

INSTILLING AN HONORS CULTURE AT MAINE MARITIME ACADEMY: REFLECTIONS FROM A PILOT STUDY HONORS SEMINAR

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Introduction

Many a good idea or invention has its origins in a problem needing a solution. Thus is the case with the Honors Seminar course developed at Maine Maritime Academy. Faculty and administration recognized that, while the institution was making strides in meeting the needs of at-risk students, we were not directing sufficient attention and resources to our highest

performing students. Surveys of our best and brightest students -- our Scheel Scholars -- identified their desire for cross-disciplinary learning that both recognized their achievements and challenged them to apply advanced critical thinking skills. Faculty also expressed a desire for professional development opportunities to work across disciplines in collaborative settings in order to stimulate teaching pedagogy and individual faculty enrichment. An ad hoc Honors Committee was convened in January 2012 to develop and institute a program that would expand academic offerings to those students deserving of greater intellectual challenge and academic growth. The program would provide students with opportunities to broaden their interests in cross-disciplinary topics and nurture their abilities in conceptualizing, analyzing, and synthesizing diverse ideas. The first Honors Seminar was offered in Fall 2013; the second seminar is currently in progress. The goal of these pilot seminars is to ultimately build a curriculum which raises the aspirations of the entire student body, increases our exposure as an intellectual community, and persuades students with high aspirations to attend Maine Maritime Academy.

Form Follows Function

The structure of the Honors Seminar curriculum is based upon the mission statement and learning objectives of Maine Maritime Academy, which promotes curiosity and empowers students to leadership roles. The first step toward developing the program involved conversations and surveys with students who might desire such an experience. Maine Maritime Academy annually recognizes scholarly accomplishments of top students in each academic major; these students are designated as our Scheel Scholars; the late Henry A. Scheel, a noted naval architect, left funds to permanently endow scholarships for students who best exemplify intellectual curiosity and achievement. Scheel Scholars expressed a desire for interdisciplinary

learning experiences; students felt they did not interact academically outside their majors but highly desired the opportunity to participate in academic activities as a scholarly group. They also felt that recognition of academic achievement could motivate them to enroll in an Honors program, even if it involved a degree of academic risk and lack of comfort.

Faculty Recruitment

Conversations with these students, and interested faculty, led to several draft proposals for a Pilot Honors Program course that would recruit both talented students and faculty. A first step towards realization of the seminar course was to recruit faculty from different departments to develop together a cross-disciplinary course that favored critical thinking, metacognition, and leadership training above any specific topic that might be selected as the anchor for the course. The cross-disciplinary nature of the faculty team builds collegiality and respect for differing viewpoints that students could model during the course; the diverse teaching styles likely used by each faculty member also enhances professional development and adds pedagogical tools to each's tool box.

The time commitment to this type of seminar is not insignificant. Monthly, and often weekly, meetings are needed in the spring before the course is offered. Team faculty must decide on a topic, determine how students will be selected, extend student invitations, and then develop the actual course content. Work continues in the summer as individual faculty search for and share potential course materials, with several planning meetings typically occurring in the weeks before the course begins. During the course itself, weekly meetings continue as team faculty debrief previous class periods and prepare for future ones. Also during this time, faculty are interacting with students via online Canvas posts and offering other methods of outcomes assessment.

Student Recruitment

There are varying ways in which to select student participants for the Honors Seminar, e.g. Scheel Scholar recipients, GPA-based, faculty nominations, and student applications, and any or all of those options were considered. However, regardless of how students were selected, the Honors Committee, and the faculty teams for Fall 2013/2014, determined that students should each be individually invited, by letter, from the team faculty, to participate in the course. The personal invitation is recognition of each student's academic performance and potential, which scored very high in student surveys. Faculty teams target an enrollment of 16 students for the seminar (preferably juniors and seniors) – a size that optimized both individual and group work. The top 16 students are invited to enroll in the course, with a waitlist developed.

The Physical Setting of the Course

From the beginning, the committee and faculty realized that finding the correct physical space could have a positive impact on the course. Students wanted to be recognized and honored for their participation, which would be easily demonstrable to them, and anyone else who knew about the course, if the course space was special. It was important that the space not be a regular classroom, and that other "perks" were available as well. We ultimately settled on the large, and rather plush, conference room used by Maine Maritime Academy's Board of Trustees; we also arranged for a coffee and snack service to be available during classroom breaks. The course meets for three hours one evening per week, so break-out time is critical.

