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ASSESSMENT

“Too much and too little education hinder the mind.”
– Pascal
The National Collegiate Council (NCHC) is a professional organization composed of administrators, faculty, and students dedicated to undergraduate honors learning. The nation-wide institutional membership in the NCHC includes both public and private, large and small, two-year and four-year colleges and universities.

The NCHC provides professional and institutional members with information about the latest developments in honors education, encourages the institutional use of learning resources, fosters curricular experimentation, and supplies expertise and support for institutions establishing or seeking to maintain, rework, or evaluate honors programs. It also institutes educational programs of its own.

Iowa State University serves as headquarters for the NCHC office of Executive Secretary/Treasurer Elizabeth Beck. All communications regarding subscription, membership, address changes, and other matters of business should be sent to her at the NCHC office, Iowa State University, 2130 Jischke Honors Building, Ames, IA 50011-1150; phone: (515) 294-9188; fax: (515) 294-2970; email: nchc@iastate.edu. To learn more about the NCHC, visit the home page at <http://www.nchchonors.org>.

The National Honors Report seeks material concerning any aspect of honors development, assessment, curriculum, teaching, or learning. Send electronic submissions via email or disk (IBM compatible). No faxes. Deadlines are Feb. 10, May 10, July 10, and Nov. 10. Material can be sent to Margaret Brown; email <mcbrown@radford.edu>; or 606 Third Avenue, Radford, VA 24141; or phone (540) 639-3414.

Editor: Margaret Brown
Staff: Gayle Barksdale, Layout
In the next article by Ron Dotterer, he asks if assessment will still be a hot topic in 2008—and he was writing in 1988. What is the answer?

Why Do It?

2. “Assessment: A Retrospective Look” by Ron Dotterer

In this article, Ron Dotterer, at that time honors director at Susquehanna University and a member of the NCHC Executive Committee, provides an overview of assessment, which he calls “a new and improved brand name” for evaluation. Assessment, Dotterer asserts, focuses too much on outcomes. This 1988 article questions if “assessment” will still be dominant in the 2008 NCHC conference. With assessment models and bibliography. From The National Honors Report 9.3 (Fall 1988): 1-2, 4.

3. “Their Assessment and Mine” by Ira Cohen

Ira Cohen, former director of the honors program at Illinois State, former NCHC president, long-time chair of the Publications Board, questions why assessment (something honors programs do all the time) has become politicized. Outside agencies require assessment, but how can we measure the impact of higher education on students? Must assess, Cohen says, but can’t assess. Very provocative. From The National Honors Report 9.3 (Fall 1988): 8-9.

4. “Between Inputs and Outputs” by Carol Guardo

Carol Guardo in 1988 asks how to measure success when honors programs begin with talented students and end with talented graduates. Guardo, then president of Rhode Island College and chair of the Board of Directors of the Association of American Colleges, suggests that honors programs work with the students in front of them, not necessarily the ideal student honors programs are usually based upon. She suggests value-added assessment over time—over students’ undergraduate education—as a realistic way to provide students (not external agencies) with feedback on their academic progress, career choices, and development into educated, well-rounded people. An excellent article reminding honors to assist their students in tracking their own learning. From The National Honors Report 9.2 (Summer 1988): 1-4.
And When?

5. “That Honors Program Rhythm” by Earl B. Brown, Jr.............................................12

Part One
“Slower is Faster”

Part Two
“When the Train Overheats”
In Part Two, Brown explains how he fixed a problem once he recognized that he really had one. A reminder to a new director (even to an experienced one) that not every consequence can be anticipated. Solve the problem Brown says, even if it’s awkward to discuss. From listening to student and faculty complaints, he recognized that students and faculty had different expectations in the classroom. One solution for faculty—a workshop in teaching teachers to teach honors—was not exactly met with approval. From The National Honors Report 13.3 (Fall 1992): 18-20.

And By Whom? Self-Study

6. “The Fall and Rise of An Honors Program” by Bob Holkeboer.............................................17
Holkeboer, at the time the director of honors at Eastern Michigan University, wrote this series of articles beginning in 1984. These articles are the result of his study of his own failed honors program. A very thoughtful look at the components of an honors program. Interesting to read with “Basic Characteristics of a Well-Developed Honors Program” also in this issue.

Part One: Why Honors Programs Fail
A big problem with honors programs: they’re too dependent on factors beyond their control. Holkeboer wants to construct an honors program not at the mercy of university and outside forces, a program with university support. From The National Honors Report 5.1 (March 1984): 11.

Part Two: Starting With the Essentials
Reasons why colleges and universities need honors programs. Reasons for institutions to support honors. With eight objectives any director can use as a starting point. From The National Honors Report 5.2 and 5.3 (Summer and Fall 1984): 12.

Part Three: The Feasibility Study
Reviving an honors program. Be prepared for “But what was wrong with the old one”? With many questions to think about before restarting a program. Excellent. From The National Honors Report 5.4 (Winter 1984): 11.
**Part Four: Marketing the Proposal**

Strategies for involving the campus community in an honors program. The need for flexibility (and patience) in the planning; the desirability of offering several alternatives to the administration. From *The National Honors Report* 6.1 (Spring 1985): 11.

**Part Five: Getting Started**


**Part Six: The Program**


**Part Seven: Curriculum and Faculty**

Designing a curriculum that balances the easy way and the idealistic way. Holkeboer addresses considerations of faculty to teach in honors. See also Brown’s concerns in two previous articles in this issue. From *The National Honors Report* 7.1 (Spring 1986): 8-10.

**A Consultant?**


Grey Austin, a former president of the NCHC and editor of *The National Honors Report*, shares the why’s for hiring a consultant. Also, the how’s, from advance preparation by the honors program to a sample timetable. Excellent. For your information, the national office makes available a list of consultants who have attended an NCHC faculty institute on assessment. Austin’s article is from *The National Honors Report* 10.1 (Spring 1989): 16-17.

8. “Basic Characteristics and How They Grew” by Richard Cummings..........................32

One more time: the history of an NCHC guideline to fully developed honors program. With the guideline itself, reprinted in the *NHR* many times. “Basic Characteristics” is included in every start-up package for new members. From *The National Honors Report* 16.3 (Fall 1995): 21-23.


Honors Director Jay Kopp from Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa shares his program reviews at Loras College usually carried out over two semesters. The ten steps in this program review point to identifying strengths and needs—and are excellent. Kopp also shares some of the general areas identified during the program review that Loras’ Honors Program should address. From *The National Honors Report* 19.2 (Summer 1998): 1-4.
10. “An Evaluator’s Experience” by Suzanne Molnar ................................................................. 39

Suzanne Molnar, a consultant to Loras College (see above), is currently director of honors at the College of St. Catherine as well as a member of the NCHC’s Evaluation Committee. In her article, she offers suggestions to both consultants as well as to those seeking a consultant. Probably her most important point is for both the consultant and the honors director: who is actually asking for the program review and what is to be done with the final report. Very good ideas for consultants about preparing for a visit. Very helpful to directors about planning a visit. From The National Honors Report 19.2 (Summer 1998): 4-6.

11. “Using Assessment Properly” by William Whipple .............................................................. 41

Five suggestions for using assessment. Poorly planned assessment, Whipple says, wastes time and money. Assessment, an end in itself, is even worse. William Whipple was director of honors at the University of Maine at Orono at the time he wrote this article. From The National Honors Report 9.3 (Fall 1988): 9-11.

Postscript

12. “Assessment is No Longer a Fad” by Earl B. Brown, Jr. ......................................................... 42

Brown, former columnist for The National Honors Report and its editor from 1994-1997, co-wrote with Steve Culver an article in Assessment in Practice edited by Trudy Banta, et. al. He has an article coming out in a book on portfolios ed. by John Zubizarreta, University of South Carolina and member of the NCHC Executive Committee. At Radford University, Brown served as chair on assessment and co-authored the Department of English’s report for the SACs accrediting team.
Interested in joining the NCHC?

Please use the application below to apply for membership. Mail your payment with the application to:

Elizabeth Beck, Executive Secretary/Treasurer
National Collegiate Honors Council
Iowa State University
2130 Jischke Honors Building
Ames, IA 50011-1150
nchc@iastate.edu

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This issue of *The National Honors Report* is the third in the Classics series that appears in a winter issue, every other year. Classics I (Winter 1999) and Classics II (Winter 2001) presented articles that may have slipped out of sight too quickly and that were unseen by many new members. Classics as a term, you understand, is relative. The history of the National Collegiate Honors Council covers only about thirty years, but we have articles from the 1970s and 1980s that address concerns in honors education that still need to be addressed.

In Ron Dotterer’s 1988 article that follows this introduction, he gives a retrospective of assessment and its relationship to higher education. Dotterer ends his article wondering if assessment will be around—and important—in the future. He asks us to examine the sessions offered in the annual NCHC conference in 2008 looking for discussions, workshops, and plenaries on assessments. Still around? Yes?

This Classics issue is devoted to assessment just in case Dotterer’s question is answered “No” in 2008. Articles in this Classics issues go from the philosophical to the practical. Carole Guardo, president of Rhode Island College in 1988 when she wrote her article, “Between Inputs and Outputs,” challenges honors to increase student learning and to use assessment and feedback in order to accomplish this goal.

Ira Cohen (“Their Assessment or Mine?”) tells us that honors programs have always assessed what they do. But that, he says, is a double-edged sword. If any outside agency requests a self-study, a program must oblige; but then does this external agency consider the self-study self-serving?

How do you make assessment meaningful for a program as well as college or university administrators? Carefully, says William Whipple, with five suggestions for programs planning for assessment. Carefully, says Suzanne Molnar, with her nine suggestions for consultants planning assessment. Carefully, says Grey Austin, with advice for program directors or deans and for consultants. Carefully, says Jay Kopp, planning for a consultant within his college’s guidelines.

Assessment is not an end, however, it’s a beginning. Read Bob Holkeboer’s seven-parter on reviving an honors program he’s seen fail at his university; read Earl Brown’s two-parter on patience, on recognizing problems that can be solved, and on knowing when (and when not to) call in a consultant. Assessment is not an end, it’s an on-going process. Assessment is not a buzzword.
Over the last several years, the educational establishment in America has renamed one of its tried-and-true elixirs. "Evaluation," one of education’s most enduring products, has lately been marketed under a new, improved brand name as “assessment.” What caused this re-labeling? Does this change in packaging signal any alteration of what’s actually inside? Or putting it more directly, is the Assessment Movement part of some fundamental change in American education?

Admittedly, higher education has a fascination with fashionable, “hot” designs. As any reader of articles such as this knows, trendiness and educational chic are part of the prestige system of American colleges and universities. So, twenty years from now, will the Assessment Movement seem simply a twist in fashion confined to the ’80s, as mini-skirts and Nehru jackets now render up quaint reminders of the ’60s?

WHAT IS ASSESSMENT?

A definition of terms is probably the safest place to begin. Despite the infinite variety and diverse applications allowed by 3600 American colleges and universities, assessment systems in the U.S. do share foundational premises, usually fitting one (or both) of two criteria: (1) documentation describing actual student learning, including content, skills, and personal development—"straight assessment"; or (2) prescriptive measurement seeking to improve the growth rate of cognitive and affective student learning—"value-added assessment.”

