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Supporting Peer Educators in First-Year Honors Seminars at Virginia Tech

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Abstract

First-year seminars help students transition to and get involved in college faster, which can result in higher academic achievement, stronger peer relationships, and deeper self-knowledge: elements of a more successful and satisfying college experience. University Honors at Virginia Tech began offering first-year seminars in the mid-1990s but experienced difficulty maintaining them as our student population grew. This difficulty led us to reform the structure, content, and leadership of the seminars. Now they are co-led by student teaching assistants (STAs) and faculty members. The new seminars emphasize active, collaborative learning and self-reflection. We educate our STAs through pre-semester training and a fall-semester student teaching practicum. This new course model better supports our STAs and encourages students to form good habits early. Although we still have many opportunities for improvement, the new first-year honors seminar and student teaching practicum are fostering reflection, faculty and peer relationships, and campus integration.

Supporting Peer Educators in First-Year Honors Seminars at Virginia Tech

Our Program's Context and Philosophy

Virginia Tech is a public land-grant research institution of over 30,000 students, 1,600 of whom are in University Honors. We serve students from every college within the university and offer multiple diploma options, two living-learning communities, and our own study abroad program.

While the structure of our program has changed over the years, our philosophy has remained consistent: We believe that honors exists in the freedom students achieve when they take control of their education. We coach our students to seek freedom within discipline—to think creatively, to declare their priorities. Our philosophy is eloquently articulated by Parker Palmer in his book, *The Courage to Teach*: “If boundaries remind us that our journey has a destination, openness reminds us that there are many ways to reach that end” (77). Though our students share similar experiences, no two students have ever graduated from University Honors, or “reached that end” in exactly the same way.

Our students select experiences from over a dozen ways of earning honors credit that culminate in one of six honors diplomas. We incentivize high-impact practices such as working closely with faculty, studying abroad, participating in undergraduate research or internships, and engaging in peer education (Kilgo, Sheets, and Pascarella 510–512, 519–523). Our program is not disciplinary. Within the framework of the honors diplomas, our students have institutional support to develop their passions, identities, goals, and agency.

History and Development of Our First-Year Honors Seminars

Our first-year seminars were founded out of necessity. On a September afternoon in the early 1990s, our then-director, Dr. Charles “Jack” Dudley, sat down with a group of honors

seniors and asked who was applying for graduate school or major national scholarships. It was worse than he suspected. Not only did no hands rise, but only a few students had even heard of the GRE (Dudley).

As he tells it, this incident was the impetus for the very first First-year Honors Seminar (FHS) at Virginia Tech. He created one small class of first-year students with impressive potential in their honors applications. Dr. Dudley taught civil argumentation through discussion of current events and literature, he shared information about scholarships and graduate school, and he encouraged the students to learn from each other (Dudley).

While not initially a primary course objective, peer education became a clear strength of the seminar. Students from disparate disciplines and backgrounds found friendships and support, motivation and inspiration. They showed each other creative ways to earn honors credit through undergraduate research, internships, and study abroad. For the first time, Virginia Tech honors students had formed a community (Dudley).

When our first residential community opened in 1994, we made FHS a requirement for residential students. This was easy with only 20 students in honors housing. However, over the next 17 years, our residential population increased to over 400. This growth threatened FHS because every section needed a faculty facilitator.

We struggled to sustain FHS: we expanded class sizes, canceled non-required sections, involved all of the University Honors staff, and asked the same faculty members to volunteer semester after semester. Despite these efforts, it had finally become impossible to recruit enough faculty to lead all of the sections. To continue offering first-year seminars, we needed to significantly revise the course structure.

Four years later—after four program facilitators, extensive literature reviews, and several stages of university governance—we had a new first-year honors seminar that incorporated peer education and a student teaching practicum that I teach to support the peer educators.

The New First-Year Honors Seminar

Our new seminar is designed to promote first-year student success. We keep class sizes small—no more than 15 students per section, and frequently fewer than 10—to foster significant faculty and peer interaction. Class activities emphasize active and collaborative learning, a balance of academic challenge and support, and self-reflection. (For more information about the theories and practices that our seminar supports, see Pascarella and Terenzini 616–626, 651–654; Tinto 145–148; Kuh et al. 11–13, 69–72; Light 45–69; Hunter and Linder 285; Bean 149–168, 173–181; Cuseo et al. 16; and Newton and Ender 40–41.)

