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Opening Doors to Engage a More Diverse Population in Honors: A Conversation

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**Opening Doors to Engage a More
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diverse student populations in predominantly white programs is vital to both the success of all students and to honors education as a whole.

Key Words: partnerships, underrepresented, equity, experiential, identity

INTRODUCTION

“Smart but definitely not one of those smart kids—the kids whose parents were members of the booster club and themselves members of the high school’s national honors society.” This is how Quentina Dunbar recalls her high school self. During her sophomore year of college, Quentina joined the honors program at Minnesota State University, Mankato. As a regional comprehensive public university, the institution has a history of increasing access to higher education. Minnesota the honors pro)12 (a)5 (nk)-10 (a)13 (t)14 (c

myself in my education. Through my social justice education, I became more active on campus and in the community at large.

Ginny

Increasing access to honors for students who have not traditionally seen themselves as “honors students” starts with a more inclusive admissions process. Since 2009, the honors program at Minnesota State Mankato has employed holistic admission. Applicants to honors programs—whether incoming first-year students, current Minnesota State Mankato students, or transfer students—are evaluated with a holistic rubric that takes into account their potential for growth and achievement as well as any previous successes. Qualitative evaluations of achievement—such as student narratives and recommendation forms—carry more weight than numeric data. An important component of our efforts toward inclusivity is accepting current students after their first semester as well as transfer students; we do a round of applications for current students each fall and spring semester. Quentina entered the program via this route as do approximately one-third of our students. This group of students tends to be more diverse in terms of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and gender.

Jill

Current students may need contact with honors pedagogy to encourage them to apply. Cross-listing courses with other departments can facilitate this contact. Three years ago, I taught a study-away course called “Anne Moody’s Mississippi: Race, Culture, and Civil Rights,” which was cross-listed in honors and history. Six students registered for the class: four in the honors section and two as history students. The honors students typified the program as a whole. Although they came from different academic departments—including art, anthropology, education, and social work—they were, like their professor, all white. Opening the class to non-honors students could and in this case did mean expanding access to a more diverse student population as both non-honors students were women of color: Quentina was from a Liberian-American community near Minneapolis, and the other non-honors student, the only history major in the class, grew up in a Spanish-speaking household. I never thought of the class as being divided between honors and non-honors students. They all participated in the same learning activities, were assessed by the same rubrics, and pursued the same learning outcomes and honors competencies.

Quentina

My multidisciplinary courses led me to “Anne Moody’s Mississippi: Race, Class and Civil Rights,” a history class cross-listed with an honors seminar. In addition to analysis of the Civil Rights Movement through the lens of a woman, the course provided an experiential education component—a trip to Mississippi over spring break. The course offered an opportunity not only to mix my studies with travel for the first time but also to explore one of the many intersections of my identities. I spent much of my childhood grappling with what it meant to be African versus African American. Though my paternal grandmother was born and raised in Michigan, my father and all but one of his siblings were born in Liberia because of the turbulent racial climate of the 1950s and 1960s in the United States. My mother was born and raised in Liberia and came to the United States as a refugee.

With this background and understanding, I enrolled in “Anne Moody’s Mississippi” seeking knowledge of self and of the history that altered my family’s story forever. The class was small: six students, our professor, and later the then-director of the honors program (Christopher Corley), who accompanied us on our trip. This intimate encounter with the “smart kids” became another transitional event in my academic career. Prior to this experience, the first word that would have come to my mind when confronted with an honors student would have been “different,” but through engagement with the course content, class discussions, and most importantly my classmates, I came to realize that I am and have always been one of those smart kids. We had similar grades. We were taking similar courses. We had similar interests. I started my honors program application somewhere in Mississippi.

Jill

Quentina’s experience with the course exemplifies another important point in Klos’s article: the significance of using honors curriculum to engage social justice. The course attracted Quentina and her classmates because it gave them an opportunity to examine our nation’s troubled civil rights history and to consider its modern implications. The book *Coming of Age in Mississippi: The Classic Autobiography of Growing Up Poor and Black in the Rural South*, by civil rights activist Anne Moody, led us to reflect on important questions such as “Who owns history? Who tells the story of civil rights and how do they tell it? What are the implications of past discrimination for communities of color today?”

Ginny

Last fall, with input from honors students, including Equity Ambassadors, we revised our application questions for the first time since 2009. We rephrased some of the language in order to increase access and diversity. For example, instead of asking students to list or describe leadership positions they held, our question pertaining to leadership now reads: “Identify the most meaningful school or community activity in which you have participated. How did your participation in the activity impact others in your school or community?” In other words, we now acknowledge in our application the mantra that we constantly assert to our students: leadership is about opportunities and results, not positions. This question also allows our students to engage in deeper thinking about their experiences by asking them about the effects their actions had on other individuals, not just on themselves. Since we have only recently started using our new application questions, we do not have evidence yet of their impact on our program’s diversity. We hope they will engage more students who, like Quentina, are already doing honors-like work even if they do not recognize it as such.

Quentina

The honors program allowed me to capitalize on the moves I was already making as an undergraduate student. The semester after I joined the honors program, I led to study abroad with the full support of my honors director, who created a practicum course geared toward my studies and travel. I was responsible for submitting critical reflections during my time abroad, promoting my growth not only as a student but also as a global citizen. The honors program gave me a platform to conceptualize, articulate, and reflect on my experience in a richer, more meaningful way.

Upon my return to Minnesota State Mankato, I was a bit apprehensive about how I would meld into the honors program. The only people I knew were the four other girls from the class I had taken the year before. I did, however, have a strong relationship with the director, which had been facilitated by our communications and my reflections while I was abroad. I found myself in her office on my early visits to the honors program. I began to look to her as a mentor who was able to see the light in me. She was constantly reassuring me about my strengths and talents while giving me opportunities to learn and grow. I kept going to her office. As a senior, I had a lot of scary changes and challenges on the horizon, and we were able to talk through them. She pointed me in the right direction.

Ginny

Every student deserves a faculty or staff member who will “see the light” in them. The challenge is to make the type of relationship that Anne Dahlman developed with Quentina accessible to each student. Attracting and admitting students from diverse backgrounds into honors is not the end of the process; the goal is to make them happy and fully participating members of the program. Building successful student relationships is key to that goal but is challenging in an era of budget cuts. One budget-friendly way to increase student access to high-impact teaching and mentoring practices is through campus partnerships, which can make a little investment go a long way. Honors programs can, for example, partner with groups including a greater diversity of students to co-host campus events, or they can purchase tickets for their students to attend cultural events, providing a comfortable venue for diverse students to get to know each other. Programs can also sponsor attendance at events that focus on diversity, access, and equity. For more than forty years, for example, Minnesota State Mankato has hosted an annual Diversity Dinner to celebrate our community’s multiculturalism, an event that provides an opportunity for meaningful partnership.

Jill

For several years, honors has partnered with the university’s Common Read program—a university-wide initiative designed to engage the community in the careful study and exploration of a common text. Each year departments across Minnesota State Mankato collaborate to create engaging experiences with the common read book.

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the few who find their way to honors. The central values and purpose of a