Other motives that have driven institutions into the assessment business include providing capstone and integrative learning experiences, improving student retention, validating the existence of effective learning climates (especially those lacking traditional forms of prestige), and creating longitudinal studies or databases for individual students or for an institution. Some of these motives, of course, are more self-serving than others. Yet many seek noble ends or at least an expansion of existing institutional research to carry out sound institutional planning.

“Big-picture” (macro) assessment aims at identifying a department, program, or institution’s strengths and weaknesses. Mean student scores, for example, can be measured against national norms as a way to evaluate the consequences of a curriculum—a method still infrequently used. Are the objectives of a general education/Core curriculum actually being met in
specific courses? Are actual student outcomes in line with stated goals and purposes? What are we expecting students to do? Do we know when it is or is not happening? What does a particular program regard as its intended outcomes? Are current students achieving those outcomes? To what degree? And against what standard? Are faculty teaching in ways consistent with their intended outcomes? Are there unsta ted outcomes that inevitably replace stated expectations?

“Disaggregated” (micro) assessment aims at presenting a detailed portrait of an individual student learner. The extensive student data most colleges and universities collect for admission decisions rarely will be used by those colleges and universities once a student is admitted. Increasingly, sophisticated campus telecommunication networks and expanding use of computer capabilities make this form of assessment feasible for a growing number of institutions. An “aggregation” of the data from these separate student portraits gives a school a rich, composite picture of its student body.

**ASSESSMENT MODELS**

Whatever we may say about assessment, it has already become a recognizable force in the modern academic community. Begun early in the 1970s at a handful of widely scattered institutions, within a matter of years and under support from an increasing number of institutions and professional organizations, assessment has grown into a national preoccupation. Specific assessment programs, nonetheless, still present clearer pictures for discussion than most discussions of assessment theory.

Alverno College pioneered assessment, offering the model of an entire institution focused on setting “performance standard levels” in various “core ability” and disciplinary areas, and then creating instruments to determine when those levels have been met (Joel Read, *Assessment/Evaluation and Costs*). In the early 1980s, King’s College (PA) adapted this model of campus-wide curricular assessment for its core/general education courses (Donald Farmer, *Enhancing Student Learning*).

In the late 1970s, Northeast Missouri State University began its own experiments with value-added assessment, one of the first schools to use assessment at a public university (*In Pursuit of Degrees with Integrity*). The University of Tennessee-Knoxville, and in particular its Learning Resource Center, has shown how legislative mandates requiring assessment and legitimate institutional needs can—with enough careful study and hard work—be brought into contemporary existence (Trudy Banta and Homer Fisher).

More recently, Rhode Island College has devised a database for using enrollment information as part of a profile of each individual student, computerizing the processes of advising, course selection, and career guidance. [Note: see Guard’s article in this issue]: James Madison University is currently undertaking research on what constitutes legitimate and reliable “assessment measurement instruments” (i.e., tests) and is expanding assessment testing into new areas that have resisted this type of testing, such as “moral development.”

Among others, the American Association of Colleges (AAC), the Fund for Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE), UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute, the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE), and the American Council on Education (ACE) have all advanced the cause of effectively measuring student outcomes. In 1985, AAHE began its Assessment Forum, establishing a national network and directory of and directory of assessment programs and projects. On June 8-11, 1988, the Forum held its third national conference on “Assessment in Higher Education” at Chicago’s Palmer House.

But it would be misleading to suppose that assessment’s rapid growth has been caused entirely from within the Academy’s ivied walls. In many parts of American higher education, assessment is attributable directly to external pressures from “clients” and funding sources, to those outside the university who desire increasing sufficiency of proof for academic advertising claims. Sometimes these pressures contain veiled, and often not-so-veiled, threats of fund withdrawal for failure to provide such proof.

Public institutions, in particular, have received explicit, yet occasionally hastily drafted mandates from their legislatures and governing boards. “Performance funding initiatives” have been imposed by an increasing number of state legislatures, both as a budgetary check and a spur or reward for innovative or effective achievement. Over two-thirds of the states now have some form of assessment mandate in their public higher education authorization or budgetary legislation.

New self-studies undertaken for accrediting associations have also pressured institutions to back up whatever claims they make with more well-intentioned goal statements and significantly higher levels of quantifiable evidence. Most regional accrediting organizations now follow the lead of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and ask schools to include assessment as part of their regular reaccreditation self-studies.

**ASSESSMENT METHODS**

While quantifiable assessment (comparison to norms and standards) is more common, qualitative assessment (comparison of outcomes to stated goals and objectives) is equally a part of this movement. Specific assessment methods depend upon two preliminary
questions: “What do you consider worth assessing?” and “Can you find or make an instrument that will give you sufficiently reliable measurements?”

Much of the controversy over assessment flows from the range of answers offered to these questions. The assumptions one makes in answering these two questions reflect the range of responses given by constituents of contemporary American higher education. Groups frequently demonstrate conflicting or even contradictory motives for undertaking assessment—an inevitable seed of discord.

Two national assessment tests are commercially available: ACT-Comp and the Educational Testing Service’s Academic Profile. Each offers a package of skill and competency-based measurements, with both the strengths and drawbacks of a single national exam attempting such a lofty purpose as overall undergraduate assessment. The Graduate Record Examination, the professional school admissions test, and other professional external examinations complement homegrown assessment tests. In-house tests serve effectively to tailor a school’s testing methods to the institution’s reasons for undertaking assessment. Their chief drawback is the lack of an external environmental standard.

“Pre-testing” and “Post-testing”—the measurement of what students know both before and after a particular course or academic program—are concepts central to many assessment systems, particularly programs interested in identifying precisely what a specific learning situation has or has not done to increase a student’s knowledge.

Since the 1920s, the Honors Program at Swarthmore College has included an assessment it modified from a European model: the external examiner. Before graduation with Honors, students sit for examinations—oral and written—prepared by recognized experts in the disciplines who are brought to campus for the assessment function.

**SUMMARY**

Assessment turns our attention away from more traditional axes for examining our schools, away from teacher-centered or curriculum-centered learning. Instead, emphasizing behavior over structure, assessment focuses us on outcomes, and whatever gap remains between the two. It asks questions few institutions have dared to ask and even fewer have answered convincingly: What have students actually achieved since the beginning of their college study? What “value [is] added” by an education at this particular institution? In this particular program? Is this institution/program better than other comparable institutions/programs? What links are there between the stated goals and objectives of a school, a program, or a course and what actually happens within individual classrooms?

Despite academicians’ and administrators’ traditional neglect of them, these are questions those paying the bills regularly have asked—or at least have yearned to ask. Higher education’s inability to supply answers has led to general public skepticism about the utility of our colleges and universities—articulated recently by both the Right and the Left, by both educational reformers and defenders of tradition such as Allan Bloom and former Secretary of Education, William Bennett. It is no accident that the Assessment Movement has flourished at the same time that the United States has endured an historic downturn in its international educational standing and a crisis of confidence over its future direction. Too infrequently have we heard a confident voice within education announcing the components of real educational success or lauding higher education as embodying the American ideal of equality of opportunity?

That educational efficiency has been very much on the minds of higher education’s consumers also is visible in the enduring commercial success of the several guides to “rating” colleges, such as Barron’s, Peterson’s, and the U.S. News and World Report. Many seeking admission, it seems, desire even these simplified forms of assessment.

In his January 27, 1988, *Chronicle of Higher Education* end piece, James H. Daughdrill, Jr., President of Rhodes College and former chairman of the board of AAC, explained his own conversion to assessment. He argued that assessment’s emphasis on accountability allows schools to differentiate themselves from one another with greater precision. But more importantly, he suggested, the Assessment Movement allows faculty to regain their primacy in the educational process, taking direct credit or blame for their own students’ learning and allowing faculty to argue more effectively for exactly those resources they need to enhance their learning.

It is this emphasis, of course, on accountability to outside forces that some faculty have used to rebuff the Assessment Movement, seeing such influence as a threat to the independent nature of each institution and
to the academic freedom of each faculty member. An acceptable balance between diversity and accountability is only now beginning to enter the assessment debate.

Assessment is all the things it has been called: a pedagogical preoccupation, an innovative means to foster and to measure learning, a threat to a teacher’s classroom autonomy, a concrete test of whether a college’s claims of benefit are legitimate. Which of these competing strands will take dominance is still unclear. The debate has begun; it seems reasonably certain to continue for at least a few more years. Perhaps we should devote—even at this early date—a session at NCHC’s annual conference in October 2008, to see whether assessment is still a word we recognize.

A BEGINNER’S ASSESSMENT BIBLIOGRAPHY


Particular case histories of at least three successful programs are available: Alverno College, Hood College, Northeast Missouri State University, Kean College (NJ), King’s College (PA), Rhode Island College, and the University of Tennessee. The titles of in-house publications appear in the text. Also, see Patricia Hutchings, Six Stories: Implementing Successful Assessment. Washington, DC: American Association for Higher Education, June 1987.


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"Assessment" appeared with little warning in the higher education community in 1985/6. It had its antecedents in the very popular and widely quoted works of Alexander Astin and others. These authors, who had been writing long before the idea of assessment came to the fore, were concerned with the nature of the university experience. The literature was filled with discussions and research on the meaning of higher education and its impact. In addition to Astin, the work of a wide variety of individuals contributed to these discussions, among them are K. Patricia Cross, W. Perry, A. Chickering, E. Bayer, L. Knefelkamp, and Z. Gamson.

The concept of assessment that has had the greatest impact on higher education had its origins outside of the academic community. It came from external agencies, concerned with, or about higher education; and they wanted higher education to explain its worth, given the perceptions of academia that were surfacing during the Reagan years.

First and foremost, there was the stream of attacks on the failures of higher education in America. Chief among these were the verbal tongue-lashings of the Secretary of Education [William Bennett], followed by the publication of *A Nation at Risk*. These and subsequent discussions of the failure of higher education struck a responsive chord among the public at large and especially with those who either oversaw education (primarily public) or paid the bills for education (public and private). How else can one explain the popularity of both Bloom and Hirsch?

Another area in which public expenditures on higher education was questioned (including loan programs) was at the state level. Over the past ten or fifteen years, higher education began to compete for a greater share of state expenditures at a time when other demands were increasing. Those who favored competing expenditures, and those who favored no expenditures, both hit on higher education as a target. This second group, usually very conservative, also wanted higher education to demonstrate its worth.

Because of the many agenda that lie behind assessment, many, myself included, had deep reservations about it. These were also reflected in the universities’ positions as they were assigned the task of assessment by governing agencies that were responding to these agenda without a clear definition of assessment.

My first reaction to the assessment directive was “Don’t we assess (i.e., evaluate) what we do all the time?” What do we mean by assessment? Over the last two years, I have discovered that the word assessment as used in higher education is not related to any of the definitions given in my Merriam Webster or even the *OED*, whose definitions relate primarily to matters of taxation (although, one might add parenthetically, that much about assessment is taxing). After a perusal of many of the works usually cited in the assessment literature, I think I have a functional understanding of what is meant by it—if not a real definition: assessment, as it is used, is a means of measuring what students learn and how higher education affects them, and perhaps, what goes on during the learning (not teaching) process.