The Budget

The budget for the Honors Program, and the pilot Honors Seminars, went through multiple iterations as financial reality met idealism and desire. However, at a minimum, a budget for this type of course should include an adequate physical space, monies for break-out

refreshments, honoraria and travel for several outside speakers, funds for several field experiences, and perhaps a final celebration banquet. Faculty compensation can be either as a reduced teaching load from normal department teaching assignments, or less optimal, compensation for a teaching overload, although this can put enormous stress on a faculty member.

The Honors Program is a cross-disciplinary endeavor; the initial funding at Maine Maritime Academy came from the Academic Dean's budget. Because the Honors Seminar fulfills a general education, social science and humanities, or free elective requirement, it could also be housed and funded in an Arts and Sciences department if funds were allocated to that budget instead. Budget flexibility must be built into course development, but ideally, team faculty know at their initial planning stages exactly what their budget will be. That was not the case for either the Fall 2013 or Fall 2014 courses and thus faculty had to make changes to the course over the summer planning periods. Funding for the Fall 2013 offering was approximately \$10,000, and \$13,500 for Fall 2014. While there was some discussion of imposing a course fee to cover costs associated with the seminar, that idea ran counter to the purpose of providing academic opportunities to our best and brightest students. Additionally, the cost of the program is in alignment with other programs at the academy, e.g. student remediation efforts and athletics.

Assessing Outcomes in "Real Time"

The Honors seminar is a student-driven course, and thus must be flexible and responsive to student input. The Honors Committee and team faculty are sensitive to this, and thus pre- and post- student and faculty surveys (via Survey Monkey) were deployed. Prior to the course starting in Fall 2013, students were asked to describe their expectations for the course, e.g.

course expectations, personal concerns and goals, level of difficulty, time commitment, and their definitions of academic excellence. Those questions were again asked at the close of the semester to assess how well the course met student expectations. Faculty narratives of expectations and goals were also collected.

In addition to the pre- and post- surveys; each faculty team member served as a course contact person for 5-6 students; contact faculty were responsible for assessing and commenting on student posts in Canvas, for encouraging and mentoring students, and periodically assessing student opinion of course progress to date. This personal contact facilitated a very nimble course flow, as student comments were immediately incorporated into new course directions

Fall 2013 – Honors Seminar – The Cape Wind Project

A 3-credit Honors Seminar was green-lighted in Fall 2012 to be offered Fall 2013. The Honors Committee invited three faculty to instruct the class, Dr. Thomas Batt from Arts and Sciences, Dr. Ann Cleveland from Ocean Studies, and Captain Richard Miller from Marine Transportation. The faculty members, each from a different department, served as co-instructors, bringing their own specific discipline, expertise, instructional style and experience to the class. Students were selected from the Scheel Scholar roster and from faculty nominations from all academic departments. Sixteen students received letters of invitation prior to registration for fall courses, and they were encouraged to contact one of the faculty team for more information. A flyer describing the course, including faculty contact information, was posted in the Student Center for additional publicity.

The faculty team selected the film "Cape Spin" as the jumping off point for a discussion of the controversy surrounding a large wind energy project proposed for Nantucket Sound. Students were asked to draw on knowledge from their own academic disciplines – marine

science, engineering, marine transportation, business and logistics – to bring their student colleagues up to speed on what the project might mean to Nantucket Sound. More importantly, the topic encouraged students to detect and analyze the spin surrounding the project, and take measure of their own biases. Faculty identified the following course goals:

- To develop students' ability to analyze, conceptualize, define, synthesize, examine, infer, listen, question, reason, evaluate.
- To develop habits of mind: curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, metacognition.
- To develop a speculative, questioning stance toward knowledge and experience.

Additionally, the course was designed to engage students in course facilitation and to be inclusive of all academic disciplines offered at MMA.

The seminar met for 3 hours each Monday evening, and team faculty alternated moderating the evening. The first third of the course was more faculty-driven as faculty developed the topic and activities for the evening. It was during the first third of the course that guest speakers were invited to lend expertise on wind energy, marine engineering, environmental impacts and federal and state permitting of energy projects. The group also traveled to Vinalhaven, ME to visit the Fox Island Wind Project and to speak with several proponents of the project (opponents of the project were not available during our visit).

While team faculty had spent Spring and Summer 2013 thinking about how the seminar should proceed, they were surprised how quickly the course evolved. Students moved very quickly from examining the spin around the Cape Wind project to examining other energy-related issues. This evolution, though unintentional, was serendipitous and highlights the value of letting academically driven students take the reins in designing a challenging curriculum.

