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Making Room for Honors



Eileen Catte of Severn, a sophomore at Anne Arundel Community College, is taking an environmental science course under a new effort at the school designed to expand the honors program. (Baltimore Sun photo by Amy Davis / September 11, 2008)

Anne Arundel Community College is pursuing several ways to encourage advanced learning experiences

By Susan Gvozdas

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Eileen Catte decided to try out some honors classes at Anne Arundel Community College this semester. But both of the ones she signed up for were canceled.

As she scanned the course catalog for other honors classes, she zeroed in on an environmental science course. Although it wasn't an honors class, Catte was able to make it one under a new honors contract program launched this semester at the college.

Under the honors contract, a teacher and a student must agree to 15 hours of one-to-one instruction as well as a project in addition to the regular coursework. Catte, an avid environmentalist, received approval to design an on-campus rain garden that would prevent erosion by catching storm water runoff.

After the class is finished, she and her teacher hope they can persuade campus officials to plant the garden. Catte said the experience will be more than just a science course. "It's like, wow, activism," Catte said.

The honors contract is just one of several initiatives the college has launched this year to expand an honors programs.

This year, there are eight students in the program, and four others have applied.

Students who earn at least 18 credits in honors classes will receive a new honors certificate. The certificate will grant them automatic entry into the honors programs at Stevenson University and the University of Baltimore, as well as \$1,500 scholarships to both institutions. The University of Baltimore will offer the scholarships as long as money is available, said Kelly Koermer, who oversees the honors program.

Students can earn an honors certificate with 15 credits if they earn an associate's degree in applied science. This applies whether or not they plan to transfer.

The college has set aside a new office for Koermer near the library to run the program, as well as a lounge for honors students only. Officials have designed honors program ball caps, shirts, pens and planners that they are using to promote the program on campus and off.

The freebies are a hit with the high school students that the college is trying to attract, said Katherine Voss, assistant for the honors program.

"The additional PR has really helped get our name out there and really helped us with recruitment," she said.

Although the college has had an honors program for many years, school officials felt that it needed to be built back up again, Voss said.

Jason Mauck, a 20-year-old psychology major from [Edgewater](#), thinks the honors designation will look good on his resume, even if he decides not to transfer to Stevenson or the University of Baltimore.

"You'd have to be a fool to pass it up," he said.

Mauck is working on a contract with his teacher for his class, "History of Homicide." In addition to exploring sensational murder cases, the course covers the history, psychology and legal aspects of homicides.

Mauck and his professor, Robyn Brown, have not settled on all the details. He hopes he can incorporate a visit to a prison or do a police ride-along as part of his contract. Mauck is looking forward to the extra instruction.

"Any question that you have you can ask your teacher all about it," he said. "You're not just sitting in your classroom staying quiet."

Brown, a professor in the college legal studies institute, said they also are discussing whether Mauck should examine a particular viewpoint of those involved in a homicide - the killer, the victim's family and friends, the media, or law enforcement. Mauck would have to do first-person interviews with police officers, crime victims and others.

"What I'm trying to avoid here is a 10-page paper on [Ted Bundy](#)," Brown said, referring to the infamous serial killer who terrorized women in the 1970s.

Koermer said the honors courses aren't intended to just pile on extra work. The college wants to give students in-depth knowledge on a subject and offer opportunities to do field work. Students could be asked to do a presentation, experiment, performances or research.

Not all teachers have to accept honors contracts. Susan Lamont, Catte's professor, said that she agreed to consider them because she likes working with highly motivated students. Catte made the process easy by coming to her with ideas.

"I'm kind of spoiled with Eileen because she knows what she wants to do," said Lamont, who is an assistant professor of biology.

Catte, 32, must scout areas on campus that might benefit from a rain garden and then determine how much rainwater the plants would have to divert. She also has to determine what type of pollution might be in the water and which plants would be the best filters.

Catte looked through plant samples Thursday at the [Chesapeake Bay Foundation](#) in Annapolis, trying to decide which ones might be useful for her rain garden. The environmental project is one she is familiar with as a regular volunteer at the foundation. She plans to consult with experts there as part of the project.

Catte, a business major from Severn, wants to transfer to a four-year college and eventually go into green building design. She didn't set out to earn an honors certificate. She signed on for the extra work for personal reasons.

"I care a lot about changing the world, not just moving into a job or a career," Catte said. "This is not just getting your homework done, but saying I want more."