

CHAPTER SIX

PUBLICITY AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

Having defined some goals of the program, honors directors may wish to enlist the help and support of many of the faculty and administration as they prepare to recruit and enroll students. These allies will need appropriate materials and information to be conversant with the program. The program's accomplishments so far have been great, but the honors director has only just begun. If all effort stops after the program's goals and structure are identified, the honors program will remain a secret on campus. The honors director now needs to target information to the students who can benefit from the honors program. In other words, the honors program needs publicity.

Publicity takes many forms, serves many different needs, and must be tailored to the specific goals of each program. The honors director will need to think about how to proceed. The first impulse may be to take the ideas that have worked for other programs. That will only work, however, if the program being borrowed from is similar to the one being promoted for the first time. No two honors programs can be publicized or marketed in exactly the same way; nevertheless, some commonalities exist.

Honors publicity generally targets three groups: college employees, students, and the general public. The honors program needs to know why it must communicate with each group and how to measure success.

Target Groups

College Employees

- The Administration

Having gained the initial support of the administration, the honors director and the honors committee will want to keep administrators informed about what is happening in the program. Most honors programs are costly from the standpoint of cost per student hour; thus, the administration must understand how much the honors program adds to the mission of the institution.

- College's Governing Board

The two-year institution's governing board or board of trustees should be kept informed, especially about those elements that

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reflect the quality of the college. The governing board will likely provide an informal means of sharing information with members of the general population.

- The Faculty

The honors director and committee will want the broadest base of support that can be had from the faculty, both those who are a part of the program and those who are not. The broader the support of the program from the faculty, the less likely it will be perceived as elitist.

- Foundation

If the two-year college has a foundation or other collection of people with the responsibility of generating funds for the college, the honors director and committee will want them to know about the honors program. They will be able to use the academic successes of the honors program to solicit funds. The honors director and the honors committee, in turn, may be able to turn to them for scholarships and funds for special events or projects.

Alumni

Many alumni remain deeply interested in how their alma mater is doing academically. Certainly, as the honors program matures, the honors director and the honors committee will want to keep former honors students aware of the continuing activities of the program and achievements of the current students.

Students

- Desired Students

This target group would seem to be the most obvious for publicity. This group is also the one that the honors director and honors committee will need to most clearly define so that all publicity efforts are successful. The goal of the honors program may be to attract more incoming freshmen or freshmen who are better prepared. The program may want to appeal to those students already on campus because many students may be ready for honors work after they have had at least one semester of college. One goal of publicizing the honors program may be to encourage students to stay to complete their first two years in the two-year institution's honors program before transferring to a four-year college. Contributing significantly to the graduation rate is one way the honors program repays the institution for its support.

- Students Participating in the Honors Program

How the honors program communicates with the students who are already in the program will depend on the nature of the honors program and campus. If the honors program has honors sections, disseminating information through those classes will be fairly easy. Data processing services can often supply mailing labels for students in the program and for those students who meet the requirements but are not yet in the program. If the two-year college is a residential campus, then information can be given to the students through their mailboxes and posted flyers. The honors program will probably need an extensive email list of honors students. An easier way to keep honors students informed may be to create and update an online bulletin board. The work involved in keeping email lists and online postings updated may not be more than the work involved in keeping computer-generated lists updated. In all, the honors director and staff may find that managing the lists can quickly fill a significant amount of work time.

- Students Not Participating in the Program

The great majority of students on campus will not participate in the honors program; however, these students can still benefit from having an honors program on their campus. It may make students feel better because the college they are attending has an honors program, which will enhance the reputation of the institution, and they may also benefit directly because honors events may be open to the whole student body. Fliers and handbills will be most useful for this population. They can also check the website or online bulletin board for events and calendars.

The General Public

- Specific Community Groups.

These groups may have some impact on how the community views the college: service organizations, philanthropic groups, city and county governments, parents' associations, youth or religious groups. Many groups exist whose interest in one academic area could dovetail quite nicely with the honors program's ambitions. For instance, the honors program could offer a series of speakers on the history of the civil war and allow the local group of civil war buffs to help organize and publicize the speeches. These groups need to know what an excellent option honors at the two-year college can be.

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- The General Population

This group will be the hardest to connect with concerning the honors program because they are the most various. The honors director, however, may be particularly interested in them because they may underwrite the whole operation of the college through their tax support. Whether they pay salaries or define the two-year college's reputation in its service area, they will feel positive about the whole college if they know about the honors program's accomplishments.

Types of Publicity

After identifying the target groups, the honors director in conjunction with the honors committee must decide how the message is going to reach them. The following ideas need to be weighed and measured against the honors program, campus, and student body.

