

Cultivating Ideal Citizens in the Age of the Global at Texas Southern University: Honors Academics and the World African Community

by

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Abstract

This report, based on a paper the author presented at the conference of the National Association of African American Studies in Tampa, Florida in June 2015, describes the academic core and related components of the program conceived in the Thomas F. Freeman Honors College at Texas Southern University, a historically African American institution in Houston, Texas. This report on the program, with its aim of cultivating students into “ideal citizens of the Age of the Global,” elaborates the *raison d’être* for the program; describes the three themes and two skills in the academic core of the program; describes the related instructional, observational, experiential, activities and services aspects of the program; describes the relationships between the program and its associated instructors, its associated departments, the University, and the community; clarifies the implicit and explicit commendations and recommendations of the program; and finally arrives at the conclusion that the program meets the imperatives of African American, world African, and overall world community, honors units.

Introduction

Perhaps the major objective of University academic honors units is to provide for the fullest development of their students through a combination of academics, activities, services, and relationships. But as they work to meet this objective, the honors units face at least three imperatives. One that is universal includes the maximization of their distinctiveness in their institutions. The second, specific to the United States, includes the meeting of the criteria and standards of the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC). The third, specific to the age of the realization of globalization and the aspiration toward globalism, includes the preparing of students to live in progressively larger arenas that we may view as the “concentric circles” of family, neighborhood, social community, organizational community, nation, and world.

For honors units in the historically-Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the United States, one additional and critical imperative is the maximizing their relevance to the realities of their students. This imperative seems critical, because as of December of 2017, the web site of the organization of honors units at HBCUs did not enunciate criteria and standards for honors units in general or for its member units in particular (see <http://www.naaahp.org>). The Thomas F. Freeman Honors College at Texas Southern University attempted to meet these imperatives in the program that it conceived in 2011 and which may guide the elaboration of honors education at other historically-Black colleges and universities in the United States, as well as at other institutions that serve students of African descent around the world.

Background: Distinctiveness

Honors units for undergraduate students have developed and implemented many elements that they believe set them apart from other academic units in educational institutions. At one seminar that the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) convened at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln in the summer of 2011 for the new leaders of honors units, among these elements, participants included this non-exhaustive list:

1. separate course numbers, sections and classrooms for honors students;
2. priority registration or advance registration privileges for honors students;
3. separate instructors, advisors, mentors and supervisors for honors students;
4. separate dorms, places of study and places of interaction for honors students;
5. scholarships, work study, other financial help designated for honors students;
6. separate opportunities for observation and experience for honors students;
7. separate study-away and/or study-abroad opportunities for honors students;
8. separate research projects, creative projects, internships for honors students;
9. chapters, organizations, and/or networks for transitions by honors students.

After identifying these elements, participants seemed unified in the view that almost all of them may be present to varying degrees in many academic units, and/or may be provided by non-honors academic, student activities, or student services, units. Thus they seemed to agree that honors units seem to have lost much of the distinctiveness they may have enjoyed.

One approach to addressing this reduction of distinctiveness would be for honors units to develop new sets of observations, experiences, activities and services to which they expose only their students. But that does not address the core issue: that the other academic units and the activities or services units could replicate these elements, and honors units one more time would face the question of their distinctiveness.

And after this reinvention by themselves and replication of their “new” elements by others, the honors units one more time may face the scrutinizing, and even questioning, of their very *raison d’être*.

One other approach to the resolution of this reduction of distinctiveness arises from the view that the principal bases for eligibility for admission into honors units include a record of academic achievement and the potential for enhanced academic achievement. Thus it argues that programs in honors units should assume the presence of this record and potential in their students; should be centered on academic elements that other academic units probably would not replicate; should integrate these academic elements with other academic elements that are common or specific to other individual academic units; should include activities and services that have been unique to honors units but that other units have adopted; and should address the critical matter of their *raison d’être* – the central issue of enhanced academic achievement for what purpose(s), or, toward what end(s). This would ensure, as the National Collegiate Honors Council proposes, that the honors unit offers an academic program that is “broader, deeper, or more complex than comparable learning experiences typically found at institutions of higher education” (see updated Definition of Honors Education, nchchonors.org, 2017).

In 2011, the Thomas F. Freeman Honors College at Texas Southern University conceived of a program that answers that challenge. This report describes the academic core and related aspects of that program. It states the *raison d’être* for the College. It states conceptually and operationally the academic implications of the *raison d’être* for the program in the College. It describes conceptually and operationally the instructional, observational, experiential, activities and services implications of the *raison d’être* and academic program. It describes the many relationships between the program and its instructors, departments, University and general community. It clarifies implicit and explicit commendations and recommendations the program in the College received, and provides the implications of these commendations and recommendations, as well as other insights from its program.