Fall 2014 -- Honors Seminar -- Communities and Conflict

The topic of the Fall 2014 Honors Seminar is "Communities in Conflict" and is being taught by Ms. Betsy Reese (geography and GIS professor) and Mr. Michael Schaab (physics and chemistry professor) of the Arts and Sciences Department, and Ms. Barbara Fleck (engineering professor) of the Engineering Department. The course investigates how communities wrestle with complex issues, e.g. allocation of resources, siting of energy or waste facilities, zoning, and educational priorities and whether there are common themes to both conflict and its successful resolution. As in 2013, the course emphasizes collaborative learning including in-class and online discussions, small group projects, and simulations. Course goals are:

- To develop students' ability to analyze, conceptualize, define, synthesize, examine, infer, listen, question, reason, evaluate.
- To develop habits of mind: curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, metacognition.
- To develop a speculative, questioning stance toward knowledge and experience.

Because this course is in progress as this paper is presented, course faculty will provide additional information at the Maritime Education Summit 2014.

Lessons Learned

By all accounts the Fall 2013 Honors Seminar met the course objectives and provided a talented and enthusiastic group of student and faculty scholars an opportunity to engage in meaningful development. The reputation of the seminar circulated far beyond the core group of invited students, and invitations to join the Fall 2014 seminar were eagerly anticipated by our best students. Faculty interest in the professional development rewards of team teaching was also increased, and continues to grow. That said, several core lessons were learned from the pilot seminar experience. The most important, and pleasing, lesson is to be ready for surprises, and to follow them if they appear fruitful. The quick evolution from critical analysis of the central topic of wind energy, to a broader exploration of alternative energy advocacy and spin,

was unexpected but it was almost wholly student driven and thus pursued with incredible enthusiasm and curiosity. A second important lesson, that perhaps should have been anticipated, was that many students were very concerned with how they were to be evaluated for course grades. The team faculty discussed student performance at length when they met, and provided mid-semester and course-end evaluations to students, but there was no clear grading rubric that students could refer to. Some students readily accepted this because they were more interested in gaining the course experience than the grade that they might receive, but other students were quite concerned about their course grade. This is understandable as the course was developed for the brightest students on campus, many with close to perfect GPAs, so care should be taken in course invitations and the course syllabus to explicitly state that cross-disciplinary experience can be more valuable than grade considerations alone. Another consideration is how to strike a balance, when giving course assignments, between structuring the assignments too rigidly and stifle creativity, and being explicit enough in outlining expectations and assessments. In Fall 2013, students were asked to pursue their own interests in alternative energy or other controversial subjects and to use the critical thinking skills nurtured during the semester to examine the "spin" surrounding their topics. Students were invited to be creative in the ways they pursued their topics, but all were asked to present their projects to the class. Unfortunately, clear guidelines for what constituted a "presentation", and a final deliverable product, were not communicated well, and fourteen of fifteen students ultimately defaulted to PowerPoint presentations of their work. In hindsight, this can be excused as these sorts of presentations are required of many students, many times in their academic careers. The team faculty did not anticipate this, and should have been clearer in steering students towards more creative and insightful ways of presenting their material. A last point to be made is that a "course debrief"

should occur at the end of the semester where all stakeholders share what went well and what did not, and make suggestions for future iterations of the seminar. The Fall 2013 seminar ended with a course dinner at a local restaurant, which was an excellent experience, but the format did not allow for the debrief or any sense of closure or completion.

A Call to Action

The Honors Program at Maine Maritime Academy is still in its infancy, endeavoring to institute a program that addresses the interests and desires of those students who excel academically by expanding the depth and breadth of intellectual offerings and challenging our brightest students to higher achievement. The program also seeks to motivate faculty to pursue cross-disciplinary, cooperative teaching opportunities which foster professional development and pedagogy. The goal of this Marine Education Summit 2014 paper is to interest, to excite even, our sister maritime academies in exploring their own Honors culture. The success of the pilot program is best summed up by student feedback: “this class really engaged my abstract thinking, challenged my ideals, and made me a more effective student, teacher, and communicator”, “this class has been one of the highlights of my time at MMA.” and finally, “this course helped me to “think outside of the box:.....I now find that I think about *why I think the way that I do* with more depth. I always left the class wanting to learn more”.