What can be wrong with that? Isn’t that what we as honors directors have emphasized? Attend any of our conferences, and if you do not walk away with some idea about learning then you have missed some of the essence of honors. But assessment, as popularly used, rarely has a theoretical base. If one is articulated, it is more or less mentioned and then ignored. This is understandable when you recall that the origins of assessment are political. The individual most praised (or blamed) for assessment was Governor Lamar Alexander of Tennessee. What he was asking for was on its face not unreasonable. He and politicians across the political spectrum wanted to know if higher education was worth the money spent on it. After all, Secretary Bennett and others were saying that, in effect, money spent on higher education was not being well spent. They wanted to know what was the meaning of a college degree? Were we too vocational, or not vocational enough? Does a college education produce a literate and competent individual? Had there been a slippage in the standards for granting a college degree? Many individuals who were, or at least felt, responsible...
for the public trough started to ask higher education to give an accounting of itself.

These questions were not necessarily asked only by the foes of higher education. Our friends, too, wanted some means of defending us against the yahoos. After all, public higher education, in virtually all jurisdictions, had been the recipient of several billions of dollars since 1960. How could we describe our stewardship to the public? Unfortunately, we were trapped in a cost accountant’s universe. That is, everything has a bottom line.

These questions by external agencies seemed to parallel the self-examination that was already ongoing on campus. Most importantly—what is it that we are doing to, or with students? After all, when higher education was campaigning for funds in the sixties, one of the arguments used was the economic value to the student of a degree. This campaign worked. During the sixties, many students saw the university as a means of social change and mobility. Academics caught in a changing institution tried to redefine the nature of higher education. This led to a series of experiments, some successful, some not. During the decade of the seventies, most states, as a result of economic constraints, started to examine their commitment to higher education. The “Reagan Revolution” underscored these concerns and led to a series of limited questions about the “output” of higher education—changes in the student. “Outputs” are theoretically comparable.

This led to a search for comparable data by state agencies about students. It has led away from questions about the nature of learning and toward those questions which lead to easy, unthinking, comparability.

Many felt that the best way to find comparable data in this numerically constrained universe was to devise a series of “objective tests,” e.g., the ACT-Comp. These tests have been administered in many places, to the benefit of the professional test makers. Do they really measure changes in the student? I suppose—if one has baseline data—but do they measure the impact of higher education on the individual? What has disappeared is the idea of the educated or cultured person.

A second approach that has worked its way into the assessment literature is the concept of “value-added,” pace Karl Marx. This concept really avoids any discussion of the meaning of higher education. If anything, at its worst, it is unbound solipsism. No matter how carefully we control this contract, we are in a bind of student growth as defined by the student. Moreover, political overtones have emerged in this area.

Higher education, in playing the assignment game, finds itself in a frightening bind. We, at the behest of outside agencies, who control most of our destinies, have been asked to evaluate ourselves. At the same time we have to define who we are, and what we are, and to assure what good bunnies we have been. Failure to do so would lead to repercussions. However, the external nature of the assessment question can easily lead to the rejection of the questions as being self-serving. So we are damned if we do and damned if we don’t.

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**What is the NCHC?**

The National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) was established in 1966 as an organization of American colleges and universities, students, faculty, administrators, and those interested in supporting honors education. Historically, the honors movement has been a catalyst for positive change in American higher education. Many of its innovations—undergraduate research, study abroad, experiential learning—have become standard features of mainstream post-secondary curriculum. NCHC members, both individually and together, continue to respond to the special needs of exceptionally talented and motivated students through a wide variety of programs and activities.

- NCHC encourages the creation of and renewal of honors programs by offering popular annual workshops:
  - Beginning in Honors®, Developing in Honors, and Students in Honors.
- NCHC supports existing honors programs with a full slate of national, regional, and statewide conferences, forums, and workshops.
- NCHC promotes a better understanding of current issues and developments in honors education through its two publications, *The Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, a scholarly journal, and *The National Honors Report*, a professional quarterly.
- NCHC creates new learning opportunities for students: theme-based Honors Semesters, in places like Appalachia, the Grand Canyon, and Greece; and Sleeping Bag Seminars, where students from several institutions get together for a weekend of theme-based learning and socializing.
- NCHC sponsors a wide range of committees and programs that support specific constituencies, such as Large Universities, Small Colleges, Science & Math, Two-Year Schools, as well as committees and programs that address specific concerns of honors education, such as Teaching and Learning, Evaluation, and Research.
- NCHC provides grants through its endowed Portz funds to support innovations in honors programs.
For my presentation tonight, I’ve chosen the title “Between Inputs and Outputs” with the stress on the word “between.” For several years, higher education in its jargon and in its approaches to student learning has been dominated by concerns for inputs and outputs. As a psychologist, I have often speculated that these unfortunate terms and concepts were a throwback to the influence of behaviorist thinking which focused on a stimulus-response analysis of human learning and virtually ignored what was going on within the learner.

In recent years, however, psychology and her sister sciences have put the learner back into the equation. Cognitive psychology, in particular, strongly influenced by the work of Jean Piaget, have devoted both empirical and theoretical attention to learning processes. We have consequently looked more wisely and more intelligently at that important interaction which takes place between stimuli and responses, and grappled, however imperfectly, with the real action components of student learning.

When we talk about inputs in higher education and look at the students entering our colleges and universities from this perspective, we generally cite average SAT scores or like measures, rank in class, special proficiencies and similar academic characteristics as descriptor of what is being put into our classrooms. We talk about curricula or programs as vehicles for putting learning into our students. We talk about those who do the inputting—the faculty—in terms of the ratio of their number to the number of (if I may coin a word) inputees. But we fail to address that wonderful, inactive process, its nature and characteristic, which takes place between faculty and students and which is called education or learning.

Following this line of reasoning, we define the excellence of colleges and universities by their students: the higher the average SAT score of entering students, the better the institutional process which occurs between students and faculty, and at these so-called better institutions the process is indeed better.

On the output side, we follow a like pattern. We make the presumption that an institution of higher learning is better if its outputs (or graduates) are headed for graduate school in is proportionally high numbers, if the starting salaries graduating students will earn are high, and if the number of students placed in entry level jobs in their fields of specialization is also high. Now I am not saying that this kind of evaluation of the success of an institution is all bad; I am simply saying that it tells us next to nothing about what has been happening between the input of students and the output of graduates.

Those of you who have as your special responsibility the education of honors students may truly be in a quandary when it comes to knowing whether or not you have been successful in your teaching efforts. Yours might be that often disparaged case of starting with talented students and ending with talented graduates, with the argument made that you can take little credit for what has happened in between because it was, in essence, already there. How do you know that what you have done in between makes a difference in the learning of these students and how do you know that what you have done has led to their engagement in learning? Let me here quickly disabuse you of the notion that I come with all of the answers to these questions. I’m going to assure (gratefully I might add) that the sessions of the next couple of days will contain some answers for you.

Tonight, I simply want to comment on two of the conditions for excellence identified in “Involvement in Learning” by Alexander Austin, namely, increasing student involvement in learning, and using assessment and feedback to enhance student learning. It seems to me that if we are to increase the involvement of students in learning, we need to know a good deal about them, particularly about their cognitive and motivational characteristics.
We need to know something more than simple input characteristic. We need to know something about students as active learners engaged in the learning or the in-between process. But do we?

A couple of years ago, I published a paper entitled “Designing Curricula for Imaginary Students.” In that article, I argued that there are major stumbling blocks to the design of curricula, which are sensitive to the individual differences in student learning styles and responsive to their cognitive and motivational characteristic. For tonight’s purposes, I would add that faculty teaching honors students have to be sensitive and responsive to the characteristics of their special students if they are to involve these students more effectively in the learning process.

Since most of the stumbling blocks are well known to all of us, I’ll focus on the one, which is not. This impediment is more subtle, yet quite powerful, in its influence on the design of our programs and it is this: the majority of our existing undergraduate curricula are designed for imaginary students. Simply put, when most faculty put together course syllabi, majors or honors programs, they are designing all of these educational experiences with a particular kind of student in mind. My thesis was, and is, that this student rarely conforms to the reality that professors encounter in their classroom, laboratories, and studios on a daily basis. The challenge then is to replace the imaginary students who people our minds with an understanding of those students who actually people our classrooms.

But you might ask, just who are what are these imaginary students? Let me try to describe them to you. They are students who are bright, motivated, and skilled—especially, those who are skilled verbally, analytically, and conceptually. They are students who are not always looking for the right answer. They are patient with exploring alternative points of view, and they are students who do not perceive such explorations as a waste of time. They are curious about a wide range of issues and topics; they enjoy making connections across disciplines and areas of knowing. They have little need for closure and they will take lots of intellectual risks. These students ask questions, challenge, display a sense of humor, and a playfulness of mind. They are even interested in integrating their own learning processes and, of course, they are tremendously original and creative. (Sounds a lot like us, don’t you think?)

In Jean Piaget’s words, we would label this student “formal operation,” that is, a student who is able to deal with concepts and symbols and metaphors in a facile way and who is at ease dealing with multiple levels of abstraction simultaneously. Studies, however, have revealed that our colleges and universities are not highly populated by such students no matter what we might like to think.

Another development theorist, William Perry, characterizes persons who achieve the highest positions in his scheme of cognitive development as having achieved a relativistic point of view. Such students are able to handle multiple perspectives, and to recognize that there may be more than one outlook on some problem or issue. They are able to gather information, to select good authorities or sources of information. They can accept uncertainty and ambiguity and have less need for closure or for some kind of conclusion to aid their understanding.

For these students, the teacher serves as a role model demonstrating the kinds of learning behaviors sought—seeking out information, being tolerant of uncertainty, exploring differing viewpoints, seeking varying solutions, and gradually moving toward conclusions when and where achievable. The teacher becomes more of a guide, a consultant along the way, engaged in interaction with students, rather than an authority figure inputting information.

These relativistic students think abstractly. They are articulate in both oral and written expression. They are capable of examining the assumptions of their own arguments and positions, and they argue from premises in a logical and consistent manner. Such students accept responsibility for pluralistic points of view, and make choices among a multiplicity of possibilities either cognitively or ethically. These, I believe, are our imaginary students.

The data suggest that most college or university students are found in the lesser positions in Perry’s scheme. Even honors students are more likely to be in those positions that precede the highest. And, we should note, only some portion of the students in these lower levels achieve the true relativistic posture of the advanced positions and become fully capable of the abstractions, logical analyses and linkages characteristic of these levels of cognitive development.

Where, we might ask, do we find most of our honors students? They are in the process of making the transition to such levels, but are not there yet. And because they are not there yet, the design of honors programs, the ways in which students are engaged in them, needs to be premised on that realization. These students’ transition thus becomes critical if the fullness of intellectual development is to be achieved. Teaching and learning addressed to facilitating this transition is needed. Educational experiences
of and with these students must be premised on the realistic notion of where these students are developmentally and where they are going. We must put our imaginary students out of our minds and concentrate on the real ones before us.

