INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF ACADEMICALLY TALENTED STUDENTS: A FORENSICS MODEL FOR THE BASIC PUBLIC SPEAKING COURSE

Kevin W. Dean and David G. Levasseur*

College communities, like any microcosm, are populated by a vast diversity of students with a wide range of needs and interests. Unfortunately, despite our best intentions, the educational needs of many of our most talented students go unmet. The impact of such oversights has been felt in numerous ways. A 1983 report by The National Science Foundation found that, "the total number of highly superior students who drop out at one stage or another totals over 125,000 a year. It is particularly pertinent that the greatest loss occurs not in the transition from high school to college, but after college entrance." The report went on to claim that, "a formalized honors program offers one viable solution to this high attrition rate among talented students."¹

Recent years have produced an increasing awareness on the part of administrators and educators to fill a pedagogical void by offering courses targeted towards a previously neglected group: academically talented students. Often such courses are housed in "honors programs" and have been found to "challenge faculty, raise academic standards across the board, and generally invigorate an educational institution."²

Our failure to offer academic stimulation to our talented students is often apparent in departments of speech communication, particularly within the basic course. One writer notes, "It is almost axiomatic that the larger and more heterogeneous the student population, the greater the need for an honors program to ensure that the more able student does not lose his or her enthusiasm early on."³ Inevitably, communication educators find themselves dealing with students performing on a diversity of skill levels within the basic course. Varied skill levels are especially obvious in basic public speaking courses where some students, due to high school

KEVIN W. DEAN is the Basic Course Director and Coordinator of Forensics Activities in Speech Communication at the University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742; DAVID G. LEVASSEUR is a Master's Candidate and Assistant Coordinator of Forensics Activities in Speech Communication at the University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742.
experience, forensics work, or simply innate talent, demonstrate clear mastery of basic organizational, research, writing and oral performance skills that keep others floundering. Our field justifiably offers attention to individuals who are communication-apprehensive, yet seems reticent to offer innovations for the academically talented.

The problem is magnified at our institution by the current design of our basic course. Although our basic course services nearly seven hundred students per term, we offer no curricular, co-curricular or extra-curricular mechanism which allows gifted students the challenge to refine these previously developed skills. We presently have no official forensics program, a natural draw for such students. The advanced public speaking course requires the basic course as a prerequisite and, due to limited resources, has become an exclusive opportunity for communication majors. Furthermore, while our institution does have an honors program that serves over one thousand students, there are currently no honors course offerings in speech communication that run concurrently with our standard course offerings. One way the communication discipline can challenge our talented students through academic curriculum and programs is through "honors" sections of the basic course.

Offering a voluntary accelerated program under the rubric of our basic public speaking course at the University of Maryland became our goal. Our motivation for the project was two-fold. First, while we did not wish to withdraw all skilled students from the basic course, we did want to provide an experimental opportunity for those motivated for an extra challenge. Second, we hoped that the project might be an initial step towards instituting a viable forensics program which was truly co-curricular. Thus, to meet these needs, we established an experimental "accelerated program" in conjunction with the basic public speaking course during the fall term of 1988. Using a forensics model, the special section offered students increased individual instruction in crafting oral presentations at a higher level of sophistication than expected in the traditional basic course.

Our experiment met with mixed results. In this paper we will outline the procedure we followed in setting up the project, some pitfalls we experienced, and some suggestions for future endeavors.

**Establishing the Advanced Section**

Frequently, honors courses evolve from an institution's standard curriculum, and parallel the material presented to the tradi-
tional student. One report notes that, "honors program courses differ from other courses because of additional reading and writing assignments, more independent study, more in-depth discussion, and critical thinking exercises."5 Another study claims the uniqueness of honors courses is in providing students "with more opportunities for creative thought and discussion as well as research and questioning... Students are asked to read more primary source materials, cover the subject area in greater depth, and write more papers."6 Adhering to these precepts of honors courses, we began to plan our special section.

The basic public speaking course at the University of Maryland yields three credits and requires students to attend a mass lecture twice a week and lab sections once per week. In the lab sections, students present three major (five- to ten-minute duration) graded presentations over the course of the semester. Recognizing that students in the "advanced" section would receive credit for the basic course in public speaking, we first needed to make certain that students would meet at least these minimum standards.

A room was scheduled for two hours on Monday and one hour on Wednesday afternoon at a time which did not conflict with the mass lecture. Special section students were exempted from the mass lecture, except on special occasions of specific lectures or speakers, and their previously assigned lab was replaced by the special Monday-Wednesday lab section. They were assigned three major speeches of "forensics nature." This meant that the presentations (informative, persuasion, after-dinner, rhetorical criticism) would be eight to ten minutes in duration and would be expected to reach a level of perfection (organization, research, delivery, etc.) suitable to the novice level of regional individual events competition. All basic course students included in the advanced section were also required to take a written final examination; but in the advanced section the format was essay rather than objective.

