



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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EVERYONE WINS: NURSING STUDENTS GAIN HONORS TRACK WHILE RETURNING VETERANS GAIN ACADEMIC SUPPORT

It didn't happen often, but, when it did, it was always disappointing...Here's how it would play out....A nursing student would be registering for classes and would express the need to take just one more honors course in order to receive recognition as an Honors' Scholar at graduation. Unfortunately, my colleagues and I would have to say that the nursing curriculum was not able to offer any honors courses.

For several years, the Middlesex Community College (MCC) Nursing Department has been interested in implementing an honors course for students. Clearly, we attract students who meet the MCC honors' criteria of maintaining a B average and having earned 12 credits towards graduation. Students sometimes inquired whether the nursing program offered any honors courses, especially those students who had taken two honors courses while enrolled in the pre-requisites for the nursing program and now needed a third honors course to receive honors designation on their college transcript. However, like many college career programs, coursework is rigorous in the nursing program, and the curriculum is already filled with content required for accreditation. Consequently, while the reasons to establish an honors course were compelling, the demands of the nursing curriculum made it difficult to execute. Yet, the nursing faculty continued to explore this possibility by joining the Honors Committee at MCC, and the journey to the solution began.

The Honors Committee members and the leadership were very welcoming to the nursing faculty, and they carefully listened to the roadblocks that we had encountered. Then they suggested that, rather than developing an *honors course*, the solution may be developing an *Honors Option Contract* that would tie to an existing nursing course. (This would require that a

student, who is enrolled in a regular course, contract to work independently with the faculty member teaching the course. The focus would be to explore the course content on an advanced level by exchanging ideas as well as participating in additional readings, writings, and/or projects. Additionally, in order to apply for an Honors Option Contract, the student must have a B average and have earned 12 credits toward graduation. To designate the course as honors on the student's transcript, the course must be completed in a timely manner with a grade of B or better. Eureka!!! An Honors Option Contract was indeed the solution!!!

The second step was collaborating with faculty and administrators. Both nursing faculty and administration supported integrating an Honors Option Contract into the nursing program and determined that it could be implemented in the last course of the nursing program: Nursing Care of the Adult II.

The third step was selecting a project—for example, a service learning project that could be adapted to ensure that it met the criteria of the Honors Option Contract. We decided that the Mind/Body Supported Education Project, established in 2005 as an enrichment experience for student nurses, could be adapted to meet the criteria of an Honors Option Contract. It is noteworthy that the Mind/Body Supported Education Project provided an additional supervised experience for student nurses to collaborate with veterans who wanted to return to college. It was essentially a supported education program that taught veterans techniques to deal successfully with stress in the academic setting. Since this project required the student nurses to teach evidenced-based coping techniques, it clearly met the criteria for an Honors Option Contract.

The fourth and final step was tying the course objectives of Nursing Care of the Adult II to the Honors Option Contract and then developing tasks. Examples of two of the objectives are:

1. Synthesize knowledge from pharmacology, nutrition, the biopsychosocial sciences, and previous nursing courses when providing care to the veterans.
2. Explore resources that are available at MCC that



will provide academic and emotional support for the veterans.

Examples of two of the tasks:

1. With supervision, conduct an informal needs assessment to determine the health education needs of veterans around the issue of stress in the academic setting.
2. Communicate at least once a week with the nursing professor in person or by email/ phone.

Who Benefits?

We hope that this is a win/ win/ win/ win for students, veterans, faculty, and the college community!

1. Students benefit because they have an enriching experience that fosters creativity and critical thinking. They will receive honors credit on their transcript. Additionally, they may wish to include this additional experience on their résumés.
2. Veterans benefit because they have a supported educational experience that fosters academic success and, possibly, mitigate some of the stress and trauma that many returning veterans experience.
3. Faculty members who supervise Honors Option Contracts benefit because they are enriched by the experience. An area still being addressed is providing concrete rewards to faculty who agree to teach these courses. Some ideas that have been suggested are “workload recognition” and stipends.
4. The community college benefits in that it is a marketing tool to attract:
 - a. qualified students in career programs (e.g., nursing students) who may be drawn to a community college that offers an Honors Option Contract course
 - b. qualified faculty members who stave off “burn-out” by enjoying the challenges of teaching an Honors Option Contract Course.

Lessons Learned

Involve everyone who is interested! This innovation has great potential for enriching the college community. Amazingly, our journey to develop an honors track for nursing led to the outcome bonus of supporting our veterans from combat to college!

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