I recognize, however, that just as many of us had difficulty letting go of the imaginary friends of our childhood, so too is it difficult to let go of our notions of the imaginary students whom we would like to have in our classrooms and honors seminars and for whom our courses and educational experiences are designed.

But there is a new and growing development going on in higher education, which, I believe, can be helpful to us in achieving rapport with our real students and involving them in the learning process. It is the assessment movement wherein students are evaluated systematically and regularly on a whole range of cognitive, personal, academic, motivational, and interpersonal dimensions. They then receive feedback not only about how well they are doing in their courses, but also about how well they are developing.

As you know, assessment has become one of the hottest buzzwords in higher education. Assessment, as it is talked about today, has been linked to issues of accountability, quality, and student development. Its implications, when logically pursued, are far-reaching and profound because its bottom-line question goes to the heart of the mission of any college and university.

In other words, it asks about what occurs between inputs and outputs and what has happened to real students. Given all this, I put my toe into these assessment waters with some trepidation. But I cannot resist doing so because I see great potential for all of our students, honors students included, to be understood in ways which will allow us to engage them more effectively in their own learning experiences and, as importantly, to allow them to become more knowledgeable about themselves—their learning, their development as students, and as whole persons.

As the American Council on Education reported last year [1987], there is considerable support among campus administrators for assessment as it relates to central education purposes. Ninety-five percent of those surveyed supported linking assessment to efforts to improve instruction and 89% favor the inclusion of feedback to students from assessment procedures. The perceived stumbling blocks to the implementation of new assessment approaches are, however, formidable. They include the funds needed to develop the procedures, the lack of clarity over what to evaluate, the fear of the misuse of the results, the future, or progress. There are prematriculation measures, course and program assessments, certification and licensing examinations, graduate record scores, placement information, and myriad other means of gaining insight into the performance, achievement and accomplishments of students—all of which we have been gathering for quite some time.

Why then the focus on assessment today and what is the difference between old and new forms of assessment? Many hypotheses and explanations have been advanced; I shall cite just a few here. The spate of reports on higher education that were published in the early 80’s raised serious concerns about the efficacy of various curricular approaches and of the undergraduate experiences as a whole. Public policy pundits raised issues of the value of the return on federal and state investments in higher education. While educators argued that higher learning was necessary to ensure the nation’s

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indicator of quality can be found in the assessment of the talent development of students as a function of their undergraduate education. He maintains that such an approach is more reflective of the fundamental educational purpose of an institution of higher education. It looks critically at the student learning which has occurred and at the development experienced by students as a function of their undergraduate education, that is, as a function of what happens between inputs and outputs.

Astin has also given voice and support to the value-added approach to the assessment of student learning and development, an approach that is currently being practiced at my own institution and drawing great interest nation-wide. In value-added terms, an excellent institution is one that fosters significant improvements in the cognitive and affective functioning of its students over the course of the collegiate experience. Value-added assessment consequently addresses actual experience in college; it, as contrasted with other assessment approaches, probes what change in students has been wrought by the entire baccalaureate experience.

Assessments are made over time in order to demonstrate the positive changes which occur in students and which highlight the value that has been added to them in terms of skills, knowledge, and psychosocial growth and development.

Rhode Island College [in 1988] has been and is a pioneering institution in value-added assessment. Supported by a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education, our program is distinctive in one very important way. The value-added assessment is conducted in order to provide individual students (rather than the institution) with feedback that helps them in charting the course of their personal development during their collegiate experience. In our view, this individually oriented, developmental approach is more meaningful to our students who are primarily commuting, working students with much self-doubt about their academic goals and abilities. And, we believe, it is more meaningful whether we are talking about honors students or those of lesser talents.

In order to achieve our objective with this project, we have developed and distributed an individually tailored personal learning plan to each entering freshman—a plan that can be updated each year as students progress through their programs of study. Data from the admissions process and from a whole battery of tests and questionnaires of varying sorts provide the raw material for the creation of the personal learning plan. These data not only assess cognitive characteristics, but also an individual’s emotional and behavioral potential and development. The plan reviews a student’s academic strengths and weaknesses, motivations and emotions, interests and goals, and the extent to which these goals are being achieved. The purpose of the personal learning plan is to able to give students a clear and cumulative sense of progress, the extent of their development, and the consequences of their involvement, and the consequences of their own learning process. Our ultimate goal is to understand and help individual students achieve the fullest possible development of their potential not only in academic studies and career areas, but also as people.

I believe that honors program, and especially their directors and faculty, have the same ultimate goal. I believe that if we can put aside all notions of imaginary students and appreciate our real students for what they are and where they are developmentally, we have taken a step toward our goal. I believe that if we focus our attention not on inputs nor on outputs but on what happens in between, we will be even closer to that goal. I believe that if we can recognize and then act upon an understanding of the critical cognitive transitions being made by our students, the goal is within reach. And, finally, I believe that if we can engage our students in their own learning and the assessment and tracking of their own learning, we will eventually achieve the goal. And then, and only then, will we have the grounds for talking about and celebrating conditions of excellence.

Dr. Guardo’s article reprinted here was originally presented at the 1988 conference of the Northeast Regional Council Conference addressing the theme, “Involvement in Learning.” In her opening paragraph (deleted in this “Classics” issue) she praises the Northeast for its selection of the theme and gives her thanks to Dr. Alexander Astin, who contributed extensively to a 1984 report of the same name, “Involvement in Learning.” Dr. Guardo was president of Rhode Island College and was chair of the Board of Directors of the Association of American Colleges.
As a consultant for many years now, I am always asked when to bring a consultant in, or when to modify the program or when to…. My usual response is, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” But recently, I’ve been thinking about the rhythms that govern honors programs.

Others, too, have been giving this some thought. Witness all of the sessions [at the NCHC conference] dealing with revitalizing an honors program and all of the people who attend them. Most of the time I found that the speaker is describing a program that has died, a program which has no rhythm. In many cases, these programs had an ineffectve “poor” director, or had a director retire and were unable to maintain the rhythm that the previous director had created, or the previous director had allowed the program to fail.

So what is the rhythm of an honors program? Let’s begin with the assumption that you are a new director of a new program. What should you expect in the first couple of years? Nothing, or at most, very little. In most cases, the program has been mandated from above, not from below. For some reason, usually recruitment purposes, your president or board wants an honors program but wants one that will put very little drain on a college or university’s meager resources.

At the outset, everything is thrilling. There is the excitement following the announcement that you are the director of the institution’s new honors program. Many faculty come up to you to offer their support or tell you what kind of honors program you ought to have. You choose a council to develop a program. You talk with Admissions about recruiting students. You talk with the Information office about a glossy, classy brochure. Everything is going at breakneck speed. The rhythm seems so fast that you may wonder what you have gotten yourself into, but you may find that you don’t have time to even worry about that.

ADVICE: DON’T HIRE A CONSULTANT. Not yet, anyway. Attend conferences, sign up for NCHC’s Beginning in Honors©, and even visit other institutions’ honors programs. Go with the flow; let the rapid rhythm carry you and your council.

Following the initial spurt—which may last anywhere from a month to a year or two, depending on how long the planning takes and the enthusiasm of your council lasts—the early rhythm is slow. You may even become frustrated at your lack of success. All of you started with such enthusiasm. You and your core of committed supporters were going to build the best honors program any institution had ever seen. You thought it would be easy to recruit students—any student will be excited at the educational opportunities afforded by your program. You thought it would be easy to recruit departments and their faculty to reach in the honors program. Who wouldn’t want to teach the best and the brightest? But you are unable to convince departments or faculty to offer honors courses or to enroll students in honors courses. You don’t understand.

ADVICE: BE PATIENT. You are doing the right things. Don’t call in a consultant. Don’t overhaul your program. Don’t start looking for faults in yourself or blaming those who helped you launch the program. Don’t ask for more money or reassigned time. Money and additional reassigned time won’t cure these ills. Patience will.

One sign of a change in rhythm is that students begin to refer other students to you, or students already enrolled in the program recruit students from their high schools for the program. Or departments which were not initially interested in teaching honors courses call to insist on the opportunity to teach in your program.

But, and it is an important BUT, don’t expect miracles. Just because word of mouth is beginning to attract students and departments doesn’t mean it’s time to sing the Hallelujah Chorus quite yet. You are receiving more inquiries about your program; you are speaking to more departments;
you are enrolling more students in honors courses; you are getting greater commitment from students and faculty to make your program succeed. While you’re picking up steam, you also realize that the engine is still doing twenty miles an hour and there is no traffic on the tracks.

So, of course, you wonder, “What am I doing wrong?” The program is growing. But why isn’t it growing faster? Why can’t I get that key department involved? Why can’t I attract or recruit more students to the program? Why you can’t has to do with the rhythm of the program. You are just beginning—the rhythm is still slow—somewhat faster than the letdown after that initial good will spurt, but still slow.

ADVICE: BE PATIENT. You are right on schedule. Let the pot simmer. Let the work of mouth work for you. Don’t rush it.

But now the program is really taking on a mind of its own. You may even wish for those early days when you weren’t so successful. I know I did. One sign of this increased speed is the constant stream of students to your office or the desire of these students to plan more activities than your budget can afford or the desire of departments to offer more courses than you can fill.

It is time when you feel stretched to the limit. Nothing concrete is happening. The new courses won’t go into effect until next fall; it’s too late to make the case for additional funds for student activities. But you are stretched. Because nothing concrete seems to be happening, you have difficulty in asking for more money. And, you also know that funds are short and that there is little money—if any—for personnel.

ADVICE: RESIST TEMPTATION. You don’t want to have an honors section half-filled. Control the tempo. Don’t let the train run away from you. Grow gradually. Relax. If you are a half-time director, work half time. The work will get done.

One of the easiest ways to burn out—to be honest, I do not believe in that concept, but since so many academics use it, I’ll use it—is to do more work than you are paid to do. You get angry and frustrated. You say to yourself that this work must be done and since the administration will not give you the support staff you need, they expect me to do it.

You are not Mighty Mouse. Do it when you can; do it when time permits.

This is also the time to be especially wary. If you let the train run away with you, then your program will probably need to be resuscitated. It’s grown too quickly, you are unable to fill honors courses, so fewer departments offer fewer sections. When fewer departments offer honors courses, fewer students are interested in taking these courses. Your program has suddenly died.

If you resisted temptation, your program is building slowly but surely. In fact, you’ve reached a plateau. In a year, maybe even two, nothing is happening. Good. You need to regroup. This is a good time to invite new faculty and students to join your Honors Council or Committee. It is the time before the storm—that sudden growth spurt, that reinvigoration which occurs naturally after the plateau. The program is beginning to run itself. You even have a chance to take your hand off the controls. You have gotten departments and students accustomed to your schedule. You have built up an internal rhythm. You and your support staff or your council or your departmental liaisons know when proposals are due, when evaluations are due, when students need to be told or reminded to turn in material or proposals in. The administration published due dates for honors course proposals in their calendars. The Information Office is publicizing honors events and activities. The Admissions Office is taking advantage of your program in recruiting students.

Your students are giving papers at state, regional, and national conferences. You have made several friends in honors with whom you exchange ideas and information. Everything is moving like a well-oiled machine, your train is doing forty despite the occasional roadblocks.

