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Faculty share strategies for teaching honors classes

Faculty share strategies for teaching honors classes

BY SALLY ACHARYA

When planning an honors course, faculty must consider not just how to craft the syllabus, but how to craft their approach to a class full of challenging and stimulating students whose distinguishing marks aren't just As.

A conversation titled "Teaching Honors Classes—Best Practices and Challenges" drew a diverse collection of faculty last week to a roundtable discussion to mull over what strategies work, what don't, and what might work in university honors classes.

While honors students are undeniably bright, they're not necessarily the most creative, most articulate, or even most brilliant students on campus. But they have one thing in common, noted Michael Mass, director of the University Honors Program: "They've been terribly successful in high school."

Many of these students are understandably fond of the strategies that have brought them success so far and may have an aversion to taking risks, said Richard Sha, literature, College of Arts and Sciences (CAS). "They have been highly rewarded for following the box," said the veteran teacher of honors classes.

Sha's suggestion is to talk on the first day about "good mistakes." The idea that risk-taking can bring rewards and isn't necessarily a path to a dreaded B-minus is "absolutely something to bring to the forefront of an honors class," he said.

Longtime math and statistics professor Lyn Stallings, associate director of the Center for Teaching Excellence, reminded her colleagues that the background these goal-driven students bring to college often includes years of test-preparation courses that focused on a simple end: high marks on standardized tests.

"That's the damage that's got to be undone," Stallings says. After all, high test marks can get a student into an honors program, but the strategies that work on standardized tests don't necessarily translate to college honors courses.

One suggestion for encouraging risk-taking came from the Outstanding Honors Professor of 2004, Cindy Bair Van Dam of the College Writing Program, "I spill a lot of ink at the beginning of the semester that doesn't come with a grade," she said. She intentionally starts the semester with an assignment she knows will be uncomfortable, so that students know they're taking risks, but aren't anxious over grades.

She does not, however, completely excise grades from the equation. As sociologist Cynthia King noted, honors students are so grade driven that experimenting with ungraded assignments could be counterproductive. ("I wouldn't try until I had tenure," said King, to general laughter.) Bair Van Dam

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not only gives a “practice grade” in her offbeat early assignments, but provides plenty of written feedback to help students understand what she’s seeking.

Several professors suggested sharing essays anonymously to show what is meant by an A paper. Sometimes, says Pek Koon Heng, School of International Service, “They’re chastened by it.”

Many professors noticed that honors students can be uncomfortable with group projects. That’s not surprising, said Bair Van Dam, given their life experiences. “Remember, they’re coming from high school,” she said, and in group projects, “They were the ones doing all the work.” One tip: Make it clear that you won’t give a single grade for the whole group, but will give individual grades that may vary among group members.

Naomi Baron, language and foreign studies, has noticed that students who bonded outside of class had an easier time with group projects, and students living off campus were least receptive, perhaps because of logistical difficulties.

Honors classes bring their own challenges. But faculty agreed that honors students are also energetic, responsible, enthusiastic, and a pleasure to teach.

The Center for Teaching Excellence and University Honors Program hope to sponsor more roundtable discussions in the future to help enhance teaching in the honors program.