Studies of honors programs appear uniform in their claims that full value is obtained with "extra-course" and/or "capstone" projects which supplement in-class activities. Indeed, "social events, enrichment activities, and recognition festivities are essential elements to honors programs."8 Grounding the special section in a forensics model made the selection of our capstone project obvious—participation in a tournament. Thus, an additional feature of the course was providing those students who wanted the experience a chance to enter an end-of-the-term regional forensics tournament hosted by a nearby university. This tournament was particularly well-suited for our needs, for it fell at the end of our
term, and it offered novice events. Assuming that all the students would want to participate in the tournament and being hesitant to mandate participation, we presented the tournament to students as a strongly-encouraged option.

With the format in place, we next needed to obtain the students. Since the advanced section was experimental, we arbitrarily decided that we would work with eight to twelve students. This move was consistent with the philosophy of honors programs to limit student enrollment and maintain small class size. We opted to place no initial restrictions (e.g., previous course work, forensics experience, grade point of "x," senior standing, etc.) on those who would inquire. Instead, we compiled a detailed questionnaire that would help us assess the background and potential commitment of the students. Ultimately, we looked for students we felt were earnestly interested in the project. Our only specific criteria, in addition to desire for more advanced experience, was a desire to participate in forensics competition. Since the capstone forensics tournament was such an affordable option, we reasoned that this event would function as a nice bonding and motivational element for the class members. Those clearly not interested in such an experience might not be best served by the direction we were taking.

To assess the interest level and commitment of the students, we scheduled fifteen-minute interviews over a ten-day period. On the first day of mass lecture we made a presentation explaining the special section. We emphasized the rigor of the course and made it blatantly clear that expectations would be high. Forty students went through the interview process, and from those we selected ten. Selections were made by the start of the third week of class, so that our experiment could begin. The group selected was quite diverse: three men and seven women, freshman through seniors, grade point averages ranging from 2.6 to 3.9, and ethnic diversity. The common link was an apparent drive to achieve in an accelerated program in public speaking.

**Assessment**

The project enjoyed moderate success. We were able to cover, in much greater depth than was possible in the traditional basic course, the theoretical components which serve as a foundation for public speaking. Students were exposed to sophisticated research techniques, including an introduction to the journals of our discipline. Through the course they received more guidance and prodding to increase the quality of their writing and presentational skills.
than did students in the regular course. The capstone experience at the forensics tournament was meaningful for the students who opted to participate. Indeed, it was perhaps the best motivational aspect of the course. We observed a marked increase in student effort and enthusiasm in the two weeks leading to this event. Of the ten students in the class, six went to the extra-curricular event and captured eight awards, including first prizes in the novice divisions of informative and persuasive speaking.

At the same time, however, our course design led to some significant pitfalls. Our first difficulty, insufficient time for topic selection, is inherent within the forensics model itself. While specific topic selection for various assignments is often not a significant variable in the evaluation of the final product in traditional classes, in the forensics model careful topic selection is critical. While it may be an arguable weakness of forensics, most coaches acknowledge that certain topics (e.g., a persuasion speech on drunk driving, abortion, or capital punishment) have become taboo in competition due to overexposure. Understandably, once students were duly warned, most of them opted to select a different subject, even though it meant many additional library hours. Thus, topic selection impeded the pace of the course.

The problem was magnified when several students perceived no need to adhere to a presentation timetable. They knew they were expected to have three ten-minute presentations by the end of the term, but procrastination soon set in. While all the students worked on projects, finalized drafts were long in coming. Students who had no specific material to work with lost valuable time that could have been spent honing specific writing and presentational strategies. These subjects, for students who had not selected viable topics, could only be discussed in the abstract.

The next problem, low student commitment, stemmed from our hesitancy to establish a formal classroom environment, which would have been the norm for traditional sections of the basic course. Convinced by the overwhelming enthusiasm from the students who interviewed and were selected for the course, and reinforced by the honors program literature which encourages program flexibility, we began by fostering the more personable role relationship of coach/student rather than the more traditionally formal rule of teacher/student. We further encouraged a "work-at-your-own-pace" attitude, where we would serve as mentors rather than task masters. This tone caused some students to view the experience in a non-academic light.
One symptom of this non-academic view was poor class attendance. Believing that sheer dedication would keep the students coming, we did not mandate class attendance. As weeks progressed, students offered an ever-increasing number of excuses for missed hours, and the initial commitment seemed to wane. At one point, a student asked permission to miss our scheduled time so she could "do work for real classes."

The stress with the attendance issue was heightened by our willingness to accept students into the course who had scheduling problems. Two of the students who appeared most earnest had class conflicts with one of the course's three scheduled hours. Since a large portion of the class was devoted to individual work, we were willing to set up additional hours with these students to meet the three-hour weekly commitment. Their absence from the group became obvious. This hampered the group's potential for cohesion and fostered the assumption that attendance was not essential.

