

Civic Honors Program at Johnson County Community College

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Introduction

The word “community” in the community college carries an ever-increasing importance. Institutions of higher education have a responsibility to build bridges that will connect students, faculty, and staff with the community by mobilizing a base of volunteers. Graduation with Civic Honors is a simple idea: At the culmination of an academic career, a student receives recognition for academic development, service learning, and civic engagement within the community. Johnson County Community College (JCCC), a founding member of the Kansas Campus Compact, has taken the steps to formalize student recognition for civic engagement via graduation with Civic Honors.

Civic Engagement

Expanding the scope of a historically successful tradition, such as a higher education academic honors program, into a new Civics Honors program requires planning and development. Johnson County Community College (JCCC) already has a well-established Service Learning program and a civic engagement component in place through Phi Theta Kappa (a national honor society for two-year schools) and special recognition like the Outstanding Student Award. Thus, the concept of developing a graduation with Civic Honors program came naturally. The JCCC Civic Honors program encourages and recognizes students’ exemplary efforts and achievements – civic responsibility, public service, and community engagement. JCCC regards its relationship with the community as very important. “Community” is more than just a part of its name – it affirms the college’s commitment to a sustained partnership with Johnson County.

About Johnson County and JCCC

With more than 34,000 students enrolled in credit and continuing education classes each semester, JCCC is the state’s third largest institution of higher education and

the largest of the 19 community colleges in the State of Kansas. In Kansas, state legislation enables communities to create college districts. Every college district received support from both state funding and local taxes. In 1968-69, Johnson County Community College was founded to serve the residents of Johnson County.

To help put the size of the community college in context, Johnson County, Kansas encompasses 21 incorporated cities and nine townships, all suburbs of Kansas City, Missouri. The United States Census estimated the county's current population to be approximately 486,515, and projections suggest the population will reach well over half a million by 2005. The county attracts an average of 10,000 new residents and 12,500 new jobs each year and accounts for more than six of ten new businesses in the Kansas City Metropolitan Area.

JCCC is a vibrant and growing community college that offers a full-range of undergraduate credit courses that form the first two years of most college curricula. In addition, more than 50 one- and two-year career and certificate programs prepare students to enter the job market in high-employment fields.

Beginning the Journey toward Graduation with Civic Honors

Today, institutions of higher education in the nation are looking for programs that enhance civic skills and increase civic involvement on the part of students, faculty, and staff. Community visionaries are aware of the importance of building sustainable models that strengthen the community.¹ At JCCC, community leaders were instrumental in defining and establishing a new graduation with Civic Honors program.

Elaine Perilla, the chair of the college's board of trustees, is also the executive director of the Volunteer Center of Johnson County. Elaine demonstrates her continuing support of civic engagement through countless projects, including being an advocate for this program, and participating in organized events such as the Campus Compact meeting held on the JCCC campus last spring. Elaine Perilla noted, "Graduation with Civic Honors provides formal recognition of the community college connection with the community. More importantly, it will instill an awareness and commitment to civic engagement from our students." Perilla accurately describes the importance of strengthening the relationship between the community and the community college. Elaine

Perilla is an example of a person who is willing to attend meetings and be a voice for strengthening community. Bringing people together requires a base of strong advocates willing to champion collaboration on the issue of civic engagement to realize the benefits of community opportunity.

Graduation with Civic Honors is a simple idea: At the culmination of an academic career, a student receives recognition for being well-rounded in academics and community service. The award recognizes students' efforts in public service and community engagement. At JCCC, Civic Honors students will receive special recognition at the college's commencement ceremonies in May.

Implementing the Graduation with Civic Honors Program

However, it is always a journey to implement a program of this significance on any campus. JCCC's journey began early in 2004. The first step toward implementation was the creation of a campus-wide taskforce that examined the concept of graduation with Civic Honors. Taskforce stakeholders included faculty, staff, students, and a member of the college's board of trustees. Several meetings, e-mail conversations, and brainstorming sessions resulted in discussions of several concerns, including the following:

- Whether a minimum GPA would be required of students
- The use of the word "honors" as opposed to "distinction" or "service"
- The difference between civic responsibility and leadership in the community
- Whether students could work for for-profit companies, religious institutions, or partisan political organizations
- Whether service had to be strictly volunteer, and not paid work
- Whether service before enrollment in a class would count toward Civic Honors

After much discussion, the taskforce agreed that no minimum GPA would be required – civic engagement would be encouraged among all students. "Honors" was the term selected, even though it bore implications of academic honors. Leadership would be encouraged, and students would be required to work as non-paid volunteers for nonprofit, nonreligious, nonpolitical entities.

