

Section B

COMMUNITY COLLEGES

An Honors Education at a Bargain-Basement Price

BY ELYSE ASHBURN

IT IS HARD to decide whether the atmosphere in Room 202 of the Humanities Building feels more like a twentysomething house party or a high-school homeroom. Probably the latter, since the young adults here at Montgomery College, a two-year institution in a suburb of Washington, are clutching lattes rather than glasses of merlot. Garb runs the gamut from hooded sweatshirts to T-shirts stamped with witticisms like “Music Happens.” Outside, it is an altogether uninspiring autumn day, cool and overcast.

Mary T. Furgol, a freckled professor with short hair and a voice that makes history sound like a lullaby, is at the front of the room. The topics of the day in this honors course are slavery and the displacement of American Indians.

Conversation soon turns to the narrative by Olaudah Equiano, who writes that he was an African-born slave and abolitionist who bought his freedom but later participated in the slave trade himself.

“So, it was just a job then?” one student asks.

“Well, let’s start there and keep thinking about it,” says Ms. Furgol, director of the Montgomery Scholars Honors Program, one of the college’s honors programs. “OK? Because I don’t know that there is one answer.”

It is the kind of open-ended response that one might expect from a professor at Wellesley College rather than one at a community college. Long the workhorses of higher education, community colleges have been called on to impart job-specific skills. But as tuition at four-year institutions nears prohibitive levels for some students, and the demands of the global economy become more pressing, community colleges increasingly are focusing on producing creative thinkers as well as skilled workers. And honors programs like Montgomery College’s are leading the way.

Miami Dade College; Pima County Community College, in Tucson; Sinclair Community College, in Dayton; and Valencia Community College, in Orlando, are among others that have well-established honors programs.

“We have this body of students who, for financial reasons, not intellectual ones, can’t go elsewhere,” says Ronald G. Brandolini, director of Valencia’s honors program and a member of the National Collegiate Honors Council, a coal-

ition of college and university officials that promotes honors education. “So what are we doing to serve them?”

Montgomery College, which has almost 33,000 credit students annually and three campuses, has offered honors-level study for about 30 years, much longer than most community colleges. Many community colleges still do not have honors programs, although the concept began spreading in the 1990s. Today community colleges make up about 20 percent of the 800 institutions that belong to the honors council.

The honors programs at Montgomery College got their start, in large part, because faculty members wanted to teach specialized material—the literature of the Caribbean, for example, rather than a general English course. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, students who were seeking a challenge at the college could participate in an honors independent study or could join an honors “module,” a subset of a larger class that would do additional, honors-level work and meet with the professor outside of class.

Then, in the mid-1990s, college officials realized they were not doing enough to meet the needs of high-performing students coming out of the local high schools.

So in 1999 they started Montgomery Scholars, which enrolls 25 students straight from high school each year, pays their tuition and fees for two years, and puts them through a rigorous, interdisciplinary transfer program.

“We wanted students to see that this college offered the same opportunities as other colleges and universities, but at a tremendous tuition rate,” says Carolyn S. Terry, dean of humanities at the college’s Rockville campus and the college-wide dean for honors.

Over the next seven years, the college added three more honors programs. The Sophomore Business Honors Program, at the college’s Macklin Business Institute, which is only open to second-year students, also started in 1999. Students in the program take honors-level economics, statistics, and other core business classes. Graduates, who must have maintained a 3.2 grade-point average, typically transfer to the Robert H. Smith School of Business at the University of Maryland at College Park or to another business school.

The Millennium Scholars Program, which is open to full-time students but geared toward working adults who are often enrolled part time, started at the college’s Germantown cam-

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pus in 2001. Students take two paired honors courses, such as environmental biology and physical geology, each fall.

The Takoma Park Scholars Honors Program, which is also designed for part-time adult students, started in 2003 on the campus for which it is named. Students must take four specified honors courses, such as “Fundamental Concepts of Inquiry in Literature and the Arts,” over four semesters in order to graduate from the program. Students with at least a 3.2 grade-point average can also take honors-level courses without being enrolled in a specific honors program.