The course goals, for example, are elaborated versions of Cuseo, Thompson, Campagna, and Fecas' well-supported “four powerful principles of college success”:

1. We want you to practice an active, curious, creative, engaged style of learning, meaning-making, and participation.
2. We want you to get to know yourself better. We want to help you find your niche at Virginia Tech; to encourage you to choose activities, majors, and minors; and to help you set career paths.
3. We want you to know about the resources and opportunities available at University Honors, Virginia Tech, and the surrounding community.
4. We want you to discover how to use social and community networks to make better connections with faculty, graduate students, upper-class students, and your peers (1).

By developing familiarity with university resources, connections with others in the academic community, self-knowledge, and a pro-active approach to education, students are more likely to have a successful and satisfying college experience.

Leadership

All sections are now co-led by a student teaching assistant (STA) and faculty co-facilitator. This dual facilitation model enables first-year students to work closely with both faculty and peers to form influential relationships (Pascarella and Terenzini 620–621, Newton and Ender 8–9).

Peer education also benefits the STAs, perhaps even more than the first-year students (Kuh et al. 195, Newton and Ender 13–14). The following are some typical benefits to peer educators as presented by Dr. Jennifer Keup, director of the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, at the 2014 Institute on Peer Educators:

- “Experiential education opportunity
- Development of employability competencies
- Academic, personal, and interpersonal skill development
- Greater sense of community and campus integration
- Increased knowledge of institutional resources
- Engagement with faculty and staff
- Intercultural competencies
- Leadership training” (slide 26).

Shared leadership also makes this position more viable for faculty. Though we offer suggestions, we let each faculty–student pair decide how to share responsibilities. Most teams follow our recommendations: STAs manage course logistics—such as taking attendance and

communicating with students—and they plan and lead the majority of classes. The faculty co-facilitators mentor the STAs, teach some classes to connect with students and model good pedagogy, and confirm all course grades based on the STAs' suggestions.

Course Structure

Unlike previous versions of the course, in which every section was autonomous, the new FHS includes a loose curriculum and common assignments. Each week, all sections focus on a theme. The themes provide a shared experience among first-year students, and they enable me to train the STAs on each topic as it occurs during the semester. The themes range from practical topics, such as navigating university resources or applying for scholarships, to more abstract ones, such as diversity of perspective or the purpose of liberal education. This flexible structure gives the STAs and faculty co-facilitators the freedom to bring their own passions and strengths into the classroom within the framework of the course.

First-year students study the course themes through pre-class work, in-class activities, and post-class explorations.

Pre-Class Work

Prior to each class meeting, students complete a short reading and reflective writing assignment. The goal is to introduce students to a concept and give them a foundation to build on in class (Bean 100). Short popular or scholarly articles are the most commonly assigned readings, but the teaching teams also use creative sources: short videos, websites, legal documents, news stories, creative writing, speeches, personality assessments, or even personal interviews with peers or faculty whom the first-year students have not yet met. The pre-class reading can be almost anything that offers new perspectives.

The weekly reflective writing responds to the reading, helping students further process and internalize the weekly theme (Bean 97–98). This writing is exploratory and reflective—messy (Bean 100–101). Students should seek to complicate rather than conclude, to try on new perspectives and to question their own. To help students authentically and productively engage in their writing, we created ten optional prompts to guide their reflection. Here are three of the prompts:

- “What confused you? What questions do you have? Use your response as a way to grope toward your own answer, but prioritize the process of searching for that answer over the temptation to arrive at a final decision” (Bean 101–104, 107).
- “What connections do you see between this week’s reading and something from a past week? Why are these links significant? Demonstrate ways in which the texts compose a conversation for you, one text engaging or ‘revising’ another” (Bean 107, 110).
- “Write about the text from two perspectives: believing and doubting. Rather than just recording what you immediately believe and doubt, try to practice ‘believing’ the unfamiliar ideas and doubting the familiar ones. What would it mean if you believed or doubted these ideas?” (Elbow, *Writing without Teachers* 147–190).

