education to develop "global thinkers who, enjoying a sophisticated world view, consciously integrate their studies into the life of the community and the world" (Greater Expectations, 2002, p. 21). Thus, the WCUHC is designed to accomplish what Colvin called for -- "preparing citizens for leadership responsibilities necessary to strengthen communities, the nation, and democratic institutions" (p. 29). A key belief undergirding WCUHC is that leadership studies are a critical and beneficial component of undergraduate liberal education curricula. Thus, this program integrates liberal arts and leadership, focusing on the development of the "whole person" (Conrad & Wyer, 1982; Hawkins, 2000; Lang, 2000) by teaching students to understand not only themselves but also the foundations of a democratic society and the responsibilities of citizenship. These sentiments reflect scholarly literature both about liberal arts education and leadership education.

According to the AAC&U presidents, a quality liberal education should aim to: (a) develop intellectual and ethical judgment; (b) expand cultural, societal, and scientific horizons; (c) cultivate democratic and global knowledge and engagement; and (d) prepare for successful involvement in a dynamic economy (as cited in Colvin, 2003). Referring back to the course titles and descriptions, it is clear that the Honors core addresses these curricular recommendations.

Again, an important note is that WCUHC is bound within the university structure – in fact, is bound within the 14-school state university system – to have students complete general education requirements. According to Kipling and Ferren (2000), some well-intended institutions with general education programs create them seeking a "perfect solution" as if all students will take the program exactly as designed. They commented that, in reality, however, students take courses at their convenience, put off requirements, and piece together requirements from several institutions to meet graduation requirements. This curriculum is designed to avoid some of those typical situations and to create consistency for WCUHC students while retaining freedom to offer specific courses that cover its three primary components of the program of scholarship, leadership, and service, using an interdisciplinary approach.

The sequenced core also takes guesswork out of needing to know which courses fulfill general education requirements. In addition, this sequence, combined with both advising from an advisor within the student's major and Honors advising, helps students understand the value of the liberal arts focus of the core curriculum. According to Humphreys and Davenport (2005), liberal education often leaves students unaware and unimpressed of reasons to pursue it. They question its utility (Knotts, 2002) and its logic

(Lowenstein, 2009). According to Rust (2011), strong advising is key to helping students understand their entire college experience – curricular or otherwise – as part of a liberal education. Given the emphasis of the core curriculum as a hallmark of WCUHC, students understand how the courses relate to the WCUHC mission.

Interdisciplinary

Leadership is multidisciplinary in research, theory, and practice (Middlebrooks & Allen, 2009), and the approach taken in Honors acknowledges this interdisciplinary nature. WCUHC goes one step further, and like Chaszar (2004) who distinguished between interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches, WCUHC believes multidisciplinary studies involve combining two or more disciplinary viewpoints without integrating them, while interdisciplinary requires interaction among those disciplines. Therefore, to ensure that courses are interdisciplinary rather than simply multidisciplinary, all nine core courses are team taught with two professors of two different academic disciplines.

Despite "the observation that one and the same person can gain an education in several different disciplines is reflected in the very life our universities" (Guerra, 2013 p. 252) some educators worry about the narrow focus and specializations in higher education. Roberts (2013) quoted a participant saying, "we talk about departments being in silos, but it is really easy for us to become one person silos" (p. 66). Thus, the WCUHC rationale is that an interdisciplinary approach is important foundationally in developing leadership skills because as Roberts (2013) claimed, as individuals incorporate the notion of leader into their identities, they find it necessary to shift their affiliation with a particular peer group (i.e., biology majors) to one that is interdisciplinary and position specific. For example, HON 100, *Self-Awareness and Development*, has been taught by professors of kinesiology and communication studies. Half of the course content focuses on self-awareness development through adventure-based learning activities, and the other half is focused on developing self-awareness by examining processes perception, communication, and conflict resolution. These approaches help establish the role of self and others as well as the notion that self-awareness develops holistically – that physical, mental, and emotional processes are critical. In addition, HON 314, *Science, Technology & Environmental Systems,* is taught by a professor of geography and planning and a professor of professional and secondary education. They focus on sustainability through the lens of agriculture and the professions by bringing different concerns from their respective fields about topic areas such as (a) plant distributions, weather and climate, soil fertility, and pesticide use (b) their impacts on environmental systems that require knowledge of chemistry and physical geography, (c) the philosophical, historical, and cultural underpinnings of society to explain why one culture has developed a high-input, high-impact, genetically engineered food system and another has developed a low-input, low-impact genetically diverse food system.