In the conception and elaboration of details of the program, one point of reference consists of the comments from the heads of honors units at the seminar organized by, and the criteria and standards and admonitions that appear at the web site of, the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC). But one additional and important point of reference consists of the major characteristics and imperatives of Historically-Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the United States in particular, and of the educational institutions that serve the members of the world African community in general. One part of this report is an interpretation of the core academic aspects of the program – the three academic themes – in the elaboration of subjects in the histories of people of African descent in the United States (African Americans) and other members of the community (other people of African descent, and people of Africa). The report concludes with several responses to the program from selected publics, and the proposition that the program meets African American, world African community, national community, and world community, imperatives.

Raison D'être and Age of the Global

There seem to be two contrasting conceptualizations of the Age of the Global. One is the state that one scholar (Gittens, 1990) seems to view as multi-faceted integration and that we may call "globalization." One is the philosophy and practice that another scholar (Schiller, 1991) labels "global civil society" and that we may call "globalism."

We may make at least three observations about the conceptualizations. First, they describe states we may perceive as "trans-temporaneous" – that seem applicable for "a millennium." Second, we may weave them into a grand view that integrates the practice of living that "globalization" captures and the spirit of living that "globalism" captures, and is much more encompassing than the view that either of them would seem to capture. Third, the integrated conceptualization would capture the essence of the ideal citizen of the Age of the Global.

In all honors units, one core assumption is that all students have a record of high academic achievement and the potential to enhance that academic achievement. Thus one focus is on realizing that potential, but an even greater focus may be on the search for the answer to this question: "Enhancement of academic achievement – for what purpose, or, toward what end?" We may answer this question with this idea: The enhancement of academic achievement for the realization of students as accomplished specialists, integrative contributors and visionary leaders in the Age of the Global. This leads to the "mission in context" of the program:

The mission of the Thomas F. Freeman Honors College at Texas Southern University is to educate its students to live out their lives as ideal citizens of the Age of the Global.

Students and alumni of the College will be accomplished in their specialties, multidimensional in their knowledge, interdisciplinary in their perspectives and approaches, connected and dedicated to their local or primary or proximate communities, and well integrated into their national and global communities.

They will secure the most good from their communities, contribute the most good to their communities, cultivate a certain balance among their memberships in multiple communities, and promote the best relations among these communities – crucial in simultaneous multiple memberships in the age of globalization and globalism.

Academic Program and General Guidelines

In many honors units, there is little that unifies the academic programs students should follow. The units may have Introduction to Honors courses or others that have similar titles, with the focus on the cultivation of the spirit, making use of the resources, or following of the procedures, specific to them. They may have such basic expectations as the development of the research, interpretation and implementation skills of students, but leave the realization of these guidelines to individual instructors and/or specialties. To some extent at the sophomore level, but especially at the junior and senior levels, in addition to the difficulty they face in keeping students attached to their offices, officials and services, they have difficulty ensuring consistency and continuity and unity in the observing of the academic, activities and services aspects of their programs by their students. The importance of this issue is reflected in the exhortation from the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) that “The curriculum of the honors college offers significant course opportunities across all four years of study” (see Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors College, 2017).

Themes and Skills in Curriculum

The program addresses this issue by translating the mission into five core “themes” and “skills” (a) to which students receive an introduction early in their tenures, (b) of which the students develop an understanding in their General Education, (c) which the students apply in major courses, and (d) which the students apply and integrate in capstone courses. The three themes include Interdisciplinarity; location of subjects within Local/National/Global context; and Ethics/Aesthetics/Philosophy in the age of the global. And the two skills include the use of computers (a) in research and (b) in multimedia reports, presentations and portfolios.

The justification for each of the themes and skills focuses on the relating of them to two categories of imperatives – ideals for the age of the global, and needs in the age of the global:

The Justification for Interdisciplinarity:

A few years ago, in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, a law firm announced it was looking for someone to instruct its mid-level attorneys in the best use of language in the preparation and presentation of statements on behalf of their clients. The firm no doubt wanted a recruit who had the willingness to understand the multiple aspects of issues that the law and cases in law may address, as well as backgrounds in law, writing, speech, and instruction, and perhaps logic, philosophy, and psychology.

It wanted an employee with the sensitivity to the multidimensionality of subjects, as well as the ability to appreciate and develop multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives on them. Bearing this and similar needs in mind, one of the themes in the Honors College is the “multidimensionality” of subjects and the development of “interdisciplinary” perspectives on and approaches to them.