ADVICE: BE FLEXIBLE. As your program develops impetus, you are going to run into problems, problems you could not anticipate. Find reasonable solutions; be willing to compromise. For example, early in my career as honors director, the president of my university said that students on academic scholarships would no longer be required to enroll in honors courses.

I rushed to the Admissions Office to tell them the good news. Now, when they recruited top students, they could them that the university’s academic scholarships would come with no strings attached. I also asked Admissions to give me the names of these top students so that I could recruit
them for the honors program.

Now that all is going smoothly, it may be time to bring in a consultant for two reasons: (1) to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of your program; and (2) to tell your administration what you have been telling them for years—your needs. It is true that someone at least 40 miles away knows best what is good for your program. Don’t hesitate now to use a consultant to get what your program needs: more support staff, more reassigned time (don’t say release time because you are not being released from anything), larger space, more scholarship money, greater access to the loop. I’m sure you can supply your own wish list without further help from me.

ADVICE: DON’T ROCK THE BOAT. Make changes, yes. Constantly re-evaluate, yes. But remember the needs of your institution. Don’t make changes because Indiana University or East Carolina or the College of New Rochelle does things one particular way. Keep in mind your institution—its students, faculty, and administration and the physical and budgetary constraints peculiar to your institution. Too many wholesale changes may disrupt the rhythm and lead to engine trouble.

Some general advice about rhythm: you will find that your program may have periods of what seem to be inactivity, even periods of regression. Don’t panic. Growth is not a straight line. I recall my daughter, then thirteen, behave as though she were eight, before suddenly acting as though she were fifteen. Periods of inactivity often precede faster tempos. My outline has no year markers. Each program’s rhythm is different.

And, finally, I have always tried to do at least one new thing a year—whether it be to host a conference, create an Honors Day for high school seniors, or simply take some students to the NCHC conference. In that way, I try to keep the rhythm upbeat even if the program added no new course or recruited fewer students. And, I could always point to this new activity as a reason for needing more funding and more support staff.

The Rhythm of Honors Programs

Part Two: When the Train Overheats

By Earl B. Brown, Jr.

From The National Honors Report 13.3 (Fall 1992): 18-20

Rhythm is tricky. Just when you seem to think everything is click clacking along smoothly, the engine overheats. How you handle heated engine often determines how quickly you can get the train moving again.

When you last left me, I was saying BE FLEXIBLE, BE PATIENT (Spring 1992). But what happens when you and the Honors Council realize that you weren’t patient enough, that you have moved too quickly. You realize that there is something you neglected to do, something that needs to be done which has not yet been done but should have been done several years ago? Huh?

Yes, that does sound vague. Let me be more concrete. To do so, I’ll need to provide some background.

I have heard over the years complaints (what honors director hasn’t) from students taking honors courses and faculty teaching honors courses. As long as these complaints were few and far between and from faculty who were not strong supporters or students who did not understand what we were trying to accomplish, I tended to ignore them. Sure, I shared them with the Honors Council and, sure, we looked at student and faculty course evaluations to try to determine how pervasive the problems were. But most of the time, it was one or two students griping about a course or a faculty member who was harder on himself and the course than the students were. In fact, we found that students tended to enjoy courses that faculty thought had not gone well. And, yes, occasionally we did find merit in the complaints. One faculty member thought that first semester freshmen should be doing graduate work; one student thought it would be all right to disrupt class at every opportunity.

What was behind most of these complaints was a lack of understanding of the educational philosophy of our honors courses and a difference in expectation on
the part of both faculty and students. Faculty expected graduate-caliber students; students expected faculty experienced in teaching honors courses. For years, I had been telling faculty through the honors program newsletter and through their department liaison that students enrolled in honors courses are not necessarily better students. Faculty should expect their honors students to be more motivated and more interested in learning but that was all they should expect. After all, at Radford University, students could self-select honors courses once I had interviewed them to find out their motivation for enrolling in a particular course. I found out that some faculty still expected their students would be different.

We had thought that offering workshops every semester on the teaching of honors courses would solve these problems. Faculty were encouraged to attend the workshop the semester before they would be teaching an honors section. But not all faculty attended. And, we found that that faculty who did not attend were invariably the ones who complained. We tried to encourage their attendance by telling them about some difficult situations some other faculty had had in teaching honors courses. We were still unable to get a substantial number of faculty to attend or open a dialogue with faculty about their expectations.

The Honors Council suggested that we offer an opportunity early in the semester for faculty currently teaching an honors course to come to discuss their problems and successes. That discussion, the Council hoped, could encourage faculty to make some sort of mid-course correction to solve any classroom problem. We have been doing that now for several years. But few faculty attend, And, those that do by and large want to discuss their success. Rarely did I hear about serious problems until it was too late to correct them.

But over the past year or so, the complaints have gotten louder. Faculty in larger numbers were complaining about students who were ill-prepared or were not willing to learn; students were complaining about faculty attitudes: faculty humiliating students in the classroom; or faculty demanding no work from them and giving the entire class A's; or who had little or no experience in teaching honors courses.

The Honors Council suggested two solutions. One solution I have already discussed in a previous column (NHR, Winter 1992) is to require students enrolled in their first honors course to take a one-credit course, a sort of lab, whose purpose is to enhance their honors experience. The focus would be on teaching them lateral and critical thinking skills and to learn how to work collaboratively. The other solution is to require faculty to attend a two-hour workshop on the teaching of honors courses the semester before they teach one.

The Council approved this one-credit course for students and also approved a motion requiring faculty who wish to teach an honors course to attend a workshop. This workshop would help them understand our educational philosophy, the kind of student who enrolls in honors courses, the expectations students have about them, and give them some ideas as to how to lead discussions and teach lateral and critical thinking as well as communication skills. Of course, the obvious question was what to do with those faculty who had already taught or were currently teaching honors courses. We decided that all faculty had to attend the workshop if they were scheduled to teach an honors course the following semester. Once any faculty member attended one workshop, however, he or she was excused for the next two years.

So here we are, the engine is overheating and we are desperately trying to get the train moving forward. It is easy to see that we should have been requiring faculty to attend this workshop all along—hindsight is always 20/20. But what do we do now? The Honors Council has approved two motions, but how do we implement them? The first, a course for students, must go before the University Affairs Council. It will do so this fall. The other, requiring faculty to attend a workshop, has already been implemented, not without a certain amount of difficulty.

I'm sure that similar situations have happened in many honors programs across the country, and, I'm also sure that the director and/or an honors council handled or solved the problem in many different ways. So let's talk about some of these solutions. For convenience, I'm going to stay with the decision to require faculty to attend a workshop.

The easiest solution, of course, is to handle individual faculty problems individually. But I found that too many faculty teaching an honors course were unwilling to teach another. These faculty told me that their students were not ready to take honors courses and perhaps since Radford is not the University of Virginia, perhaps it shouldn't have an honors program. They were genuinely upset. But I understood the source of their anguish: they expected UVA students or their equivalent.

The real source of their anguish, the one they wouldn't even admit to themselves, was that they had failed. Here they had a class of 20 of the best and brightest and they had been unable to reach them or teach them. They had always believed (as they graded seemingly endless stacks of papers
trying to stay one step ahead of "burn-out"—that if they were given smaller classes with students who really want to learn, they could teach these students. Isn’t that why they came into teaching? They had failed with students certified by the director to be motivated and interested in learning. Why couldn’t they teach these students?

You can see where this is going to lead. The faculty member must blame someone. Let’s blame the students. They obviously were not interested in learning. Let’s blame the director. He must not have screened these students well. Or, let’s blame Radford University for having an honors program. Some universities do not deserve to have honors programs.

The next easiest solution is to excuse those who have taught honors courses before—sort of a grandfather clause. And there is certainly merit for doing so. These faculty know what needs to be done, having done it before. And, besides you don’t want to antagonize some of your strongest supporters. Yet, just because they have been teaching honors courses and just because they appear to be successful does not mean they know the honors program’s goals or the kind of student who enrolls in honors courses. For all you know, the faculty member hasn’t complained because she is unable to teach a course of interest to her in her own department. Isn’t it worth it to put up with students she doesn’t consider “honors” students to teach a course in “Search for Meaning” to a class size of 20 students? Students may be unwilling to complain because they have heard that the instructor gives every student in the class an “A” and they don’t want to ruin a good thing; maybe students haven’t complained because they feel intimidated by the instructor’s having taught six honors courses before.

You can see where this is going to lead. Students stop taking honors courses because of their experience in “Search for Meaning.” Or the faculty member who gave every student an “A” may be planning to teach another honors section. But, of course, you don’t know of the severity of these two problems until some six semesters later when finally some students have the courage to complain or you finally have realized the faculty member gives every student an “A”—not just once but every time he offers the course. The damage is difficult to repair.

A better solution, one I should have tried, was to use those faculty who had taught honors courses before to assist at the workshop. This has many advantages: it lets them know you value their experience; it provides much needed perspectives for faculty who have not taught honors courses; and it tends not to antagonize them. But there is also a risk: many times these faculty despite their experience do not know what the educational philosophy of the program is. You’d hate to have them assist you and then make statements that reflect a clear lack of understanding which must be corrected immediately so as not to give the wrong impression.

The solution we tried, requiring all faculty to attend, may prove best in the long term but sure is hell in the short term. Many faculty said they would not attend because they had taught honors courses before and did not need nor had time to attend this workshop. The only way to get them to attend was to threaten to take the honors designation off the course. That worked, I’m both glad and sorry to say: glad because I did not lose any honors courses; sorry because I had to resort to such actions. All 35 faculty members teaching honors courses this fall attended the workshop or met with me because they were unable to attend either of the workshop sessions.

The faculty response was on the whole positive. Many faculty said that they now understood better the problems they had been having and would try to correct these problems in the next semester. Other faculty said that the information would help them teach in all of their courses, not just their honors section. Still another allowed that this workshop was helpful for faculty who had never taught an honors course before, but he himself did not find it very valuable. Those who had to be dragged to this workshop were highly critical. For them, it was a waste of time.

I do believe that after another two to three years when faculty know that teaching an honors course requires them to attend this workshop, the problem will disappear. But until then, the train won’t run as smoothly.
Every honors program has a natural life cycle that is influenced both by genetic and environmental factors. A successful program must be well-constructed but it needs to be lucky, too. Some programs bloom briefly and then are blighted by a budget cut by a change of administration; others become institutionalized and complacent and wither away; still others seem to be perennially successful, always adjusting to new circumstances.

In the process of forming a new, university-wide honors program at Eastern Michigan University, I have studied not only our own failed situation but also many other programs, both good and bad. In this series I want, first, to explain why honors programs sometimes fail; in subsequent installments, I will suggest ways to insure their vitality and longevity.

**PART ONE**

**Why Honors Programs Fail**

*From The National Honors Report 5.1 (March 1984): 11.*

Some factors that influence the success of an honors program appear to be outside our control. An honors director cannot launch a Russian satellite or create a national debate on the rising tide of mediocrity in the school; but within five years of the 1957 launching of Sputnik, 150 new honors programs came into being in the U.S. and at last year’s NCHC annual conference in Philadelphia, workshops for new directors played to standing-room only crowds. The times were propitious for starting new honors programs or bolstering old ones. But it was only a decade ago [1970’s] that the pendulum had swung the other way. Money that today would go to merit scholarships and honors programs then was spent on remediation, learning resource centers, and tutoring services.