Sometimes students choose to reflect in other creative ways, such as creating video responses, cartoons, 3D models, poetry, maps, or other physical artifacts. The form is arbitrary; what matters is that it catalyzes thinking and learning.

In-Class Activities

The in-class activities emphasize discussion and small group work. The benefits of these activities include (but are not limited to) stronger academic achievement, peer relationships,

feelings of self-esteem and belonging, social skills, leadership and public speaking abilities, and appreciation for diversity (Johnson, Johnson, and Smith 31–32; Bean 167–168).

STAs are trained to facilitate collaboration through the think-pair-share pattern, regular ice-breakers, and discussions in diverse formats such as fishbowls, jigsaws, or debates. (For examples of discussion activities, see Bean 176–178; Johnson, Johnson, and Smith 33–35; and Aronson.) STAs also regularly use in-class writing to help students focus on a point or to guide reflection (Bean 104–106). Finally, STAs plan a variety of activities to engage students with different learning styles: their students perform skits to practice approaching faculty, do collaborative drawing to share their perspectives on service, attempt tasks with distractions to review study skills, or calculate the cost of attending college to contextualize scholarships. All of these activities grow out of the pre-class work.

Post-Class Explorations

Outside of class, students engage in active learning through exploration. These assignments are designed to get students out of their dorm rooms to form relationships, use campus resources, and learn their way around the community: connections that expedite college adjustment (Tinto 163–168, Kuh et al. 268–269, Newton and Ender 40–43). By exploring, students can apply class concepts outside of the classroom independently or in small groups. Some exploration prompts invite residential students to participate in their living-learning community programming. Others draw students off campus: they ride the town bus as a class to learn how to leave campus without a car, they visit the local farmers' market, or they hike the nearby Cascades. Students also explore campus, attending free workshops at the Career Center or Writing Center, open seminars in unfamiliar fields, or local concerts and plays. One of the

best prompts encourages use of our Dine with Faculty program, which lets students treat faculty to a free meal at a dining hall (“Dine with Faculty”).

Students enjoy these post-class explorations. The experiential, collaborative nature of exploring together helps them form friendships and feel at home.

Other Assignments

In addition to the weekly routine, students complete three larger writing assignments throughout the semester. These assignments are designed to focus self-reflection on students’ identities and goals, which is linked to success in the first year of college and beyond (Cuseo et al. 22–24; Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot 8–9; Kilgo, Sheets, and Pascarella 510; Keup slide 38). At the beginning and end of the semester, students respond to this “Bookend Reflection” prompt, created by assistance from Virginia Tech English professor, Dr. Paul Heilker:

Who are you? Where did you come from, and what was valued there? Who are you here?

What is this place, and what is valued here? Who will you become? Where are you going, and what values will you work to create there?

To ruminate on their first-semester journey, students assemble a final portfolio comprised of the two Bookend Reflections, their three best weekly reflections, and one final metacognitive reflection. This metacognitive reflection is the third larger writing assignment. It asks students to look over their semester writings and notice what they reveal.

This final reflection is where we see the greatest evidence of growth. Students describe what used to seem impossible that they now do with ease. They acknowledge where they stumbled and outline plans to improve. They articulate goals and plan how they will reach them. We keep these final portfolios in students’ files with the intention of returning them at graduation to provide a final reflective benchmark.

Grading

In such a developmental, relationship-centered class, grading feels like a necessary evil; honors students need incentive, but they could fixate on grades at the expense of the creative risk-taking necessary for constructive reflection. To mitigate that risk while still incentivizing high performance, the course and all of its components are graded as Pass or Fail, and the Pass threshold is set at 80%. This system makes the seminar less stressful and still consistent with our other honors credit opportunities, which require a B or better to count toward an honors diploma. Grading Pass/Fail helps not just the first-year students but also the STAs, who make grade recommendations to their faculty co-facilitators, who then confirm all final course grades. This collaborative process engages the STAs in developmental conversations about evaluation. We discuss how class participation, for example, does not necessarily mean speaking regularly in class—it can also mean actively listening and applying class concepts in writing.