The Justification for Local/National/Global:

We live in the Age of the Global – an age in which community, corporate and governmental players operate in local, national, and global arenas. Examples include the Gates Foundation (philanthropic); Google and British Petroleum (corporate); the Peace Corps (governmental). It is important that students prepare to help themselves and these players operate in all of these arenas. Thus one theme in the Honors College is the simultaneous location of subjects and expression of attributes of them in local, national and global contexts.

The Justification of Ethics/Aesthetics/Philosophy:

With the help of trade, travel, the media and other means of exchange, human beings interact constantly with each other, often across thousands of miles. Thus it is important that they employ terms of reference that apply within and across various locations. One of the themes in the Honors College – Ethics/-Aesthetics/Philosophy – covers these terms of reference. It focuses on principles (or interpretations of a philosophy) that served one “blameless” society for millennia and may guide relations today—the Seven Principles for the Age of Globalization and Globalism (SPAGGS) that include (1) Truth; (2) Justice; (3) Propriety; (4) Harmony; (5) Balance; (6) Order; and (7) Reciprocity.

The Justification for computer and multimedia skills:

The world increasingly expects content that includes text, photos, graphics, audio and video, as well as the distribution of this content. For this reason, a central component of the Honors College program is the development of the skills of students in the application of computers in empirical research, and the preparation and dissemination of multimedia reports, presentations and portfolios through traditional and contemporary means – especially the Internet.

Coverage of Themes and Skills

One aspect of the “relations” component of the program is the offering by departments of sections of existing courses that integrate the themes and skills. One is the selection by heads of departments of instructors who teach the sections. And another is the conducting by the College of workshops and seminars in which specialists in education train these instructors.

The courses include Freshman Seminar, in which students receive an introduction to the academy, the University, the College, and the themes and skills. They also include General Education courses in which students receive more in-depth introductions to the themes and skills: for the Interdisciplinarity theme, courses in English and in Speech Communication; for the Local/National/Global theme, courses in history and in political science; for the Ethics/-Aesthetics/Philosophy theme, courses in art, music, literature and philosophy. For the use of computers in research and preparation of multimedia portfolios, reports and presentations, the course is Introduction to Computer Science.

In addition to the Freshman Seminar and others in General Education, courses come from the majors or specialties of students. At the junior and senior levels, students incorporate the themes in two courses in the major or specialty and another outside the major or specialty. Students are responsible for selecting the appropriate courses, negotiating agreements on this incorporation with the instructors for these courses, working with the instructors to prepare “proposals” that center on the incorporation of the themes, and securing the approval of these agreements from the College. Students also ensure that each “proposal” course in the major or specialty principally covers one theme, and especially, that the sum of the junior level and senior level courses covers the aggregate of the themes. This is consistent with the call from the National Collegiate Honors Council that honors education spring from a “learner-directed environment and philosophy” (Definition of Honors Education, 2017). It also is consistent with the call from the Council that honors education cultivate the formation of, and relations within, a “close community of students and faculty” (Definition of Honors Education, 2017).

In addition to Freshman Seminar, General Education courses and major/specialty courses, students complete a capstone course that could be an internship, or a research or creative or professional project. That course ideally would be a capstone the major or specialty requires, and the agreement on it would call for it to incorporate the aggregate of the themes and the skills. Thus students could meet their major or specialty and Honors requirements with these capstones. The College supports the meeting of the junior, senior and capstone requirements by publishing an often-revised list of recommended junior, senior and capstone courses.

In each course students take after they have completed the computer science course, they take advantage of available opportunities to employ the skills they secure from the course in the conducting of research, in the preparation of related reports, and in the making of related presentations.

In the capstone courses, they not only incorporate the aggregate of the themes, they also utilize their computer skills, in the conducting of appropriate research, and utilize their “production” skills in the preparing of related multimedia reports, the making of related multimedia presentations, and the preparing of multimedia resumes and portfolios in which they highlight their achievements, objectives and ideals. This is consistent with the proposal from the National Collegiate Honors Council that honors education be “broader, deeper, or more complex than comparable learning experiences typically found at institutions of higher education” (Definition of Honors Education, 2017). Of course, they could utilize the resumes and portfolios in their attainment of such major objectives as admission to graduate school and provision of service to their community or corporate or governmental employers.

