

## **American Honors Conversation Notes**

### **Taken by Shawn Dry, Academic Senate College Chair**

Date of Conversation: 1/9/15

Union County College (UCC) faculty: Melissa Sande (junior English faculty), Jeff Shalan (senior English faculty and honors program coordinator)

American Honors (AH) Personnel: Lauren Comber (partnership associate), David Feingold (chief academic officer)

Approximately 15 OCC faculty, staff, and administrators were present.

- UCC's partnership with AH began in October 2013. After development of the program, the first cohort of between 65-72 students began in fall 2014.
- The fall honors courses included introductory courses in English, history, math, biology, American literature, psychology, and philosophy; there was also an honors seminar in peace studies.
- Additional winter honors courses will include second tier English, American literature, and history courses as well as new courses in speech and sociology; there will also be another honors seminar.
- These honors courses have fewer students in them than non-honors courses.
- Some UCC faculty teaching honors courses were disappointed that not all of the students were immediately of honors quality but had instead been judged as "honors-capable."
- Faculty teaching honors courses were trained and required to use the QUAD learning management system even though UCC uses a different LMS. Later in the conversation, David Feingold said that AH is changing its policy to allow a partner institution to use its own local LMS.
- There was initial resistance among the faculty to the American Honors partnership; their three main concerns were the increased tuition cost to honors students, control of the curriculum, and intellectual property of developed courses. The decision to form the partnership was forced upon them by the administration, but many of the faculty report being pleasantly surprised and pleased with their experiences with AH personnel.
- UCC had its own honors program before partnership with AH. Their home program had low enrollment and included few general education courses. The new program with AH has shifted the focus to lower-tier general education courses and has significantly increased the number of honors students.
- Students in the program include both (1) recruits drawn from local high schools by AH personnel and (2) current UCC students who applied to the program.
- The decision to admit students to the honors program is made by an admissions committee, which includes both AH and UCC membership. The criteria were more holistic in the fall semester (e.g., community service as well as GPA and test scores), but the committee is thinking they need to utilize more academic-focused standards in the future.
- The majority of the students in the program are from families with an income of \$80,000 or less. 44% of the students come from families with an income of \$40,000 or less.
- One of the key elements of the partnership is a cadre of dedicated student advisors who work with students to find funding for UCC courses (Pell grants and other need and merit based sources), help select UCC courses, and facilitate transfer connections.
- Jeff said the advisors had high-touch contact with the honors students. This contact had replaced his own former contact with them as the program coordinator.

- The advisors shadowed UCC counselors to learn their system and approaches. Jeff said his impression was that the advisors were supplementing rather than replacing the work of UCC counselors, but he has not asked the counselors.
- UCC has developed a math boot camp to help applicants be ready for the honors-level courses.
- UCC students in the honors program pay an average of 150% of non-honors tuition for honors courses. In return they are receiving access to an AH advisor and the AH transfer network.
- Honors students in the program act as a cohort to support and interact with each other.
- Students receive an AH certificate after completing 12 credits of honors courses. They receive an AH-certified degree when 24 of their 60 credits are in honors courses.
- Development of honors courses was completely owned by the faculty. They either adjusted existing syllabi and courses or developed new courses based on criteria designed by a UCC committee of faculty with AH advice but not direction. Jeff and Melissa both insisted that the faculty are in charge and that AH has been supportive but not dictatorial.
- Courses that UCC faculty develop without AH financial compensation are owned completely by the faculty. AH has intellectual property rights over courses they compensate faculty to develop; it uses those rights to share the courses with other institutions in its network so that those faculty may reference them for inspiration. It has no intention to sell the course information on the market.
- Though the “standard” AH course model has required utilization of the QUAD online LMS, David said that (1) AH is more open to colleges using their own LMS, (2) AH is more open to purely face-to-face courses without any online component, and (3) the decisions on LMS and course format are left to the faculty.
- Honors courses have a greater level of academic rigor than non-honors courses. The example given by Melissa was that her honors English course included more assignments, more reading, more difficult reading, and more theoretical and philosophical conversations.

## Text of Email Conversation

- Shawn Dry, Academic Senate College Chair
- Jeff Shalan, Union County College English faculty and honors program coordinator

**From:** Dry, Shawn D [sddry@oaklandcc.edu]

**Sent:** Friday, January 16, 2015 4:56 PM

**To:** Dr. Jeffrey W Shalan

**Subject:** American Honors conversation

Jeff, thank you for taking the time last Friday to speak with our faculty about your experiences with American Honors. The conversation was very informative and helpful.

I have a favor to ask of you. One of the major concerns that remains for our Senate is the perspective of the counselors and advisors at a college that is partnering with American Honors. Could you get me the names and email addresses of some of your counselors who might be willing to speak with me and Oakland Community College counselors about their experiences? I would very much appreciate it.

Thank you again for your time, and I wish you a great semester.

Shawn Dry  
History Faculty and Academic Senate College Chair  
Oakland Community College

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**From:** [shalan@ucc.edu](mailto:shalan@ucc.edu) [shalan@ucc.edu]

**Sent:** Sunday, January 18, 2015 1:02 PM

**To:** Dry, Shawn D

**Subject:** RE: American Honors conversation

Shawn,

It was my pleasure. You and your colleagues posed good questions. As mentioned, we asked many of the same questions and, in some cases, are still asking them. But I hope it was clear from my responses that I haven't drunk any kool-aid. In fact, what I like most about David Finegold and Chris Romer (the CEO) is that neither seems to be selling any kool-aid.