In responding to writing, we advise limiting marginal and terminal comments to specific praise or questions. This system encourages STAs to respond in a conversational, human way, which can inspire their students to think more deeply about their ideas. It also deters STAs from trying to correct, proofread, or otherwise evaluate writing in a way that distracts from the content, overlooks evidence of personal investment, and discourages students. (For more information on this style of responding to student writing, see Sommers 107–116, Daiker 153–163, Elbow “Options” 197–202, and Glenn and Goldthwaite 120–125.)

STA Training and Support

In such a complex and potentially influential class, STA training and continued support throughout the semester is critical. We support the STAs through pre-semester training and a full-semester student teaching practicum.

Training

Though FHS is offered only in the fall, the training process begins back in the spring semester. We advertise the opportunity and collect applications from prospective STAs. Once the new STAs have been selected, we meet to discuss the course, their responsibilities, and their summer assignments: readings and a blank fall schedule to be filled with what STAs would like to assign before, during, and after each class. This assignment is a developmental draft: building the syllabus schedule helps STAs think about the semester holistically and become familiar with the course-planning resources that we provide.

Most comprehensive among these is the Resource Bank, which is pre-sorted by weekly topic and then by pre-class, in-class, and post-class activities. Each activity contains a brief description and length estimate to help STAs balance the amount and type of work that they are assigning. We created this edited collection with suggestions from the honors staff and past STAs. Past STAs also helped us create a booklet of sample activities so that new STA cohorts can use, adapt, or model reliable activities while they are learning how to design their own.

In the week before fall classes begin, we have a full day of training. The training is designed to introduce and practice basic teaching skills such as lesson planning, in-class writing, small group work, discussion facilitation, and responding to student writing. The training is also meant to help the STAs realize and trust what they already know. We attempt all of this through interactive workshops that model teaching techniques and connect new concepts to pre-existing knowledge. For example, they review their syllabus schedule drafts in small groups with a rubric that reinforces the course goals, seeks balance in work loads, and promotes inclusion of each STA's strengths and interests. In another session, a panel of STA alumni discuss their experiences and answer questions. (For details about the concepts and techniques included in our

training, please refer to Newton and Ender 192–211; McCann et al. 8–16, 44–54; Johnson, Johnson, and Smith 27–35; Bean 151–163, 173–181; Sommers 107–116; Daiker 153–163; Elbow “Options” 197–202; and Glenn and Goldthwaite 120–125.)

With this pre-semester training and mentorship from their faculty co-facilitators, STAs can successfully teach their first classes. However, the complexity of their responsibilities requires long-term support. Once the fall semester starts, the STAs begin our student teaching practicum.

Student Teaching Practicum

The student teaching practicum (STP) is a three-credit, Pass/Fail course that is required for STAs and provides the academic credit that compensates them for their work. The STAs have a tremendous influence on their students (Newton and Ender 23–24, 189–190) and therefore on the future of University Honors. This influence makes the STP a valuable resource for strengthening our program.

In class, we practice and reinforce the teaching skills that the STAs learned before the semester began, emphasizing teaching authentically from a place of genuine interest and strength (Skorczewski 99–117, Palmer 9–34). We also prepare for the weekly themes in FHS, providing content training exactly when the STAs need it. Finally, we collaboratively work through issues that arise in their classes. Through this classroom community, the STAs become peer educators not just for their first-year students but also for each other.

For example, STAs prepare for the weekly themes through in-class teaching. Each STA leads a 20-minute activity that they could use the following week in their FHS. The other STAs pretend to be first-year students while I observe, taking notes that I give to the in-class teachers.

After the activity, we discuss its merits, limitations, and delivery in a workshop setting. The STAs are gracious, supportive, and constructively critical with each other.

The in-class teaching is highly beneficial. In terms of content, the STAs practice an activity that they could use in their own class. More importantly, they experience how certain things work (or do not work), and they can apply their teaching knowledge to suggest improvements. By connecting teaching concepts to results in someone else's activity, the STAs can more effectively improve their own activities and instruction.

