

## CHAPTER ONE

### DESIGNING AN HONORS PROGRAM

No set of rules for designing an Honors program exists. Each college must choose its own objectives, procedure, sequence, personnel, curriculum, and students. Among the many successful honors programs in two-year colleges, however, some similar components and stages exist. Those components in their many variations will be identified and discussed, and while the terms and vocabulary used here are familiar, each institution may decide on its own internal job titles, descriptions, and organization. The success in starting a program is more dependent upon the vision and commitment of the initiator(s) than upon the selection and sequence of steps.

The first stage is often the recognition of the need for an honors program. When an institution becomes interested in starting a program, one person or group of people will often lead the way, investigating options and benefits to the school and its students. What this may mean is that one of the first steps will be the selection of an honors director.

Because of its connection with the transfer function of the college and its emphasis on curricular excellence, an honors program must be at the very heart of the mission of the comprehensive community college. Because of this centrality of mission, the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) recommends that the director of the honors program report to the chief academic officer of the college. If the program is to maintain a truly institution-wide focus, the person administratively responsible for the program needs to be in a position of sufficient authority and vision to help bring to realization the full promise of the honors program.

Since the program deals with students, faculty, and the instructional curriculum, the designers of the honors program may need to look to the faculty for their director. Indeed, directors may need to be faculty members of significant academic standing at the college. Such an academic has a high probability of having the needed experience to succeed as an honors director and maintain the respect of peers and the administration. In addition, a director will need to be as articulate, sensitive, and well organized as any manager at the college. The honors directors' external tasks will be wide and far ranging, for they will need to contact high school personnel, parents of students in high school, faculty and administrators of four-year colleges and universities, and community leaders who may be donors to the college's foundation.

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Within the honors program, the director relates on a daily basis with honors faculty and students and can have a profound effect on the nature of the honors experience. Although directors may not have full control over personnel decisions, they will, in coordination with others, probably wield great influence over hiring by communicating the design of the program and clarifying its personnel needs. Therefore, they will need a good deal of savvy in dealing with diverse instructional departments and in negotiating with department chairs or division deans for the proper mix of honors courses and opportunities.

While support from senior administrators and the governing board of the institution is absolutely required, it is also essential that the faculty of the college and faculty leadership be intimately involved in the program. Since an honors program is intricately woven into instructional curricula, grassroots participation from the faculty is important. Taking the need for wide support into account, the honors director will almost immediately need an honors committee, usually made up of faculty, staff members, students, and administrators, and often intimately involved with the construction of the program. While different schools will need different skills from these leaders and will afford them different levels of authority, most will find that people of vision who are committed to education, to students, and to academic excellence and integrity, and who have superior management skills will serve best. The honors committee may be either advisory or policy making. If the committee is advisory, then its role is to offer recommendations, which the director can either accept or reject. If the committee is policy making, then it will be involved in setting the direction of the program.

The main concern for both director and committee, initially, will be to research other honors programs. Knowing the literature from such well-known national organizations as the NCHC and Phi Theta Kappa, the International Honors Society of the Two-Year College, and from the promotional and curricular material from other institutions, similar in size, mission, and complexity, the researchers will not need to invent an honors program from the ground up. NCHC and Phi Theta Kappa are especially eager to share ideas that have worked in the past and to send helpful material, including a list of trained consultants and evaluators. Researchers will also find that other schools have addressed the curricular and organizational issues they face. In addition to researching organizations and institutions, investigators will want to review articles published in educational journals relevant to honors programs, such as the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council (JNCHC)*, the *National Honors Report (NHR)*, and *Honors in Practice (HIP)*.

## Theresa A. James

Besides a review of the literature, sending the director and/or members of the honors committee to national and regional conferences is often a good investment. Attending the annual conference of NCHC or those held by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) or the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) may prove useful. Wide coverage at these conventions will yield the greatest results; representatives may wish to attend those dealing directly with honors and with two-year colleges as well as those on more diverse topics, such as teaching innovations and best practices, technology and pedagogy, and student recruitment and retention.

The two year college might consider visiting honors programs at other schools or having someone from another program or a NCHC-recommended Site Visitor speak on the campus.

At some point, the director and the committee are going to have to write honors objectives and proposals. The program will be planned and described, including the philosophy, objectives, curriculum, target students, and program components. The program description will be most successful if it is invested in the mission of the college and fully integrated into the institution's self-evaluation strategy. Some criteria, for instance, may be needed for the selection and evaluation of faculty, syllabi, and support personnel. The program may call for the development of housing facilities, offices or buildings, personnel offices, student areas, and dedicated classrooms. The program description should provide details and justifications for budget requests, perhaps including resources for publications and publicity, conference travel, an office, and secretarial support. The plan may require a description of student recruitment, course scheduling, faculty training, and extracurricular activities and events. This program description will need to go through the normal channels for debate and approval required for any new program at the institution.

Once an honors program description has been accepted internally, relationships may be established externally, especially with other honors programs. Often, the best recruitment and retention tools are articulation agreements with four-year colleges.

As a final note on designing an honors program, no new program can be successful without a purpose that fits the mission of the institution. Even the most energetic honors personnel will hit institutional barriers unless the program is viewed as necessary and beneficial. Furthermore, the program should be designed to survive the inevitable changes in personnel that happen to every program.

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