The Montgomery Scholars Honors Program, arguably the most selective of the four honors programs, remains the centerpiece of the college’s honors curriculum. Montgomery County is home to a number of elite private high schools and some of the best public schools in the country, and many students coming out of those schools are ready for challenging college-level work but cannot afford to attend a top university for four years.

The county’s median household income was estimated at \$82,187 in 2005— 77.7 percent higher than the national median, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. But that wealth is not evenly distributed, and the county has a growing immigrant population that disproportionately relies on the college for postsecondary education. In fall 2005, about 32 percent of the students at the college that semester were not U.S. citizens, and those 7,200 students came from 176 countries.

Participants in the Montgomery Scholars program also arrive at the college with varied backgrounds: About two-thirds are female, and about two-thirds are members of minority groups, with Hispanics and Asians most heavily represented. The entering class of 2005, now sophomores, had an average unweighted high-school grade-point average of 3.62 and an average SAT score of 1217, out of a possible 1600 points at the time.

“We’re not going to get the very, very top high-school seniors,” Ms. Furgol says. “We tend to get people who have great insight, who know they’re not ready to go off to college or that they can’t for various reasons.”

CHARLES J. OVERLY’S FATHER, a telecommunications manager at Verizon, steered him toward the Montgomery Scholars program. Mr. Overly says his 1320 SAT scores and 3.7 grade-point average at Sherwood High School, in Sandy Spring, Md., were good enough to get him into the University of Maryland at College Park, but finances were a nagging concern. So he somewhat reluctantly went to an open house at Montgomery College for potential scholars. “I was a little bit intrigued, but I was also a little bit skeptical because there’s a certain stigma among high-school students about Montgomery College,” he says. “When it came down to it, though, financially, it was between going to Montgomery College at no cost or Maryland with some financial aid.”

After what he describes as a few weeks of agonizing indecision, Mr. Overly chose Montgomery College, where he graduated in 2005 from both the Montgomery Scholars and the business-honors programs.

This fall he started his junior year as a finance major at Georgetown University, an institution he says was not an option two years ago. Through a combination of need-based grants and scholarships, including two made available through

Montgomery College, he is able to cover about half of his expenses at the university. His parents are paying part of the remainder, so Mr. Overly estimates he will only be about \$16,000 in debt when he graduates.

“From my parents’ perspective, I’m getting a four-year degree for the price of two years,” he says, adding, “I always tell people how much I valued my experience at Montgomery College. My younger sister is in high school now, and I think doing her first two years at MC would be a good option for her.”

Mr. Overly’s experience is not unusual, college officials say. So far, more than 80 percent of the Montgomery Scholars have graduated from Montgomery College, typically with a grade-point average of about 3.5. Almost without fail, such graduates transfer to four-year universities— most commonly to the University of Maryland, but also to institutions like Amherst College, Howard University, and the University of Virginia.

About 225 teenagers applied to join this year’s cohort of 25 Montgomery Scholars, up from about 160 applicants when the program started in 1999.

Once accepted, the students are expected to take three courses together their first year, including a yearlong “Global Perspectives” course taught by a team of history, English, philosophy, and music faculty members. They spend the following summer studying together in England at the University of Cambridge International Summer Schools, on full scholarships paid by Montgomery College. In their second year, they take two more honors courses together and are required to produce a culminating research project.

Current students and alumni describe their experience in the program as overwhelmingly positive, but even so, college officials are still perfecting it. They are also retooling the other honors programs with an eye toward expanding access, and are likely to introduce a collegewide honors-diploma program next fall for students who take at least 15 credit hours at the honors level. Students must now be enrolled in one of the specialized programs to get a diploma that indicates participation in an honors program.

Ms. Furgol is even exploring ways to move the team-teaching concept used in the Montgomery Scholars program into regular courses. “It is a more expensive way to teach,” she says. “It is a greater expense in the short term, yes, but maybe not in the long term if fewer students drop out and more complete on time.”

Far from dropping out, the Montgomery Scholars in Room 202 seem to be at risk of spending too much time together. They show up early to chat, and they hang out together between classes and on the weekends. “It’s not that typical college experience where you have your classes and then your separate drinking buddies,” Allie E. Butts, a first-year scholar explains.

And with that, she is off to have a sandwich with a classmate. ■



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