Before deciding on any type of publicity, the honors director should consider creating a phrase, logo, or brand to identify the honors program and all of the printed publicity that will be produced. This phrase or logo will immediately identify the honors program. In essence, this logo serves the same purpose as the mascot or team name used to identify a college's athletic teams. The people who produce designs for the institution should help the honors director produce the design and other material. The honors director also might want to see if students who are studying commercial art and design can participate in the creative process.

People at several levels of authority will want to be involved in choosing a promotional logo or phrase because these decisions will likely need to conform to the institution's long-term promotional plans. The honors program will not want to interfere with or undermine efforts by the larger institution to promote community awareness. The honors director and committee may have to have promotional items approved, and the honors program logo may have to coincide with or play off of the college's campus-wide logo. Establishing a link with the two-year college's community relations office may allow the honors director to avoid problems with publicity, promotions, communications, and recruitment further down the line.

Website

One of the most effective ways to publicize a program is to put it on the web. The honors director and committee may want to accomplish this goal in several ways: through campus/college pages maintained by professionals, through student-maintained pages that may or may not be linked to the two-year college's page, or through personal efforts.

Obviously, the director's ability to design and publish web pages will influence this decision. Having at least one page that does not have to be updated often and having some material that can be found by going to the college's web page would be wise. Beyond that, the amount and type of material published via the internet will have to do with the nature of the specific honors program. Electronically published material may be accessible for a long time, so maintenance will be required. The honors director may have to be careful about letting students open home pages in the name of the honors program, especially since the honors program may only have that student for two years.

Brochures

Most programs will want to have some kind of general explanatory brochure. This generic brochure may be altered to serve various populations. For a recruiting brochure for incoming students from the high schools, the honors director probably will want to have some kind of return card for them to mail back for ease of communication. Thus, this publication could begin with general information and save specific details for when the student makes contact. The honors program might want another general brochure for on-campus students, but without the mail-in reply form. Copies to community relations, enrollment management, recruiters, and board members will enhance the presence of the honors program on the two-year campus. Sometimes, students will want to become involved in the generation of these promotional materials, and this participation can often garner publicity for the program. Students in local high schools may be attracted to a program for which they, or people they know, can design publicity. Other brochures may not be purely informational; they may be concept brochures to show the character of the honors program without giving the details of admission, maintenance, and successful completion.

Posters

Posters would be a good opportunity to inform the general student body of the existence of the honors program. The major problem with posters, however, is that once they become familiar, people tend not to see them; in essence, the poster becomes just a part of the wall. Of course, the posters may be moved from one location to another so that the impact returns. As members of the public come on campus for various events, they will see the posters and learn about the honors program. The honors director might want to make sure that promotional posters are located in places where the general public is likely to pass while on campus. Local high schools may allow the honors program

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some of their bulletin board space to place posters, and monitoring the condition and placement of these posters, especially if they are not behind glass, will be especially important.

Bookmarks

One fairly simple way of getting at least one piece of information into the hands of students on campus is with a bookmark. The bookmark obviously contains a limited amount of information but would encourage interested students to contact the honors office. The bookmark might be placed at the checkout counter of the library for students. Or better yet, the campus bookstore could give one to students as they buy their books at the beginning of each semester. A bookmark should prominently and clearly depict one fact that would benefit students and entice them to keep the bookmark: a recent scholarship award, a quotation from a highly regarded publication, or the honors program director's official contact information. If the honors program maintains a website, this address will likely offer students everything they need in terms of information and updated calendars. For a new scholarship, a flurry of bookmarks may be the way to generate excitement.

Newsletter

If the two-year institution is not a resident campus or the honors program does not require all students to take the same classes, promotions about the honors program will have to be clever about communicating with all of the honors students. The honors office or director could mail memos out as the need arises, although such mailings can be costly and time consuming. The honors program may need some form of a newsletter published on a regular basis. Using a newsletter as a means of sharing information with students necessitates that it come out regularly.

The newsletter can, and should, contain information other than what might be included in memos to students. A look at upcoming events can be a helpful feature. Profiles of selected students can enhance the feeling of community within the honors program, especially if all of the students are not sharing some classes or living near each other. Publicizing events on campus is a way of demonstrating cooperation between the honors program and other parts of the campus. Short articles or pieces of writing by honors students and faculty can also generate interesting discussions and participation. Including a calendar with important events and deadlines is a good way to maintain student focus on success. A column may feature the activities and accomplishments of alumni of the program.