Application of Leadership through Scholarship and Service

Leadership is not only about titles (Huber, 2002). Similarly, the West Chester University Honors College considers "honors" to be more than a matter of strong grades; it implies a decision to use knowledge as an active problem solver in both the campus community and in the world. If, "leadership is mainly learning" (Vaill, 1998, p. 119) and if, as Huber (2002) asserted, students are volunteer learners, then learning to lead is a choice that students make. It is not simply an assigned class or a requirement to be met for some certification. These ideas suggest an important element in the nature of the Honors curricular choices. Huber (2002) suggested that such volunteer learners are likely to expect to be active participants in the teaching/learning transaction. Such students are unlikely to sit still for lengthy lecture sessions. Instead, they want to be learning something they can try to apply the next semester… or next week. Often, the learner soon becomes the teacher--perhaps even before class is over. WCUHC believes in this active approach to leadership.

Huber (2002) discussed beginning her graduate work thinking that she was studying volunteerism; however, she soon discovered that "volunteer" is another word for "leader." This value is reflected in the first primary component of the program, service. In fact, according to the most recent 5-year review, 100% of WCUHC students who graduated were engaged in a minimum of three campus/community organizations and over 80% identified assumed an elected/appointed leadership position within at least one organization. In 2008, WCUHC students clocked clock 1647 hours of service and over 1800 volunteer/community service hours in 2012. In both 2012 and 2013, the Honors Student Association (HSA) was named (out of 300 student groups) Outstanding Service Organization of the Year by the university's Division of Student Affairs. In addition, results of the most recent WCUHC 5-year review reveal that, in association with the Bonner Foundation and Americorps, WCUHC successfully obtained over $33,000 in grant money, which translated into 9,900 hours of service to support students who have committed to undertaking 300 hours of service in a calendar year.

WCUHC involves students in researching and executing campus events as a practical strategy for the application of leadership principles. For example, in spring 2004, WCUHC planned and executed first annual Graduate School Fair for undergraduate students. This event began as an out-growth of the Junior Capstone, HON 340, and the event has continued annually as a cross- divisional partnership between WCUHC, WCU Graduate School, and the Division of Student Affairs.

Perhaps most importantly, WCUHC uses international travel as a way for students to engage in research and service. Students enrolled in HON 352, *Personal Leadership Development: Lessons from South Africa*, travel to South Africa to engage in scholarship and service in a few ways. First, they meet with and learn more about various South African project leaders. For example, these include Sparrow Village (an HIV-AIDS orphanage outside of Pretoria) and HELP Ministry's Soup Kitchen which serves lunch to over 6000 impoverished elementary school children daily.

Second, HSA raises funds through an annual service event conceptualized established in 2006 called *Aid to South Africa*. The event draws literally hundreds of students, faculty and community members. In the first year alone, students raised $17,000 that they allocated for the above South African projects. Then, the students visiting South Africa present the group leaders with a check from the previous event to help with their operating costs.

Third, students also engage in research during their travel. Prior to travel students learn the details of the research project and their involvement. They also learn the ethical and methodological aspects of the specific research project the semester prior to travel. For example past research projects have included conducting a needs assessment of grandmothers who were caring for grandchildren because they lost their own children to HIV-AIDS in Guguletu Township. For another trip, students conducted oral histories of various South African leaders. Most recently, students conducted ethnographic interviews for an educational psychologist in South Africa. The interviews centered on South African youths' hopes and dreams for their futures and will be used to advocate for more resources in South African schools.

