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Virtual Honors Forum

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Abstract: This article describes how one honors leadership team adapted a traditional in-person Forum to a digital platform during the coronavirus crisis. Integrating a variety of asynchronous and synchronous remote technologies created a positive virtual learning experience for honors practitioners and students.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; virtual learning environments (VLE); courseware; student engagement; Frederick Community College (MD)—Honors College

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One of the hallmark experiences of honors learning at Frederick Community College (FCC) in Frederick, MD, is participating in the Honors Forum each semester. The Forum is a mini-conference on campus in which students are required to participate whether enrolled in an honors class or attempting to complete an honors contract. There is a registration desk where presenters, faculty moderators, and attendees pick up a name badge and program. In concurrent sessions, presenters, using PowerPoint slides, have eight to ten minutes to share their project findings and five minutes for questions from the audience. The experience mimics an actual conference, and students learn by doing.

Although required, students consistently praise the Honors Forum as one of their favorite experiences, even after admitting that presenting their work to strangers at a campus conference is “a little scary.” They discover they can generate new knowledge or analysis by “going deeper, broader, or more complex” in their studies, and they figure out how to share it with others. From the fall 2019 Honors Forum, sixteen students were selected to present at honors conferences (earning five awards), and another three presented at an international conference (via Skype) with Kuban State University in Russia.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic closed our campus in March 2020. Within forty-eight hours, classes moved online. After the initial shock, students and faculty began to ask, “What are we going to do about the Honors Forum?”

The honors leadership team assessed the situation, adapted to the necessity of being online, solved problems, and focused on our end goal: to continue giving students a meaningful honors learning experience. We created the Virtual Honors Forum.

Fortunately, our team included an expert Blackboard user who set up a discussion board for each presentation. The team also produced a welcome video, generated how-to instructions, sent out emails, and helped students with technical difficulties. The students worked with their faculty mentors to submit their projects, abstracts, and pre-recorded PowerPoint presentations with a voiceover narration and a transcript embedded in the notes of the slides. Some of the students who participated video-recorded their presentations. Viewers clicked on the presentation link and then could leave a message or comment for the presenter on the discussion board.

Feedback on the Virtual Honors Forum in spring 2020 was overwhelmingly positive. “This is a very impressive accomplishment and an effective alternative to a face-to-face forum,” said Brian Stipelman, Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of Liberal Arts. “I appreciated how much easier it was to see the excellent work being presented. In this virtual format I was able to experience and engage with far more presentations than I could in the traditional face-to-face forum” (President’s Newsletter).

We built on that success in fall 2020. Every student was required to participate in the asynchronous forum with a pre-recorded presentation in Blackboard. In addition, students could opt to do a live presentation via Zoom. The live forum was organized like a conference, with a video welcome from the honors coordinator, concurrent sessions, and a keynote speaker whose talk was open to the whole campus community, basically replicating the traditional in-person forum. Faculty and students praised the experience, observing that the pre-recorded and live presentations required different skills and provided distinct experiences.

We established three keys to setting up the Virtual Honors Forum:

1. *Using the skills of our faculty and staff.* One member of our team, Lisa DiDonato, had the expertise to set up the Virtual Honors Forum structure in Blackboard during the truncated spring semester. Her knowledge allowed us to respond quickly, illustrating that people and the talents they possess are the foundation of any endeavor.

2. *Using our experience.* We already knew how to organize the Honors Forum as a campus learning event. The bulk of the work each semester fell to three individuals who operated around other duties to make the Forum happen. Faculty mentors could focus on their students, and we provided instructions with screen shots on how to do voiceover recordings. In the fall semester, students had adapted to Zoom in their classes, and the program had three honors peer mentors (experienced second-year student volunteers) available to support students.
3. *Using institutional resources.* We drew on existing college resources at no cost to the program, which operates on a shoestring budget. The college already had Blackboard in place and purchased Zoom licenses for virtual classes in 2020–2021. Further, the college provided professional development over the summer to train all faculty to teach virtually or online and created a tutorial for students on how to use Blackboard.

Much of what we did worked well. Through hard work and a strong commitment to honors learning, we gave students a valuable learning experience. The two presentation techniques (pre-recorded and live) represent current best practice. Our Virtual Honors Forum has prepared students to present at the Northeast Regional Honors Council and the Maryland Collegiate Honors Council virtual conferences in 2021 with pre-recorded and live options.

Included in what did not go well was that many students were not able to participate in spring 2020. The sudden switch to an online environment caught everybody off guard, and some students were unable to make the transition. Access to computers and internet connectivity limited the level of engagement for even more students. A related problem has been the ability to complete honors projects. The physical closure of the campus and nearby research centers effectively ended several ongoing honors projects in spring 2020. Even in the fall semester, we had to reconceptualize what was possible with projects. Lab experiments and archival research were no longer options, and students had to rely on accessible online sources. Finally, change is difficult even under the best of circumstances, and the pandemic made everything more challenging. A new way of doing things necessitated new setups and instructions as well as ongoing email communications, constant reassurance, and encouragement. We adopted the British slogan from World War II: Keep Calm and Carry On.

Going forward, we want to improve the Forum learning experience in the following ways:

- Keep the asynchronous pre-recorded presentation as a requirement since it teaches an important skill and increases accessibility.
- Keep the virtual live presentation option for online learners and students who have medical conditions.
- Resume in-person live presentations when safe to do so incorporating the virtual components, e.g., a keynote speaker and strand of virtual presentations.
- Open the Blackboard site early in the semester so students and faculty can see the setup and access resource folders.
- With permission, add examples of successful presentations to the resource folders.
- Maintain a digital program to allow for last-minute changes, eliminate printing costs, and allow students to download the final copy as a souvenir.
- Continue to adapt: for example, in 2021–2022 the college will no longer support Zoom, and we will need to learn Microsoft Teams as a virtual platform, requiring another culture shift and training for faculty, staff, and students.

In summary, necessity spurred an innovation that became a best practice we plan to keep beyond the pandemic. Moreover, it prompted us to model traits of honors learning such as intellectual engagement, problem solving, creativity, and leadership that we hope our students will emulate.

REFERENCE

President's Newsletter. Frederick Community College, June/July 2020.

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