

Valuing Opportunities to Learn

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With community colleges in the national spotlight as never before, a lot of talk has focused on the excellent work that community colleges are doing to help students succeed, especially the inroads that community colleges are making among their most academically vulnerable students. Thanks to the efforts of hard-working, dedicated faculty and forward-thinking college leaders, test scores, grades, and completion rates are making slow but steady progress while achievement gaps are diminishing. These results have been the reason for cautious optimism, and rightly so. Students on the other end of the academic spectrum deserve our attention as well: students who choose to enter our doors when colleges with ivy on their buildings and in their leagues—Harvard, Princeton and Yale come to mind—would be more than happy to offer them a spot. Community colleges are also addressing the educational needs of these academically gifted students.

For many community colleges, including the Community College of Allegheny County in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the answer has been the addition of honors-specific programming. Besides offering academically rigorous

courses, these programs work to actively engage intellectually curious students both in and out of the classroom, immersing students in a stimulating learning environment that fosters critical thinking and reasoning, cultural literacy, independent investigation, and collaborative learning. At CCAC, students accepted into the college's honors program have the opportunity to take honors courses with their peers; change any course into an honors program course with the support of faculty; receive in-county tuition re-imbursement; apply for honors-based scholarships; participate in extracurricular enrichment activities (e.g., field trips, speaker series, social and cultural events, regional and national honors conferences, and international study); receive priority registration; and experience the benefits of additional opportunities to learn from and interact with faculty.

The opportunity to interact with faculty in various ways—in the classroom, during one-on-one mentoring opportunities, and during field trips and service projects—as well as at various venues—conferences, forums, campus activities, and charitable events, to name just a few—is one of the principle reasons students value CCAC's honors program. Through these interactions students often grow to understand and appreciate the teacher-student relationship in new ways that in turn enable them to invest more fully in their education. By not only working on assignments but collaborating with their professors in the creation of honors-based projects, students develop the respect necessary for a learning process that demands the utmost levels of discipline, dedication, and creative reasoning.

This kind of learning process is difficult and challenging but well worth the effort. The learning that takes place in an honors-based education paves the way for personal and professional success. Research suggests that students who are routinely exposed to complex issues that require higher levels of intellectual investigation and problem-solving develop the skills necessary for careers that require nonconventional approaches and original thinking. These skill sets are crucial in our increasingly complex and changing society, and they are exactly what an honors education seeks to deliver.

Of course, students could not achieve these skills without the resolute dedication and commitment of faculty involved in honors education. At CCAC, the faculty have not only fully embraced the principles of honors education, but they have taken them to a level that stands as a national example of what can be achieved through creative and determined leadership. Overseen by English professor Julia Fennell, who has served as CCAC Honors Program

Director since 2005, the program has grown substantially every year, with more and more students realizing the value of an honors-based education.

Under her skillful direction, and with the assistance of many dedicated colleagues, the program has achieved important goals, including articulation agreements with five regional colleges; establishing honors credit tuition reimbursement for all students taking honors classes and participating in honors contracts; developing assessment rubrics for all program learning outcomes; creating an honors handbook and newsletter; offering an annual Honors Forum; and increasing participation in the CCAC Honors Program from 28 students in 2005 to more than 400 in 2014. In recognition of her efforts both here at CCAC and at the national level, Fennell received one of two inaugural NCHC Ron Brandolini Awards for Excellence at a Two-Year Institution. This award stands as a testament to what can be achieved by faculty members strongly committed to the pursuit and advancement of academic excellence. They change lives.

Time and again, individuals who have participated in the honors program have spoken of its transformative nature. Both faculty members and students have shared how involvement in the program has enriched their lives and provided a new level of insight into the learning experience. Uniting outstanding students with outstanding faculty advances academic excellence on both sides.

One overarching theme in honors interactions is that good ideas shared beget great ones; this is one of higher education's guiding principles in the pursuit of excellence. The values that make honors education great—learning to be open to new and diverse groups of people; learning new ideas and new ways of thinking; learning to challenge and question one's values and beliefs; and learning from the past in order to pursue a higher and more perfect ideal—will serve our honors students well in lives that will present an untold number of successes and challenges but will always present opportunities to learn. Cherishing these opportunities is perhaps the greatest benefit of an honors education.

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