Ultimately, the taskforce implemented a plan that produced a pilot program resulting in the first recognition of Civic Honors for spring 2005 graduates. The taskforce developed these requirements to qualify for graduation with Civic Honors:

- Service with community nonprofit organizations, agencies, schools, or facilities providing care, support, or advocacy services
- Completion of a class that incorporates community-based learning
- Participation in leadership or development activities in at least two of the following by:
 - Enrolling in leadership and organization skills training provided by campus or in the community on topics such as grant writing, diversity, communications, or fundraising
 - Taking a leadership role in a JCCC organization, activity, or project, or
 - Assuming responsibility as part of a community project or initiative
- Preparation of a final project that integrates academic and community endeavors, such as a reflection paper, a PowerPoint presentation, or a portfolio

For example, a student and instructor may agree that as part of the student's academic pursuits in class, the student would devote 30 hours of service to help an organization such as the American Red Cross, Habitat for Humanity, Meals on Wheels, Safehome (a shelter for battered women), or the Special Olympics, to name only a few. The students would also offer reflections on what that experience meant.

All stakeholders win in this process because a student who has successfully completed the Civic Honors program has become a vibrant part of building a strong community through civic participation and volunteering. The positive nature of this message is that an institution of higher education can attempt to spread civic engagement while not excluding any actor or organizations from participation. That is the basic assumption behind positive community building, designed to help develop a stronger society as a whole. Organizations within the community are capable of broadening the concept of civil society by developing untapped potential.

This idea can quickly become a reality if leaders have the right motivation and intentions to see a world of possibility.² It is possible to motivate individuals by focusing on their civic attitude and participation within the community.³ The college conceives of "civic learning" as that which contributes to student preparation for community or public involvement in society. As described by the Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, JCCC envisioned a:

"robust conceptualization of civic participation, one that involves more than activities such as voting and obeying the law. A deeper conceptualization not only encompasses familiar manifestations of civic participation, but also aspiring to and realizing concrete contributions to one's local community and beyond.

Service-learning seeks to prepare students with knowledge, skills, values, and propensities for active involvement in their future communities.”⁴

Therefore, it is important to start designing a Civic Honors program with that end in mind. One of the first steps is identifying how the program can develop to match the vision of what is possible.⁵ The ability to take the concept of a Civic Honors program and transform that vision into a reality requires leadership and innovation that transcends the walls of the college or university and strengthens the social fabric of the community as a whole.

Benefits of Graduation with Civic Honors

Increasing civic participation begins to mend the disconnect between individuals and the community. Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone*, eloquently described the problems of decreasing civic participation.⁶ The benefit of an active Civic Honors program is organized student recognition for participation in a program that facilitates active participation within the community. The goal of the Civic Honors program is to help spread the ethic of volunteerism fostering lifelong connections to the community.

Mr. Dick Bond, former president of the Kansas State Senate and current president of the Kansas Board of Regents, accurately describes the value of a strong base in the community. “During the course of my career in politics, I learned that successful politicians had a base of strong volunteer organizations. The same lesson about success applies to the benefit of organized volunteering in the community. Graduation with Civic Honors will benefit the community by actively building a stronger base of volunteers in the community.” Dick Bond has agreed to be the commencement speaker for the first class of Civic Honors graduates in spring 2005.

The students at that graduation are part of the tangible benefits of graduation with Civic Honors. The taskforce developed a description of the benefits that graduates with Civic Honors would incur. The task forces determined that by participating in JCCC’s new Civic Honors award program, students would:

- Gain insight and experience with civic responsibility
- Develop contacts and ties within the community
- Develop civic skills and values

- Demonstrate to employers a dedication to the community that sets these applicants apart
- Show admissions officers at four-year schools the service learning that sets their applications apart
- Develop leadership skills that can be used in the community and on the job
- Increase their community capacity and commitment

Describing the Graduation with Civic Honors program would not be complete without quoting several actual JCCC student thoughts on civic engagement. These quotes help provide the perspective necessary to think as a student being exposed to the benefits of civic engagement and learning of the lifelong opportunities, friendships, and benefits associated with being active in the community.