At the local level, too, an honors program is often as the mercy of its environment. It may be scuttled by a productivity-minded president. A faculty union may forbid volunteerism (unpaid or unaccredited tutoring, mentoring, supervising) and thus inhibit the curricular flexibility on which honors programs depend. Another uncontrollable factor is institutional size; small-college programs are hampered because they lack the numbers to justify courses or they lack a sufficiently varied curriculum, while programs at large universities tend to be impersonal, unwieldy and hard to administer.

It became clear to me as I studied other honors programs that, while many had fallen victim to these accidental forces, others had survived many crises and even prospered in their wake. These successful programs had certain features in common. First, all had exceptionally capable and charismatic honors directors. Second, these programs were precisely tailored to the mission and character of their institutions. Third, they were both demanding and flexible at the same time: policies and procedures insured the program’s prestige while allowing for change and growth. The unsuccessful programs, on the other hand, were often administered by a committee or by a...
director with no vested authority. The honors curriculum was rigidly constructed according to a theoretical ideal, or it had no structure at all. Finally, the unsuccessful program appeared to have sold itself to one of two powerful campus constituencies—the elitist or the egalitarian: its requirements were either so restrictive as to allow only a handful of students into the program, or absurdly indiscriminate, so that an honors student was effectively defined as anyone interested in early registration.

Honors education at my own institution had been more or less at the mercy of its environment. In the 1960s, most large academic departments at EMU offered honors courses, but by the egalitarian 1970s, they were dying on the vine. Most accurately (since there was no vine), each department was working at cross-purposes with the others and struggling to survive. Courses, scheduled independently, overlapped each other. Faculty were assigned to them for the wrong reasons—expediency, reward or punishment, a reputation as a tough grader or published scholar—rarely on the basis of small-group teaching skills. Too often, what made these courses distinctive was simply that they involved more work—reading ten books rather than five, writing five papers rather than one. There were no external rewards for the efforts expended by honors students—no certificates or designations or pins or banquets or campus perquisites. Some honors courses were not even identified as such on the student’s transcript.

Institutional support for these modest efforts was virtually nonexistent. The swoon of Michigan’s chief industry—the automobile—had left the state economy in shambles. A traditional leader in its support for higher education, Michigan soon found itself last among the fifty states. Since our state appropriations are directly driven by credit-hour production, admissions standards became lax. Honors faculty became disheartened by the low level of student preparedness. The process of retrenchment and downsizing undermined faculty morale and discouraged institutional innovation. Department heads were harried by relentless productivity demands, and small honors courses became an unaffordable luxury.

By the end of the decade, there was a freeze on new hiring and new course development. The faculty teaching load had increased from nine to twelve hours, with ten contractually required office hours. An administration acting on the corporate-management model shoehorned more and more students into the classroom; faculty felt like blue-collar workers on a speeded-up assembly line. By late 1983 (when I first proposed a university-wide honors program), EMU was being characterized in college-prep publications as a party school that accepted anybody. Large numbers of gifted students who had applied and been admitted were finally lured elsewhere by honors programs and lucrative, merit-based scholarship offers.

I wanted to create an honors program that would survive the vicissitudes of national, state, and institutional politics. It would need to address the real needs of the university and be designed to fulfill its stated mission. And every campus constituency—regents, administrators, faculty, and students—would need to understand and endorse its reason for being.

Note to Contributors

Send your articles or announcements over e-mail or on disk (Word preferred) to Margaret Brown <email mcbrown@radford.edu> or 606 Third Avenue, Radford, VA 24141. Use J-Peg for art. No faxes are accepted.

Articles can be 1000-5000 words, informal. For new-to-experienced honors deans, directors, faculty, and students. The practical aspect of honors: recruiting, advising & retention; curriculum, teaching & learning, including service learning, experiential learning & study abroad; preparation for internships, major scholarships, and post-graduate education; also honors space, budgets, staffing, honors student housing & associations. Announcements: three to four months’ lead-time; no paid or commercial announcements.

(No poetry. Articles on “Best Course I Ever Taught/Took” discouraged. Formal, researched papers should be sent to Journal of the NCHC, c/o Ada Long, University of Alabama, Birmingham; <email adalong@uab.edu> for information.)
Essential Number 1: A Clearly Focused Rationale

An honors program is expensive. Whether the campus community perceives it, as a good investment will depend heavily on your ability to communicate its reason for being. In seeking to market a new honors program, you will be asked repeatedly, “Why do we need this?”

Here are six good reasons why an honors program is needed:
1. It helps to fulfill a college’s mission by encouraging academic excellence and by focusing attention on the values of a liberal education.
2. It is an effective means of recruiting and retaining students of high ability.
3. It buoys faculty morale by encouraging high standards of academic performance; by quickening the intellectual atmosphere on campus; and by stimulating faculty pride in the institution.
4. It helps to recruit and retain outstanding new faculty who are committed to quality in higher education.
5. It stimulates giving by parents, alumni, and friends, and opens up new opportunities for grant support.
6. It produces a substantial body of loyal, supportive and highly professional alumni.

In seeking institutional support for your proposal, you may wish to emphasize certain values over other. My own university has been especially concerned about increasing enrollments while at the same time upgrading academic standards. In recent years, Eastern Michigan University has enjoyed spectacular success in marketing: enrollments over the past four semesters have consistently exceeded our most ambitious estimates, despite a steady, planned tightening of admission standards. But we had done well in converting...

Essential Number 2: Clearly Stated Goals and Objectives

A brief, mnemonic goal statement such as this has several advantages. It simplifies a complex proposal. It enables many people to concentrate on a single objective. It serves as a lodestar to guide the program in its early stages. And it inspires confidence that the proposal is well thought out, workable, and worthwhile.

“But there are many ways in which administration can help during the program’s research-and-development phase. It can plug the idea in meetings, memos, and speeches. It can cut through red tape.”

Next, the brief goal statement should be elaborated into a set of specific objectives. Our goal—to recruit, retain, and reward academically talented students—was to be met by providing an environment that satisfied their intellectual and emotional needs. This translated into the following objectives:

Provide a format for close interaction between faculty and students. (A set of secondary objectives might describe this format in greater detail, e.g., tutorials, fireside chats in the dorm, etc.).

But there are many ways in which administration can help during the program’s research-and-development phase. It can plug the idea in meetings, memos, and speeches. It can cut through red tape.”
The Fall and Rise of an Honors Program
By Bob Holkeboer

PART THREE
The Feasibility Study

A good feasibility study—sometimes called a white paper—is an essential first step in the development of a new honors program. Since it will be widely read and carefully scrutinized, and since it proposes a model of excellence, it must be well thought out and impeccably written.

It must be both thorough and brief: no one will read a long document, especially a long, insipid document. But how is it possible to be thorough and brief at the same time? One way is to include support materials (evidence, examples from other institutions, charts, graphs, and tables) in the form of appendices. Another way is to prepare multiple versions of the same report. Faculty members will be able to digest an original report of twenty pages or so; administrators will want a five-page executive summary; and regents will be satisfied with a one-page abstract.

The feasibility study should systematically anticipate the sorts of questions you are likely to be asked as the proposal makes its way through the input system to final approval. If you are resuscitating an old program, this will require some tact, since one of the questions you will be asked is “What’s wrong with the old program?”
Other questions you will need to address are these:

- What is an honors program?
- How would such a program help to fulfill the stated mission of the institution?
- What are the benefits to the institution, and would these benefits justify the program’s cost?
- What are the criteria for admission and retention?
- What opportunities will be provided for transfer students? For non-traditional students?
- How will honors faculty be chosen?
- Will departments be compensated for the productivity loss entailed by reduced class size?
- What sort of honors curriculum is proposed?
- What benefits would honors students enjoy in addition to a challenging curriculum?
- How would honors students be graded?
- Where would the program offices be located?
- Would special housing be provided for honors students?
- How would the program be administered? To whom would the director be accountable? How will meaningful input be assured from interested constituencies?
- How much is this program going to cost?

There is no correct answer to these questions. How you answer them will depend on the peculiar nature of your institution—its size, mission, demographics, fiscal condition, student clientele, and so on.

Once the feasibility study is written, what do you do with it? I asked our academic vice-president to make 100 copies and mail them with a cover letter to all executive officers (including the President), deans, department heads, directors, selected faculty, student leaders, campus honoraries, and the campus media. The cover letter (on Academic Affairs letterhead and signed by the Vice-President) requested a written reaction by a stated deadline....

After highlighting the good parts [of the written reactions], I bound the memos in a notebook, made some overhead projections, and began my rounds.

The Fall and Rise of an Honors Program

By Bob Holkeboer

PART IV

Marketing the Proposal


On a college campus, good ideas are commonplace. At staff meetings, they are spilled daily like Onan’s seed in a scandal of prodigality. But only a small number of these ideas are finally implemented; even those that are developed to the point of a written proposal are likely to end up on a dusty shelf. Between the conception and the creation, T.S. Eliot wrote, falls the shadow.

Once you have completed a feasibility study for a new honors program, you must then ask yourself, “What am I prepared to do about it?” You must now take responsibility for what was once a mere lustful gleam in the eye. Your task now is to woo and to win. And when you have won, you must expect all the harrowing vicissitudes of new parenthood. You will almost certainly be named honors director. The honors program will be your baby. And your daily agenda will begin to resemble three a.m. feedings:

- Request grad assistant (Form P-14)
- Requisition one ream, P-14 forms
- Pick up one ream, requisition forms
- Ask Wanda to pick up speaker at airport
- Write a three-year strategic plan
- Call repairman
- Find replacement for Wanda
- Pick up speaker at airport
- Write speech for Central High Brain Bash
If you are not prepared to see your idea thus shorn of its glory, you may find yourself staring at the business end of the provost’s shotgun. But if your desire to succeed is very great, you must now bend your energies to marketing your proposal in a way that will insure success.

A successful program must be substantially supported by every segment of the campus community: students, faculty, administration, and regents. Your proposal should therefore be presented to influential committees and individuals in each of these segments.

Here are some important strategies as you make your rounds.

1. Send a copy of the proposal to the committee chair requesting 15 minutes at the beginning of the next meeting agenda. Enclose copies of a one-page summary for each committee member. Meanwhile, enlist the support of an influential committee member; ask this person to introduce a motion in support of the proposal at the conclusion of your presentation.

2. Before you meet with the committee, anticipate the concerns it is likely to express and adjust your presentation accordingly.

3. Simplify your presentation by means of visual graphic that emphasize the ways in which the program will benefit that group.

4. Keep the presentation short and upbeat. Leave some time for questions. After the meeting, be sure to obtain a copy of any outcome in the form of minutes, vote results, motions to endorse, etc.

5. Carefully note any sources of resistance. If an influential committee member raises objections, meet with that person as soon as possible to discuss the objection. Such persons often become important allies when they realize that you sincerely value their opinion.