Student capstone projects also center on scholarship and service. Students identify and investigate an unmet opportunity in a community business, nonprofit agency, or research laboratory, devise an action plan to help realize the opportunity, assess the outcome, and propose a plan for sustainability. It is expected that students play an active role in the problem-solving effort and contribute a minimum of ten hours each week to develop, execute, and assess their project. Part of the project involves interacting with the CEO, senior officer(s) and/or senior investigators of the business, agency, or laboratory, who serve as leader models for the student's project. Students must submit a final paper which captures both reflective writing about how lessons from each of the nine core Honors courses helped inform the project as well as the sustainability of the project beyond the capstone project. Again, the goal of this project is the meaningful application of leadership skills in solving a "real world" issue.

Such achievements reflect the WCUHC aim which seeks to build character and foster a commitment to life-long learning that prepares leaders for the 21st century. This reflects Watt's (2003) notion that educators must develop leadership programs that prepare students to deal with the reality of a diverse world so they are able to handle constant change as leaders in the 21st century.

Another way, perhaps less obvious way the WCUHC helps foster the application of learning is that the academic diversity of students enlivens discussions in and outside of class. Students move through the program in a single cohort. Keeping students from a wide array of disciplines together allows them to learn from each other, and it cultivates a collaborative and supportive environment. In addition to working as a cohort, WCUHC provides a living-learning community environment where students reside in a designated Honors residence hall. Hirst, Mann, Bain, Pirola-Merlo, and Richver (2004) emphasized a disconnect between leadership learning and behavior. Given the emphasis on group work in many of the core courses, having this living-learning community offers a way for students to grasp the importance of understanding the process of group development.

Such a process is learned and developed over time (Baskin, Barker, & Woods, 2005) and shows the application of class group processes in non-classroom group settings. It is not uncommon for a pre-med major and a major in music education to come together to discuss strategies for economic enhancement, formation of ethical standards for genetic testing, and approaches to survey research. Students often share the sentiment that discussions from class spill over into discussions with resident hall suite mates or discussions with larger groups of students in the resident hall common areas. Furthermore, having a living-learning community fosters acceptance, support, and encouragement, which are cited as necessary ingredients for optimal leadership development (Center for Creative Leadership as cited in McCauley, et al., 1998). It also highlights the application of leadership skills since outside the classroom, the learner may become the teacher. Taken together, these various aspects of WCUHC show a commitment toward the meaningful application of scholarship and service.

Putting it all Together

WCUHC believes in the ideal espoused by Kolb (1984) that lifelong education is best served by creating critical linkages between education, work, and personal development. Other leaders and leadership educators also agree on the strong link between leading and lifelong learning. Senge (1994) promoted the concept of a learning organization that bears a striking resemblance to Kolb's (1984) learning cycle. It is also similar to Apps (1994) transformation cycle. Generally, the cycle includes four phases of reflecting, connecting, deciding, and doing and is grounded in its own context. Thus, even though the action implied by the cycle remains constant, the focus varies. This gives the learning a purpose that determines the content and shapes the process (Huber, 2002). The WCUHC is much more than its curriculum, but the curriculum sets a strong foundation for lifelong learning in preparing students -- to become effective leaders. The true test of leadership education is the extent to which people actively create positive change in the world... being leaders and doing what leaders do with and for others (Huber, 2002). The Honors College at West Chester University is designed to prepare students to create that positive change in themselves, their neighbors, their communities, and the world.

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* The Honors College leadership curriculum at West Chester University was developed in 1998 under the leadership of Dr. Kevin W. Dean. The model of program delivery gained inspiration from the Kellogg National Fellowship Program. For a more theoretical explanation of the Honors College curricular core, see Dean, K. W. & Jendzurski, M. B., ***Shaping Leaders through Honors: A Curricular Model for Leadership Development through the Liberal Arts,*** International Honors Conference, Rotterdam, Netherlands, October 2013.

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