- “Through serving others, I have explored new frontiers, acquired skills, developed flexibility, solidified my values, improved my relationships and valued the frustrating, disappointing, confusing, and exhausting times in serving, just as much as I have valued the exciting, challenging, motivating, and rewarding moments.”
- “I can no longer imagine my life without some form of service. In visiting with the people that I serve, I not only learned a little of my worth, but of theirs as well.”
- “Each person I worked with brought with them great life experiences, and I learned as much as I could.”
- “I learned that we must work together in order to make our communities thrive. Politicians can’t change the communities, but we can.”

The bigger picture includes the foundations of not only community, but also of the individuals within that community. An empowered population is a powerful population. That power extends well beyond the sphere of influence of each individual and fosters the collective sense of belonging to a community.

The Civic Honors Call to Action

The taskforce believed that the Civic Honors designation should not only affect students but also be meaningful to the community. For the community, the program would:

- Offer an opportunity to address issues within the community via grass root members and emerging leaders.
- Instill a personal motivation among adult students and develop advocates within the community.
- Grow strong leadership within in the community for long-term success.

- Foster volunteerism and develop a pool of well-informed, well-trained individuals willing to participate.
- Address community needs and build a network of volunteers to bring about change.
- Allow community organizations to address real problems in a grass-roots way.

Johnson County Community College's implementation of the Civic Honors program creates strong advocates within the community who are interested in seeing action. Spreading the message is part of starting any movement within the community. It is more than a message—it is a call to action asking anyone who cares about the community to work for its benefit.

For a Civic Honors program to be successful, it is imperative to have an effective concept for design. A unique opportunity exists for leaders to become effective designers during the development of a Civic Honors program.⁷ Part of designing an effective program is developing the capacity for collaboration. Involving as many organizations as possible is important. Designing the program to be able to expand and work with other organizations is essential to the long-term acceptance of a Civic Honors program within the community. A program like JCCC's, created with input from community leaders and requiring both hours of community service as well as reflection on the meaning of that service, provides just that.

Building a Civic Honors program designed to facilitate collaboration and make connections within the community contributes to building a stronger community. Organizations have to adopt the mantra “never fear collaboration” to be successful in getting individuals to work together for the benefit of the community.

Whenever it is possible to allow collaboration without extensive cost to the actors involved and without substantial risk, that opportunity should be embraced and encouraged. When organizations are deciding to implement a program, three issues come to the forefront of the decision-making process: Is the program economic, efficient, and equitable?⁸ Graduation with Civic Honors is a program that provides a potentially economic, efficient, and equitable solution to increasing civic engagement in the community through increasing community awareness and volunteering.

Now is the time to take an active role in building a stronger community for the future. The graduation with Civic Honors program is a step in the right direction

providing an example of a practical solution to a very challenging problem. If a message could be associated with the Civic Honors program, then it would be about leaders who realize a world of possibility exists, because that recognition means change is possible. The best possible course of action would come from a solution that is economic, efficient, and equitable. Community leaders also have to consider that building a stronger society through collaboration also has a secondary effect. It changes the style of leadership within the community. Civic engagement is a nonpartisan topic that community leaders can use to work with other individuals within the community, which helps foster continued collaboration by building networks of trust. That network of trust transcends any one program and strengthens the community as a whole.

Footnotes and References:

¹ David Osborne and Ted Gaebler. 1992. *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming the Public Sector*. Addison-Wesley Publishing Company. Pages 1-24.

² Kimberly Stanton. 1999. *The Revival of Civil Society: Global and Comparative Perspectives*. Article: *Promoting Civil Society: Reflections on Concepts and Practice*. New York, New York: St. Martin's Press. Edited by Michael G. Schechter. Pages 243-252.

³ Benjamin Barber. 1984. *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*. Los Angeles, California: University of California Press. Page 117-120.

⁴ Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, *Service Learning Course Design Workbook*, Summer 2001. Page 38.

⁵ Stephen R. Covey. 1989. *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic*. New York: Simon & Schuster. Page 95.

⁶ Robert D. Putnam. 1995. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

⁷ James G. Clawson. 1999. *Level Three Leadership: Getting Below the Surface* Second Edition. New Jersey: Prentice Hall. Page 209. Clawson provides the foundation for how to lead through design and gives strategy for individual leadership in the development of programs.

⁸ H. George Frederickson. 1980. *New Public Administration*. University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1980. Selected by Choice, the professional librarians review journal, as one of The Outstanding Academic Books of 1981-82. Also published in German, Japanese, Korean and Indonesian. While attending the University of Kansas Nels had the chance to take a class from H. George Frederickson called concepts of civil society. During the course of that class the question, "What could colleges do to get people involved within the community?" Several years later Nels is still advocating graduation with Civic Honors.

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