

CREATING AN INTERDISCIPLINARY BUSINESS HONORS PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an integrated business honors program recently established at San Diego State University. The program was based on providing a comprehensive educational experience using the format of a one unit interdisciplinary seminar course and the completion of a personal learning portfolio. While portfolios are common in the areas of education, writing, and the fine arts, they are not often seen in business disciplines even though they can be an effective tool to enhance learning and demonstrate the skills required for success in a professional career. The paper also includes a discussion of the administrative considerations that are important when creating a business honors experience.

INTRODUCTION

Honors programs have grown in number at higher education institutions. Recently, these programs have been both praised and criticized as large public institutions develop honors programs to respond to criticisms of being impersonal and focused on large lecture venues, and as smaller regional state colleges use programs to try to enhance their image and reputation [6]. A study by Long [1] found that there are 506 honors programs at public four-year institutions that meet the criteria of the National Collegiate Honors Council which requires that a program have a defined mandate and mission along with a clearly defined course of study. Long's data indicates that most programs are "general" programs with few "departmental" honors programs, and that nearly 60 percent of the programs only accept students at the beginning of their educational career. Although most programs consist of a four year experience, a program designed for upper division students in a particular major can play an important role in student development. Siegfried [2] describes such an economics honors program instituted in 1991 which was designed around active, in-depth learning and capstone experiences. The program which can be started as late as the middle of the junior year provides accessibility, skill development, and incentives to combat procrastination. The capstone for this program is a senior thesis.

Tsui [7] provides evidence that honors courses, as well as interdisciplinary and writing courses, are positively associated with self-reported growth in critical thinking. Tsui also found that certain instructional techniques enhance critical thinking: writing a paper which is critiqued by an instructor, preparing an independent research project, participating in a group project, doing a presentation, and taking an essay exam. Thus, writing clearly is important to develop critical thinking. However, writing also can be structured to enhance other academic learning through the use of a learning portfolio.

Zubizarreta [8], following the work of Seldin [3] [4] [5], proposes that a learning portfolio be based on the three fundamental components of reflection, documentation, and collaboration. Zubizarreta defines a learning portfolio as "a flexible, evidence-based tool that engages students in a process of continuous reflection and collaborative analysis of learning. As a written text, electronic display, or other creative project, the portfolio captures the scope, richness and relevance of students' learning. The portfolio focuses on purposefully and collaboratively selected reflections and evidence for both improvement and assessment of students' learning" [8, p.16].

DEVELOPMENT OF A BUSINESS HONORS PROGRAM

In 2001, the College of Business discontinued its old honors program where students took four upper division business core classes in specially designated honors sections. Scheduling and resource issues, as well as a lack of connection between the courses resulted in a low interest level from both students and departments. After examining various options, a new business honors program was designed to provide an interdisciplinary experience for students who were interested in going beyond the typical classroom courses. At its heart is a one unit seminar held each semester with the ultimate outcome the construction of a student portfolio documenting learning, involvement in activities and reflection.

Business Honors Program Requirements

The honors program emphasizes four areas of performance: *academics, community involvement, field learning experiences, and improvement activities*. During each semester, a one unit seminar meets for five 90 minute sessions beginning with the second week of classes. Individual meetings with the Program Director occur during off weeks to help students develop and review their portfolio. Sessions focus on current events effecting business or outside speakers.

In the *academics* area, students prepare a *business honors report* for each seminar semester demonstrating knowledge about the current problems and issues affecting our local, regional, national and global business environments. In addition, there are three *general education reports* representing required upper division work in the areas of the humanities, social/behavioral sciences, and math/science. These reports must make linkages between the course's content and the business arena.

For *community involvement*, students report on three activities describing their experiences and discussing what was learned and how it improved their knowledge, skills or abilities. At least two of three areas must be represented: 1) Leadership, 2) Service Learning and/or Social/Community Welfare and 3) Academic Responsibility which is defined as participation in an academic competition, intercollegiate academic forum, community event, or similar activity representing the college or university.

The four required *field learning experiences* include: 1) Business Internship. 2) Professional Meetings, and 3) Field Trips. For the two personal *improvement activities*, students may select books or activities, such as participation in workshops or organizations (Toastmasters International, etc.).

Representative Statistics. Since 2002, 81 students have started the program. The first seminar class started with five students; there are now 36. Not all of the students complete the program. Thus far, 26 have graduated with 17 more scheduled to graduate in 2006. Of the 19 people who left the program, nine had academic performance problems, seven didn't have time or lost interest in the program, two left the university, and one attended summer school in order to graduate early and move to another country.

Administrative Considerations

Administrative issues must be considered when developing an interdisciplinary honors program. (1) It is important to have faculty involved who are comfortable with integrating material from across all business disciplines, as well as from disciplines in other fields. (2) Scheduling conflicts can arise, but these can be handled with priority registration for honors students. (3) Academic standards must be set since acceptance into the program does not guarantee academic excellence in the future. (4) Completion

of the portfolio activities and reports needs to occur throughout the program, not just in the last semester. A schedule ensures completion on a timely basis. It also provides time for the instructor to provide appropriate feedback and to create the collaborative and mentoring relationship that enhances learning. (5) Financial resources are a continuing need for fieldtrips, participation in competitions, and to offer a small semester stipend to assist with books or supplies. (6) Dedicated space is useful to provide students with a special study area, and to have a location where students can work on joint projects and team competitions. (7) A program of this type requires much instructor time for administration of the program as well as time for conducting the seminars. Time is spent talking to potential students, and consulting and mentoring with current students on their learning portfolios. The Honors Director often becomes the “unofficial” faculty advisor for all of their needs. In addition, time must be used to arrange for speakers, work with team competitions, and apply for resources and grants to support the program.

Conclusion

It is a rewarding experience for faculty to work with highly motivated and challenging students. The current activities of our 26 graduates include attendance at various law schools, employment at several public accounting firms, service as a naval officer, attendance at graduate schools in the U.S. and Europe, development as an entrepreneur, employment in financial services firms and marketing positions, and service in a healthcare not-for-profit institution with concurrent attendance in a public health masters degree program. Overall, an integrated business honors program can be an important offering in a college’s business curriculum. When developed around a written portfolio based on the three fundamental components of reflection, documentation, and collaboration, the result is an enhanced learning experience and the creation of well-rounded professionals.

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