With this structure, it is possible to offer admission to two categories of students: the Full Program Scholars who enter as freshmen and take the Freshman Seminar, General Education, major or specialty, and capstone, courses; and Departmental Scholars who enter as transfer students, sophomores or juniors and take only the junior and senior specialty courses and the capstone course. This is consistent with the call from the National Collegiate Honors Council for program elements such as “articulation agreements by which honors graduates from two-year programs who meet previously agreed-upon requirements are accepted into four-year honors programs” (see Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program, 2017).

Enriching Activities and Services

Study Abroad

Since the College claims it prepares students to be “exemplary citizens of the “Age of the Global,” one part of the program includes study abroad by students. They may meet its proposal course requirement by taking junior and senior courses for which they receive credit for the study abroad experience. The Director of International Programs each year describes the opportunities the office provides for that experience, and the newsletter of the College reports on the students who have had that experience. One report on one student in the Semester at Sea Program includes a photo of the student with Bishop Desmond Tutu.

Organizations

Even though students may not study abroad, they would have exposure to and collaboration in settings that are international or global in focus. Students observe, or serve in, one organization with a local focus in one semester, another with a national focus in a second semester, and another with a global focus in a third semester. This opportunity comes after they complete the Honors College section of Freshman Seminar and the Honors College section of one General Education course that covers the Local/National/Global theme.

One of the major emphases in this exposure and collaboration is the development of their ability, as the “mission in context” says, “to secure the most good from their communities, contribute the most good to their communities, cultivate a certain balance among their memberships in multiple communities, and promote the best relations among these communities.”

Lecture Series

Observers may call the Frederick Douglass Lectures series an activity or service, but it has an important place in the academic part of the program in the College. The lectures provide opportunities for their presenters to help students elaborate the themes in the College, connect them to observations or experiences or environments outside those in classrooms, and inspire students to clarify and apply them in all of their environments.

Toward that end, Lectures presenters have local and national and global stature, eminent scholarly or professional or administrative records, and illustrative and inspiring biographies. Before the presentations, the faculty administrators in the College conduct primers in which they prepare students for them. During the presentations, students listen to the presenters and engage them in discussions, with a special focus on the connections to the themes.

The presenters of international stature have included Hon. Teta Banks, then president of the United Nations Association, and Consul General for Liberia, in Houston; Dr. Charles S. Finch, former Director of International Health at Morehouse School of Medicine, and expert on the thousands-of-years-old history of Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine in Africa; and Dr. Molefi Kete Asante, principal enunciator and elaborator of the concept of Afrocentricity, current chairperson of the Department of Africology and African American Studies at Temple University, developer of the first doctoral program in African American Studies in the United States, and eminent Afrocentric scholar.

United National Association Banquet

One other opportunity to enrich the understanding of the themes is the participation of students in banquets that celebrate the United Nations and the related United Nations Association (UNA). The organizer is the Houston UNA, but participants include members and officials of United Nations associations from Houston, Texas, the United States, and the world. Here, the students and their advisors receive information, insights and pointers that they apply in courses, activities and services, and especially, the interpretation of the Local/National/Global theme and the Ethics/Aesthetics/Philosophy theme.

Research Week

Yet another opportunity for the enhancement of the incorporation of the themes is the participation of the College in Research Week. One faculty administrator at the College serves as its member on the committee that plans Research Week. The program includes presentations on the research of students in the College to persons of the College, University and general communities. The preparation and presentation of these reports affords students opportunities for interpretation and application of the themes and skills. The presentation of the reports, in the College auditorium, helps the College recruit new students, inspire fresh students, provide points of reference to more advanced students, attract contributors to and supporters of the College, and introduce the University community and general community to the ultimate citizen of the “Age of the Global” the College strives to cultivate.

Program and African Peoples

This report describes the academic and related aspects of the program with language that seems “universal,” as it does not stress the fact that it is in a “historically-Black” institution. But the academic center of the program, and the elements that support that center, would find expression in developmental activities, evaluative activities, co-curricular activities, student services and institutional or professional or community relations specific to HBCUs. This is obvious from the introduction to the themes that the students receive in Freshman Seminar.

Here, the theme of Interdisciplinarity and the related multidisciplinary provide the frame for the study of the more than 10 categories of evidence that the late Senegalese multigenius Cheikh Anta Diop (1981, 1982) developed and that lead to the conclusion that the Kemetu (“ancient Egyptians”) were People of the African Continent, and the more than 10 categories of evidence that the late Guyanese polymath Ivan van Sertima (1976, 1992, 1998) developed and that lead to the conclusion that people of the African continent came to the Americas across the Atlantic over millennia. Indeed, the experience of investigating and understanding these treatises provides students with the opportunity to apply the theme in this investigating and understanding, to propose and explore the application of interdisciplinarity in their other courses, and to propose and explore the application of it in their observations, experiences, and anticipated scholarly, professional and service projects that focus on their ethnic group.