We would offer two possibilities which partially explain this behavior signifying lack of commitment. First, many students, ours being no exception, are inundated with activities from early September. Keeping student momentum alive for an event not scheduled until December is not an easy task. Second, as Todd notes, the personality types of individuals often drawn to honors classes (tendencies toward introversion and intuition-dominant measures on the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator) tend not to actively seek assistance when problems are encountered. Such individuals perform better in a more structured environment.11

Our third problem-spot stemmed from our selection process. While research on honors programs consistently maintains that no single measure (e.g., SAT score, grade point average [GPA], etc.) is a determining factor for admission to an honors course, the assumption is clear that some minimum standard of verifiable academic performance needs to be presented.12 While we requested students to provide us with their GPAs, this did not become a significant criterion in our evaluation and ultimate decision for class membership. In our selection process, perceptions of earnest student commitment and a record of prior speech experience weighed more heavily than other factors.

Despite commitment and prior experience, intellectual ability soon became a discriminating factor. Several of the students simply did not have the fundamental writing or research skills to keep up with the rest of the group and, as a result, became frustrated. By
the end of the project, we observed that irrespective of prior experience, those who gained most from the class (based on our evaluation of individual progress and their evaluation of the course) were the students with higher grade point averages. The other students would have benefited more had they remained in the traditional course where basic elements of writing and organization were given more direct attention.

We do want to clarify that GPA by itself should not be the determining factor. Our extensive work with forensics programs has shown that there is not always a correlation between scholastic aptitude and oral performance. Many students who do not necessarily test well can excel in arenas which measure effectiveness through oral communication. However, GPA is one measure of dedication to academic pursuits. Certainly the demands of such a course as the one outlined here mandate such commitment.

Recommendations

While we were particularly pleased with the results of our capstone project, and while student evaluations of their experiences were generally positive, the quality of the overall course from our vantage as educator/coaches was less than we had hoped. Given our experiences from this venture, we make eight recommendations to others interested to providing such a course:

1. Require deadline dates for all assignments. This would hopefully keep the coursework progressing along and place more of an academic priority on the class. Further, it would allow time for more extensive re-writes, which would be likely to increase the quality of the speeches.
2. Require strict attendance for the course.
3. Restrict class membership to those who can attend all group sessions.
4. Provide time early in the course to work on presentational skills through declamation or oral interpretation activities and exercises. Students must be confident with a body of material and not concerned with memorization, if coaching of presentational elements is to be worthwhile. Students with specific assignments (e.g., a four-minute poetry reading or four memorized minutes of a famous or student oration) would be more likely to comprehend and be able to apply these presentational skills to later work.
5. De-emphasize the capstone, end-of-the-term, tournament and attempt to get students to a forensics event earlier in the season. Our coaching experience with established forensics programs has taught us the value of getting students out early to tourna-
ments. Tournaments motivate efforts for preparation and, if nothing else, would force students to select topics early. Furthermore, assuming the experience is a positive one, tournaments are wonderful vehicles for building enthusiasm.

6. If using an end-of-the-term tournament as a capstone event, it should be co-curricular rather than extra-curricular, and thus required of all students. While provisions must exist for emergencies, and while grades should be based on tournament preparation and not performance outcome, a tournament provides a unique educational experience to which students in such a course should have exposure.

7. Require a writing sample during the interview process. This would help to measure the ability levels of the students more accurately.

8. Recognizing that most honors programs have a GPA of 3.5 (on a 4.0 scale) as a cut-off point for admission to honors courses, consider very carefully before registering individuals for the "forensics section" who do not have at least a 3.0.

Conclusions

Offering a co-curricular "honors" experience through the basic public speaking course for more experienced speakers and/or those desiring an accelerated format can be very rewarding for students as well as instructors. A course such as the one outlined here fills a current void in our curriculum which desperately needs our attention.

In preparing to offer such a program we would recommend the acknowledging of forensics limitations, the stringent application of the above guidelines, and a selection process that does not solely rest on GPA, but takes prior academic experience into careful consideration. We hope to have learned from our mistakes and look forward to an opportunity to revise our approach to address the advanced basic course student.

NOTES

4A frequent hesitation in offering honors sections has been the charge that all the "good" students will be drawn out of the course, leaving a mass of mediocrity. Honors program research shows this to be a fallacy. One report
-wage consolation to faculty who fear a "brain drain" from their regular sections, noting, "all academically talented students will not opt for participation in honors for various reasons: time, scheduling, or perceived rigor of honors work." (See Susan M. Todd, "Scholars and Strategies: Honors Programs in Community Colleges, Part I," Community College Review 16 [1988], 21.) Another study claimed that, "the press of time surfaces as a disadvantage of honors program participation for many students, along with high faculty expectations and self-expectations." (See: William E. Piland and Janet Azbell, "The Honors Program Student: A Typical Profile," Community and Junior College Journal 58 [1984], 47.)

Piland, McKeague and Montgomery, 34.


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See: Austin, 10; Friedlander, 28; and Todd, 22.

Todd, 21, grounding her claims in a 1986-87 study by Wittig, Schurr and Ruble (Forum for Honors, 17, 26-35), argues that a "system which is too vague and outlines which allow too much flexibility may be misleading, confusing and frustrating, introverted and intuitive than the general populations."