Another way that the STAs engage in peer education is by performing peer observations. Twice during the semester, they visit another STA's class to observe how another person with the same training and curriculum teaches in a different setting. Then they write a reflection that describes what happened and how the observed techniques would or would not work in their own class, a structure based on Margaret McLaughlin's "focused reading response" (168–176). Again, this assignment provides new perspectives and helps students apply their knowledge in a way that improves their own teaching.

Results

The current structure of the class has been in place for the last one-and-a-half years, and we have strong qualitative indications of its success thus far.

First, the latest STA applications show positive trends. In Spring 2015, we received so many more applications than in previous years that we were able to accept STA alternates for the first time. Furthermore, a large percentage of the Fall 2015 cohort are sophomores who applied because they enjoyed FHS so much as freshmen that they wanted to lead sections of their own. The current STAs also report that many of their students would like to be STAs next year. Though we know that older students could bring more experience to their classes, we are grateful

to have students involved early, making time for honors before their majors become too demanding. We also interpret this interest from current and rising sophomores as an indication that the course is being well received by first-year students.

As the STP instructor, I hear how much the STAs gain from their work, and I see them transform into confident leaders during the semester. Congruent with research (Kuh et al. 195, Newton and Ender 13–14), the 2014 STAs reported these benefits from their work:

- “By the end of this STA course, [I was] a different person with a refined set of values and intuition.”
- “This has been one of the most rewarding and challenging learning experiences of my time in college yet—learning how to take charge, be creative, and step up in a leadership position with the confidence and authority I didn’t know I had.”
- “You get to shepherd in a new generation of students. This is intensely rewarding.”
- “Being an STA has allowed me to become more compassionate.”
- “Speaking in front of an audience for extended periods of time is now a ‘no big deal’ task.”
- “The best benefit from being an STA is learning from my students. They have so many important things to say and are also struggling with many of the same problems that I used to or still struggle with. Some of our in-class conversations have been the highlight of that week.”
- “In many ways, I feel as though I am learning more than my students are on a weekly basis.”

- “Being an STA was one of the most meaningful experiences of my sophomore year. It was the most rewarding thing I’ve done in college and brought so much joy and meaning into my life.”

These testimonials show that peer education had a profound effect on these students. Many of them are not planning to be educators, yet through teaching, they developed skills in leadership, self-awareness, and humanity that will serve them wherever they go.

Looking Forward

In the second year of the new FHS, we can celebrate increased support for our peer educators through stronger course materials and training. However, other parts of our vision for this course have not yet been fully realized.

First, we need to improve our collaboration with the faculty co-facilitators. While many STAs receive valuable mentorship from these relationships, we could do more to better guarantee that result. Currently we send the faculty co-facilitators the course materials, connect them with their STAs during the summer, and invite them to the pre-semester training. Many faculty members cannot attend the training, though, which reduces our ability to communicate with them before FHS begins. We are reluctant to require faculty meetings, but perhaps a series of optional information or work sessions would be more accessible. For example, we could host syllabus-brainstorming sessions to facilitate initial conversations between faculty and STAs with honors staff present to answer questions.

Next, we need to continue improving the quality of feedback that STAs get on their teaching: from me, from their peers, and from their faculty co-facilitators. Ideally, I would visit every class once or twice a semester, but the logistics could be prohibitive. Some other options could include building on the peer observation assignment, offering individual or small-group

conferences, assigning more reflective writing, or more closely partnering with the faculty co-facilitators.

Perhaps our largest need is for formal assessment. We gather data through the STA applications, the first-year portfolios, STP discussions, and end-of-semester feedback. Some of this information has already inspired program adjustments. But without articulated assessment goals, we cannot be sure that we are gathering the data we will need to measure our program's effectiveness.

Finally, we hope to continue building the knowledge base of peer education in honors by recruiting and retaining strong STAs. The work is rewarding, but it is significant, and the learning curve is steep. If we can retain more STAs from one year to the next, the level of STP discussions would rise, which would produce generations of better-prepared STAs and first-year students. We would like to attract so many applications that we can be selective, target experienced students, and have STA alternates every year. Having knowledgeable, committed STAs is a priority for our program: they help students develop their passions and take control of their education, cultivating cohort after cohort of reflective and capable honors students.

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