The theme of Local/National/Global provides the frame for the discussion of the valuation of the contributions of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the views of people of African descent in their immediate area (local), people of African descent in the United States (national), and members of the world African community in general (“world” or “global”), and the multiple and revealing relationships among these valuations.

It also provides the frame for discussion of the valuation in the opinions of people of African descent in the United States (“local” or “proximate”), people in the United States in general (“national”), and people in the world at large (“world” or “global”), and the multiple and also revealing relationships among these valuations. Thus it helps students develop an appreciation of their simultaneous location in both the world African community and the general world community, thus contributing to their valuation of the world African community and their consideration of the complexities of their various and related locations within an aggregate we may call “global social space.”

The theme of Ethics/Aesthetics/Philosophy provides the frame for the discussion of the comparison of the emphasis on the “individual” (the life of, the liberty of, and the pursuit of happiness by, the single individual) in the preamble to the constitution of the United States, the emphasis on relations and hence the collective in what some call the seven “principles” but experts call the seven “interpretations” of the African philosophy of MAAT (they include truth, justice, propriety, harmony, balance, reciprocity, and order, and are the subjects in many sources, such as Karenga, 1993), and the merging of these two philosophies of life and living in what the United Nations calls the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This provides the opportunity for students to develop an appreciation of the advancement of ideas and life and living among their ancestors, the value of these ideas in ancient and recent and current history, the role of these ideas in the “civilizing” of humanity (such as the utilization of them in the “civilizing” Civil Rights Movement in the United States), and especially, the value of them both in the “civilizing” of the realization of “globalization” and the “civilizing” of the related aspiration to and ultimate realization of “globalism.”

Thus the course provides the opportunity for the introduction of each of the themes in the process of stimulating knowledge of, understanding of, attachment of value to, examination of implications of, and imagining of further study of, issues pertaining African Americans, other peoples of African descent, and peoples of the African continent – members of the world African community. This is consistent with the proposal from the NCHC that honors units “provide (educational) opportunities that are appropriately tailored to fit the institution’s culture and mission” (Definition of Honors Education, nchchonors.org, 2017).

Commendations and Recommendations

The themes and skills draw the attention of many visitors to and observers of the College. One reason is that these visitors and observers find these aspects to set the program in the College apart from the programs in other honors units. Another is that these aspects of the program appear to them to be critical in the preparation of students for today, tomorrow and the day after in the Age of the Global. These views seem to be characteristic of parents who urge their children to enter the College so that they may pursue the program in it.

When the University revised its mission and the related goals and objectives in 2014, the dean of the College served as a member of the committee that represented all academic units in the University and that wrote the new mission. After considering the mission statements that emerged early in the life of the committee, the dean borrowed from the mission of the College in the conceiving of another mission statement, he and the Dean of the School of Law enhanced that alternative and proposed the result to the committee, and the committee selected the ideas at the core of their proposal as the cornerstone of the mission statement it recommended to the University. Thus the statement of the mission and the related academic core of themes and skills in the Thomas F. Freeman Honors College proved to be consistent with, and even served to inform, the new statement of the mission of the University.

In preparation for an official visit to Texas Southern University in 2012, one high-ranking administrator at the Thurgood Marshall College Fund reviewed the program in the College and compared it with those in honors units at several other historically-Black colleges and universities. In a meeting with the Dean and faculty administrators at the College, the official volunteered that the program in the College prepares students for positions that would require that even the most recent recruits perform their duties and connect with colleagues in diverse parts of the world. With this in mind, the official called the program “unique.”

Conclusion

The themes and skills that anchor the academic component of the program, and the activities and services and relations that support that academic component, seem to have at least three significant features: they are responsive, in that they speak to the needs of students and the “age” in which the students live; they are innovative, in that they combine ideals and policies and practices that the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) spells out and that speak to the need for the distinctiveness that the members of the organization emphasize; and they are distinctive, in that they do not seem to appear on the web site of such an organization as the National Association of African American Honors Programs (NAAAHP). The mission, themes and skills also are universal, as they apply to honors units in HBCUs, in institutions around the nation, and in institutions around the world. And, those honors units that adopt the mission, themes and skills are likely to cultivate their students into ideal citizens, specialists and leaders, within the universe that may be the world African community or the general global community, for today, tomorrow, and the day after – for the Age of the Global.

Selected Related Works

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