While I'm fundamentally opposed to the privatized, for-profit, neoliberal business model of education (what one of your colleagues referred to as the commodification of higher education), and have spoken quite candidly to David and Chris about this, they both genuinely believe in what they're doing and are on the level. And in this case, at least, what that business model allows for is a certain flexibility. David suggested as much when alluding to the change in their thinking about what role the Quad and online instruction would play in the larger network of participating colleges.

From the very start I've been impressed with their openness, responsiveness to faculty concerns, and willingness to adapt. And as such, I made the argument to colleagues and our administration that if we were to sign on (and it seemed clear to most of us that our administration intended to do so, regardless of faculty objections and concerns), we should do sooner rather than later, while the organization was/is still in its formative phase and when we could thus exert greater influence on the shape it ultimately takes. My experience thus far has borne that out.

As I suggested in our discussion, I oftentimes find myself aligned with David attempting to persuade the administration of the wisdom of one policy or another (e.g. admitting part-time students into the program and allowing non-cohort students to take a limited number of honors courses if seats are available, neither of which our administration will yet agree to). And working with David and AH has enabled me to do things which our administration (by which I always mean our president and academic vice president) rejected in my attempt to develop a new honors program after they disbanded the previous one I'd established long before they arrived on the scene: e.g., develop a much broader range of course offerings that will allow many more students to participate than the administration envisioned in its prior idea for an honors program; and enroll existing students in the program instead of seeing it exclusively as a recruitment vehicle for new students.

That said, the differential tuition remains a concern for me, seeming to undermine, as it does, the community college mission of affordability and access, even if, as David said, tuition is set just below the Pell-eligible maximum. But, theoretically, at least, one needs to look at this issue in the broader context of AH's mission as well--to make a top-quality college education more accessible and affordable for underserved students. *If* AH does succeed in its mission, students would indeed pay an extra couple of thousand at the two-year level, but they would then be accepted into top four-year institutions with substantial scholarship support, and would thus save considerably over the long run. *If* it succeeds.

Either way, though, I don't think it translates into a program for well-to-do white kids. That hasn't been our experience thus far, and I don't think the tacit agreement AH has with its four-year "partners" allows for that. Quite simply, top quality four-year institutions have a mandate to increase diversity. Most of them have failed miserably thus far. Hence, they've begun to recruit more aggressively from community colleges. If AH just offers them more white kids from affluent backgrounds, why would they care? I think the tacit agreement, thus, is that AH will provide these colleges and universities a diverse and well-prepared student pool, and the four-years will, in turn, accept those students and provide them the necessary support to attend.

A final thought: if our administration were willing to support the kind of honors program I'd proposed, and which in fact was not so different from AH, we would've had no interest in AH. But AH represented a compromise of sorts. And since I think it's important that we do have an honors program, and because it seemed pretty clear to me that for our administration--for whom AH represents primarily a means to recruit from the predominantly white, affluent regions of the county (which, ironically, as I suggest above, runs counter to AH's mission), to increase graduation rates, and to burnish its image, all while passing the cost on to the student--it was AH or no honors program, I agreed to go along with it, however skeptically.

And now, finally, to answer your question:

Heather Keith is the Director of our Advising, Career, and Transfer Services (which is what our Counseling Department was recently renamed as). She's been very involved in AH. You can reach her at 908-709-7514 or [keith@ucc.edu](mailto:keith@ucc.edu)

Cynthia Roman is our long-time transfer counselor. I don't know how involved she's been, but I think she'd be the next best person to contact: 908-709-7103 or [roman@ucc.edu](mailto:roman@ucc.edu)

I'll let them both know you may be reaching out to them.

Once again, I'd be happy to answer any other questions, though I'll try to do so more succinctly the next time ; )

Best wishes for a good semester,  
Jeff

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**From:** Dry, Shawn D [sddry@oaklandcc.edu]  
**Sent:** Sunday, January 18, 2015 7:36 PM  
**To:** Dr. Jeffrey W Shalan  
**Subject:** RE: American Honors conversation

Thank you for your excellent and thorough response, Jeff. If you don't mind, I'd like to share your email in full with the Senate. It will give us good things to think about. I appreciate your candor and hope with you that American Honors' promises to the students prove to reach fruition. All the best,

Shawn

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**From:** shalan@ucc.edu [mailto:shalan@ucc.edu]  
**Sent:** Sunday, January 18, 2015 9:05 PM  
**To:** Dry, Shawn D  
**Subject:** RE: American Honors conversation

Thanks, Shawn, and, yes, it's fine with me if you want to share my response with your Senate. But let me then be clear about two points in the paragraph towards the end which begins "A final thought": 1) Where I write, "... we would've had no interest in AH," I certainly didn't arrive at that conclusion by polling every member of the faculty. But I did speak to many of my colleagues, and that was the position of the overwhelming majority of them. 2) Our administration never explicitly stated the reasons I offer there for its interest in AH. But in the context of our administration's well established priorities, it's not difficult to infer those as the primary reasons. So I'd suggest there is better than an educated guess. Good luck and take care,

jeff