6. Obtain endorsements in a bottom-up direction. Although top-down endorsement (starting with the president and working down) may achieve the desired outcome more quickly and surely, the program will be hamstrung in the long run by a narrow base of support. Programs in which the entire campus community feels a strong sense of ownership will be more likely to survive changing presidencies.

"I presented three sets of program features and three budgets. Since we are in automobile country, I called them the Mercedes, the Oldsmobile, and the Chevette. We settled for a one-year lease on the Chevette, with the hope of trading up."

Presentations to students should focus on the major campus honoraries and student government. Since these groups are largely composed of high achievers, the merits of the proposal will be obvious and you may expect a cordial reception, especially if you have provided for program participation by upperclassmen.

At the faculty level, the presentation should be made to the college council and the faculty senate. (If your faculty is unionized, a meeting with union officers is also prudent; proposals in union settings should avoid any dependence on volunteer teaching.) Presentations to faculty groups should stress the program’s capability of attracting more able students and the rewards of teaching honor courses. And you should expect to encounter such questions as these:

1. How will faculty be selected to teach in the program?
2. How will faculty performance be evaluated?
3. Will the program budget drain resources from other instructional programs?
4. Will the program remove gifted students from non-honors courses?
5. What are the admission and retention requirements?
6. Will departments be penalized for the reduced productivity entailed by low-enrollment honors sections?
7. Will existing honors courses and activities be allowed to continue under the new regime?
8. Aren’t honors programs elitist?

Department heads will also raise the questions of reduced productivity and faculty selection. Will the department be expected to develop its own program? How will faculty be motivated to supervise individualized honors activities such as the honors thesis? Your presentation should emphasize the ability of a strong departmental honors program to attract gifted majors, to recruit and retain outstanding faculty, and to ventilate faculty careers.

Deans will see in the proposal an opportunity for new program development that will (a) enhance the public image of their colleges; (b) recruit outstanding students and faculty; (c) stimulate research and creative activity; and (d) provide new avenues for alumni and grant support. Deans of the professional colleges will be concerned if the program focuses narrowly on the liberal arts.
Although the Academic Affairs division typically supervises honors programs, a comprehensive program interfaces with virtually every campus unit. In the case of our program, these early meetings produced some substantial benefits: extended library-loan, mainframe computer access, and early registration privileges for honors students; close cooperation with Admissions in recruiting, with Financial Aid in merit scholarships, with Academic Services in advising; special housing; and so on. A program that is thrust on these offices will yield grudging support at best. On the other hand, persons who have had a hand in shaping the program will feel a sense of pride in it.

Finally, assemble a portfolio of written endorsements, bind it attractively, and send copies to the president and academic vice-president requesting a one-hour meeting. This meeting is likely to turn not on the question of whether the program is desirable or not, but on how much it will cost. I presented three sets of program features and three budgets. Since we are in automobile country, I called them the Mercedes, the Oldsmobile, and the Chevette. We settled for a one-year lease on the Chevette, with the hope of trading up.

One month later (six months after the idea was conceived), the proposal was presented to the Board of Regents where it was unanimously approved. I was named honors director. I had neither staff nor any facility, but I did have a 50% reassigned time, a budget of $9,000 and a year to plan. It was time to go to work!

Once administrative approval for a new program has been granted, the next step is to shape a program that is as responsive as possible to all campus constituencies. A representative policy-making body is essential at this point. We formed an Honors Advisory Council consisting of one faculty member and one student from each college. Each of these ten persons had one vote—a symbolic gesture expressing the importance we attached to student input. Several at-large, nonvoting members were also appointed; these represented non-academic campus units that would be affected by the new program—Housing, Financial Aid, Academic Services, Admissions, Records, Campus Life, etc.

At our first meeting, I handed out a worksheet. The goal of the program was emblazoned on the cover: “Recruit, Retain, and Recognize the Academically Gifted Student.” Inside were several general objectives to guide us in our work:

1. Capitalize on university-wide support. (In the absence of a large budget, we would need to keep cost and administrative apparatus at a minimum, relying instead on people power, hard work, and careful strategic planning.)

2. Keep in mind the special needs of returning students, transfers, minorities, and foreign students. (We wanted to recognize the changing student populations on our campus and accommodate as many non-traditional students as possible.)

3. Create a program that is truly university-wide. (We sought to avoid close identification with a particular college, program, or division. We wanted the program to be a visible symbol of interdivisional cooperation and collegiality.)

4. Avoid elitism. (Insure that academic superiority is not confused with human superiority. The benefits students derive from the program should be those that enhance their academic success, not mere perquisites.)

5. Integrate the new programs with existing honors activities/programs. (Respect the integrity of on-going programs awards banquets, showcasing events, honors dorms, etc. The new program rather should facilitate these than threatened by it.)
6. Respond to gifted students' need for challenge, freedom, and curricular flexibility. *(Insure close interaction between instructor and student; provide knowledgeable and accessible advisement; provide opportunities for student interaction outside the classroom; encourage and reward non-curricular learning experiences, information, and resources; provide a reward structure for high academic performance.)*

7. Involve honors students themselves in policy and program planning. *(Students must be convinced that the program is designed for them, rather than for the convenience of university personnel.)*

The worksheet went on to list specific objectives that needed to be achieved over the next few months. A small working taskforce was assigned to each objective and transfer students, a significant population at our university. We also made the expedient decision to create honors sections of existing courses to avoid the impediment of new course development. But how many courses would be required? Which courses, and in what sequence? What strategy would be most effective to encourage departments to create their own upper-division honors programs? What standard features should they possess? What curricular alternatives could be offered university-wide?

3. Develop a menu of academic benefits for program members. *(What are the real needs of honors students? What benefits can be provided immediately at little or no cost to the institution?)*

4. Recruit honors faculty. *(On what basis would faculty be chosen to teach in the program? What courses would be scheduled initially and who would teach them?)*

5. Develop promotional and informational literature. *(This would require a balancing act, since promotional materials needed to be developed at the same time that the program's features were being shaped. We were recruiting students for a program that did not yet exist. Descriptive information was also required for the Undergraduate Catalog, the Campus Directory, Systems and Operations manuals, the course schedule booklet, etc.)*

6. Establish a physical facility. *(We were offered office space in the Community of Scholars, a 400-student honors residence hall—attractive and centrally located. The task was to refurbish it, furnish it, and let people know about it. A secondary problem for the upcoming semester was to integrate the honors program with the residence hall.)*

7. Establish policies for record keeping and certification. *(We needed to establish effective liaison with Admissions, Academic Services, Registration, University Computing, and Academic Records. What immediate investment should be made in a hard-copy records system? To what extent would our operation be computerized?)*

8. Develop a plan for the systematic recruitment of gifted students. *(Our goal was to recruit gifted students. Our goal was to recruit 200 freshman honors students as our initial class. We were more cautious about encouraging already enrolled students to join, since no departmental honors programs were yet available to them.)*

The Honors Advisory Council, meeting regularly over the summer months, succeeded in hammering out the program's essential features. Most decisions were arrived at by consensus, with two exceptions. Predictably, these had to do with (a) standards for admission and retention and (b) the manner of selecting honors faculty. The chief litigants in these arguments were divided over the larger philosophical issue of elitism versus egalitarian. Fortunately, these views were about equally represented on the committee and a spirit of collegiality finally prevailed, with the result that the program we ultimately designed was balanced and fair.

Detailed minutes were kept of

"Insure that academic superiority is not confused with human superiority."
each meeting and copies sent to department heads, deans, directors, and vice-presidents. Agendas of upcoming meetings were sent to interested persons and those whose programs might be affected by a particular agenda.

By summer’s end, the council could look back with pride on its achievements:

- Established curricular guidelines.
- Set standards for admission and retention.
- Created a menu of curricular alternatives for departmental honors.
- Disseminated program information on campus.
- Met with departmental curricular committees to facilitate program development.
- Developed a list of benefits of honors program membership.
- Established a clear policy on the matter of faculty selection and course content.
- Recruited honors faculty and completed scheduling for a test semester prior to the program’s official debut.
- Developed an attractive recruiting brochure.
- Established a functional office facility.
- Wrote the Constitution and By-Laws for a proposed student honors association.
- Wrote and disseminated informational literature.
- Established a liaison with the talented and gifted program on campus.
- Prepared a detailed budget proposal and strategic plan for the upcoming year.
- Wrote and distributed an honors program policy manual for faculty and staff.

The program’s foundation had been laid. During the upcoming year, we would have the leisure to plan in painstaking detail for the program’s debut one-year hence. The decision to take a year to plan was a wise one. It enabled us to implement a full-featured, university-wide program not hurt by hasty development.

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The Fall and Rise of an Honors Program

By Bob Holkeboer

PART SIX

The Program


The design elements that are the most critical to the success or failure of a new or refurbished honors program are (1) admission and retention criteria; (2) curriculum; (3) faculty recruitment and compensation; (4) reward structure; (5) physical facility; (6) administrative structure; (7) market and promotion; and (8) extra curriculum.

Admission and Retention Criteria

Over a 25-year history of honors education, a sound orthodoxy has emerged that may be summed up in four words: Wide entrance. Narrow exit. This means that, while admission decisions should err on the side of generosity, retention and certification decisions should err on the side of rigidity. As it is written, many are called but few are chosen.

The pressure to admit comes from many directions: proud parents, high school counselors, alumni, and friends; admissions counselors who know the value of honors program admission in closing the sale; administrators enamored of head counts; department heads who fret about productivity; and faculty who want their course to make. The temptation to interpret admissions standards closely accounts for the pyramidal shape of so many honors programs.

The price of promiscuity outside the gates is high. Members become cynical about their own program. Students who wash out after a year or so tend to blame the program for their failure rather than themselves. Faculty complain about the mediocrity of their students. Administrators—noting the high attrition rate—question the retention values of the program.

Decision-makers are wise to find a middle ground between rank expedience and lofty idealism, both of which will quickly sabotage a program. One way of doing this is by allowing for probationary status: students marginally qualified for honors work, or students with high GPAs and low test scores (or the
reverse), may be admitted on a probationary basis. The acceptance letter should explain clearly what the student must achieve to become a member in good standing. Similarly, members in good standing who fail to fulfill expectations may be giving a probationary semester to right the ship.

An honors director should also take pains to educate the campus community about honors students. Parents need to be told that admissions decisions are made in the interest of their child’s academic success. Faculty need to be told that their honors students are not likely to be geniuses but are the ablest members of the student body. And administrators need constantly to be reminded that an honors program is one area where bigness is not a desirable goal.

The size of an institution is an important factor in the admissions process. Small colleges are sometimes obliged to be generous in admitting students in order to obtain the critical mass necessary to fill even a limited number of honors courses. Large institutions with limited staffs and resources will find it difficult to scrutinize each application in detail; they must rely instead on automated decisions based on quantifiable data such as GPA, test scores, and class rank.