A newsletter has wide appeal. Alumni who want to know what is happening in the program can be placed on the mailing list. Certainly all of the teaching staff working directly with the program should receive the newsletter. Other staff, particularly the administration, should receive this information. While a newsletter can serve a number of purposes, drawbacks do exist. Newsletters are hard work to produce and must look professional, and from time-to-time, for example, the honors office or director may still need to send out a notice because an item missed the newsletter deadline.

Lists from Faculty and Follow-up

All instructors on campus should be asked to submit names of students who could benefit from being in the honors program. These requests can be made electronically and through flyers in faculty mailboxes. This idea could also be used with high school students through teachers who teach honors high school courses. The honors director may want to write a personal letter telling the student that he or she has been recommended by a teacher. The letter should include information about the program and an invitation to talk more with the honors advisor or to come to an academic program, social event, or honors class. Coordinating correspondence or contact with registration periods may mean that student interest translates into enrolling in honors courses. Sending a letter thanking faculty will ensure continued support for the honors program. Copying the department chair or dean would be a courteous as well as shrewd political move. Although letters may generate a response, in many cases a telephone call and the resulting personal contact and attention will be critical.

Presentations

Regular presentations at local high schools may improve the program's access to talented students and their teachers and parents. One way to interact with members of various community groups would be to make presentations at various meetings, such as those held by local community service or professional organizations or civic gatherings. The honors director can explain the program during these presentations, or selected students can make presentations about the work they are doing in the program. If demand warrants, the honors program might set up some form of a speakers' bureau.

Making reports or presentations to the two-year institution's governing board will enhance the honors program's reputation and visibility on the campus. The honors director may report to the board on a regular basis or save the presentations for special activities or awards.

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Permanent Displays

Awards and other tangible evidence of the effectiveness and accomplishments of the honors program should be displayed in a prominent place. If the honors program has an honors office or some other identifiable honors space, this might be the appropriate place for a permanent display. Placing this cabinet or display where it can also be viewed by the passing general student body as well as honors students is desirable because it augments public awareness of the program.

Catalogs and Bulletins

The honors program should work with the college's registrar or other appropriate administrators to see that the honors program and its requirements are adequately displayed in the general college catalog as well as in each semester's course listing. Highlighting some special feature of the program in the course listing or bulletin reinforces the idea of the honors program in students' minds as they register. This is an excellent way for the general student population to have the honors program called to their attention as they are planning their course schedule. If possible, honors courses in the schedule of classes should be listed under the heading of honors as well as under the appropriate discipline.

Joint Sponsorship

When the honors program sponsors an event, organizers may want to have it sponsored in part by one or more other areas of the college. For example, if the honors program is bringing in a speaker for some honors program event, the student government, service learning program, related academic areas, or other offices in the college might jointly sponsor the individual. Through joint sponsorship, a variety of benefits can accrue: 1) maximizing funds by sharing the costs; 2) demonstrating that having an honors program on campus benefits all students; 3) having a larger audience interested in the event, thus more individuals attending and benefiting. Another ramification of asking others to co-sponsor events is that the honors program can expect to reinforce the connection by reciprocating in kind at a later event.

Press Releases

To let the general public know what is happening in the honors program, the college publicist and community relations office may need to be informed first so that they can use their connections and sources to publicize the honors program event. Local or weekly papers may print news articles about the honors program. Radio and television have to

be considered within the overall picture created by the honors budget and the nature of the market. A talk-radio program may provide an alternative way to reach an audience, and many stations make public service announcements.

Counseling/Counselor

If the two-year college has academic advising done by full-time counselors, the honors program may want to have a handbook of information about the program for each counselor. In colleges where academic advising is done by faculty, the same procedure can work well. All parties involved should set a priority of referring students who have any interest in the honors program. This referral allows the honors program director to follow up with specific information for that student.

Honors Convocations and Awards Ceremonies

Recognition of the work and success of honors students is important in building pride in the honors program. This area is one where the nature of the local student body and the two-year college need to be taken into consideration. Although some honors programs have an exclusive honors ceremony, others host an all-college honors convocation where recognition is given to all students who have done outstanding academic work.

Public Service Projects

Some honors programs require that a student be involved in some form of community or public service as a part of the honors graduation requirements. Other programs use public service projects to bring together the students who are in the honors program so that they gain a sense of community. Whichever direction a program might choose to go, the results of what is done serve as excellent fodder for articles in various publications. This type of activity is also a positive way of letting members of the general public know about honors students and having honors students learn about the needs of the general public.

While publicity and public relations do not constitute the central focus of an academic program, the honors programs at two-year institutions certainly need to consider them. While an effective honors program depends on consistent enrollment and the retention of high-level students, the publicity from the honors program could well make or break its reputation with any number of stakeholders in the community. Therefore, even the loftiest academicians must spend resources on public relations.

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