I believe students are more likely to value membership in an honors program if they have actively sought it and gone through a few hoops to get it. We require students to complete a fairly elaborate application form, including much information already available to us in other forms. We also require two letters of recommendation and a 500-word essay in which the student reviews past accomplishments, articulates future goals, and concludes with a statement of proposed commitment to the program. In marginal cases, we may require an interview. This somewhat burdensome application process has two salutary effects: it discourages students interested primarily in the benefits and prestige of honors status; and for those who are admitted, it heightens the satisfaction of admission and membership. We reinforce the pride of accomplishment with a personal letter to the student, a press release to the student’s hometown paper, and a thank-you letter to writers of recommendations notifying them of the outcome.

“Over a 25-year history of honors education, a sound orthodoxy has emerged that may be summed up in four words: Wide entrance. Narrow exit.”

What should the standards be? These will vary from one institution to the next, and will be driven in large part by numerical goals. Honors students typically represent the talented tenth of the student body, but planners should keep in mind that many qualified students will choose not to participate. (An average recruiting effort is likely to attract only about a third of those qualified). Records officers can generally provide information on the numbers that a minimum GPA is likely to yield. NCHC surveys indicate the average GPA standard in honors programs to be 3.25. A minimum of 3.5 would produce a highly selective program, whereas a minimum of 3.0 would be broad-based and egalitarian. Planners of new programs tend to set unreasonable high standards at first, later confronting the awkward necessity of lowering them. It is better to set a reasonable standard at the outset, then stick to it.

For new freshmen, a number of factors may be taken into account, including GPA, test scores, class rank, recommendations, special talents, evidence of leadership ability, and communications skills. Of these, only the first three are quantifiable. If the admissions process is automated, other considerations must be thrown out, and it is proper to speak of minima rather than guidelines.

GPA is the least reliable predictor of academic success. I have seen college applications from students with 4.0 GPA and an ACT composite score of seven. And it is not uncommon to encounter students from highly selective schools with scores in the ACT 30/SAT 1400 range with relatively low GPAs. A GPA needs to be judged in relation to the quality of the high school and the student’s class rank, or in relation to average GPA in the recruiting area. A selective honors program will look for GPAs in the 3.75-4.0 range (In our area, a GPA of 3.5 represents the top 25% of college-bound students; a 3.75 GPA the top 7%). An ACT score of 26 equates roughly to an SAT score of 1150, the 90th percentile of students taking these qualifying examinations.

Transfer and returning adult students represent yet another constituency for whom admission standards must be established. Transfers from community colleges present a special problem since the quality of colleges and curricula vary widely. For this reason, we require some community college transfers to demonstrate their ability to perform university-level work over the course of a fifteen-hour semester before considering their application. Evaluating the ability of returning adults is even more difficult. We depend heavily on an interview in such cases and are inclined to admit those who
express a strong desire for honors work, since their experience and maturity contribute much of value to the honors classroom and their membership in the program gives them needed confidence and self-esteem.

Our standards for retention in the program are more precise and are rigidly enforced. Briefly, our program is two tiered: a student may graduate with Honors in General Studies (18 hours of general honors coursework, no thesis) and/or Department Honors (12 hours of honors work in the major, thesis included). In addition to these requirements, successful honors graduates must have achieved a 3.3 GPA at graduation and successfully completed at least three hours of honors credit per fifteen credit hours.

Enforcing these standards has not been painless. Reaching the one-inch line is a splendid achievement, but not quite a touchdown. We remind students who fall short that although they won't graduate with honors, their transcripts will nevertheless reflect their honors work and their learning has been profoundly enriched.

They are not consoled, of course. But that is the way with honor, still much sought after and rarely, wonderfully attained.

The Fall and Rise of an Honors Program
By Bob Holkeboer

PART SEVEN
Curriculum and Faculty

A well-designed honors curriculum must take into account both expedient and idealistic considerations. A curriculum conceived by a committee in an intellectual vacuum is easily sabotaged by such practical obstacles as graduation requirements, lab conflicts, and faculty availability. On the other hand, programs jerry-built from the scrap heap of an existing curriculum raise legitimate questions about the distinctiveness of an honors education.

In many ways, the objectives of honors learning are no different from those of higher education in general. We want not only to prepare our students for professional careers but also to provide them with a solid foundation in the liberal arts and to arm them with the skills needed to function effectively as adults. But honors students share some particular characteristics that distinguish themselves from the mass. Most respond with alacrity to intellectual challenge. A large majority plan to continue their education in graduate or professional schools and thus welcome opportunities to learn research skills under a science mentor. Their imagination and broad knowledge base enable them to think and do work that crosses traditional disciplinary boundaries.

In planning our own honors curriculum, we sought to emphasize the manner in which able students are most likely to learn, rather than on a list of required courses. We noted with alarm the deterioration of written and oral communication skills among the current generation of college graduates and decided to make frequent writing and speaking practice a hallmark of our curriculum. We regularly urge our honors faculty to seek alternatives to presentational teaching styles; to assign group projects and fieldwork; to require students to plan units, serve as discussion leaders, or even periodically to teach a class; to find ways in which students can submit their work to public scrutiny; to get out of the classroom and into the workplace; to assign work that involves campus and community resources and that has immediate, practical results.

Our lower-division (Basic Studies) program consists primarily of honors sections of required courses in the arts and sciences. These are obviously attractive from an administrative point of view; their enrollments are predictable; they are not tied to the expertise of one individual; and they require a minimum of planning. We offer about 25 of these each semester as an à la carte menu from which a student may select according to taste. Most students take one or two a semester; a few take as many as they can schedule. Students who complete 18 hours of these courses with at least a B-minus in
appeal because it costs nothing: faculty mentors provide project supervision without remuneration. Students appreciate the flexibility and relative freedom of the contract system as well as the opportunity to work closely with a nurturing mentor. But the system has many pitfalls as well. For the student, it can be lonely work without much tangible reward; and if the supervising instructor is uncooperating or unavailable, it can be an exercise in frustration. Faculty are likely to view contract honors as yet another distraction from their research. And the honors staff may find themselves buried in a mountain of paperwork. For these reasons, contract honors should be approached with caution.

A particularly sensitive aspect of the honors director’s job is that of assigning faculty to teach honors courses. To recruit gifted students effectively, the director must be able to ensure that exceptionally capable instructors teach honors courses. A recent poll indicated that 70% of all college faculty rate themselves in this category. Yet only about 3% of the aggregate are available.) We may provide the director, the department head, and the faculty member. This decision, I believe, should be made on the basis of teaching talent rather than research ability or reputation. Honors students themselves, when questioned, clearly prefer the low profile but effective teacher to the inefficient teacher with an international reputation. It is also important to distinguish between types of teaching talent; a brilliant lecturer may be ill at ease in a small group.

Finally, it is nearly impossible to ensure effective honors instruction when an honors program is forced to rely on volunteerism and department goodwill. A successful honors program must have a budget line to support instruction, although this may take a variety of forms. I know one honors director who gets the professors he wants by cash gifts (the amount is geared to supply and demand) to departments. Some programs pay a proportionate amount of the professor’s salary (an expensive option, since honors professors are often highly paid). We give department heads the wherewithal (typically one FTE per three-hour course). This is a relatively low-cost option that works well in areas where part-timers are readily available. In high demand areas (business and computer science, for example), we may provide the higher level of compensation needed to attract adjunct faculty. Without this, few department heads will be willing to suffer the productivity loss entailed by small honors courses, or to give up popular teachers with substantial student followings.

Each of our honors courses is evaluated every semester by means of a form devised by honors students themselves. We distribute an objective summary of these responses to students, faculty, and administrators as well as to the student we hope to recruit. If these evaluations can be distributed in public without embarrassment and even with considerable pride, it is a sign that the curriculum is working well.
How a Consultant Can Help Your Program

By Grey Austin


Last year, a state governing board for higher education invited me to review the honors programs at the state-assisted universities for which that board has responsibility, with the charge that I make recommendations for strengthening those programs. My report was to be, and has now been, integrated into a much larger study of higher education needs within the state. That is the nicest kind of assignment. I was able to work closely with the honors planning process at each institution, with the expectation that the consequence of the study would be an increase in support for the programs. The programs differed in structure, strength and support, a plus for the consultant who thrives on variety, and each had its unique features to emphasize. The next steps in the growth of each could have been, and to a certain extent were, identified by the local honors folk, but the involvement of a consultant added credibility to their analyses and brought their needs to the attention of a higher administrative and policy body. In one instance, the decision to move the program to the status of an honors college was at stake, and, with the consultant’s support, that step has now been taken.

More often, consultants work with one institution at a time, alone or in teams of two or three. The size of the team would depend on how extensive and intensive the task is to be, on how the particular institution regards the role of consultants, and on the funds available.

Among the reasons for inviting a consultant is the need for help with the development of specific program components. As examples, there may be an interest in building a learning environment or an international learning community, or in developing a plan for writing and thinking across the honors curriculum, or in faculty development toward greater collaborative learning, or in the inclusion of more opportunities for experiential learning in the curriculum, or in the development of a plan for assessment of student learning. There are within the NCHC membership specialists in each of these areas, and potential consultants will be found among those who have written articles on the subjects in recent issues of the Report or who have presented workshops that respond to those issues at recent regional and national conferences. One will also discover that those who have planned and directed Honors Semesters have become such experts on experiential education that they are regularly included in the leadership of programs and workshops conducted by the Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning (CAEL). And it is easy to identify which institutions have learning communities and which have built assessment of learning into their programs.

Consultation on specific program components, as well as for faculty development, may take the form of workshops for which the consultants act as trainers or facilitators. These persons may be invited back periodically to repeat and expand the training process. In such an arrangement, continuity of leadership has value.

A consultant or team may also be invited to help develop an honors proposal or to review the honors program and make recommendations. In the latter case, the invitation maybe initiated by an honors director who has gained approval and funding for the visit from the institution’s chief academic officer, and in the former case the invitation may come from the CAO directly. It is important to the consultant, as well as for the officials and committees, to be clear about who has done the contracting and to whom the report is to directed. Seldom, I think, has a review been conducted by central administrative officials for the purpose of eliminating a program or its director, but such an occurrence is not unknown. A wise consultant will find ways of identifying any deviousness before accepting or carrying through such an assignment. The consultant cannot, on the other hand, control the use to which the report is put.

When help with the development or review of a program is desired, the selection of a consultant (or consultants) may be more complex than it is for consultation on specific program components. There are a number of leaders in the honors movement who have consulted with a variety of institutions and programs, who are familiar with a wide array of program components, who understand the history and
rationale for honors education, and who have a credible style of contact with faculty, students, and administrators. My suggestion for finding the right consultant or consultants for a given situation are these: ask a few experienced directors to recommend three to five names for consideration; ask for vitae from those whose names appear on more than one list; discover and read what they have written on honors topics; find out where they have consulted recently and call someone there for a reference; call the potential consultants and discuss the local situation and the role that a consultant might play: decide, invite, agree on schedule, report, fees and expenses, etc. From time to time, NCHC has compiled a list of consultants. While such a list could serve as a starting point for the search, most of the steps suggested above remain necessary because inclusion on the NCHC list is a matter of self-selection. [Note: the NCHC list available at the national office now contains only the names of those who have attended workshops on program review and evaluation led by the Evaluation Committee.]

In my view, it is particularly important that the consultant be someone who can provide a shot in the arm for the local honors planning process and who can stimulate an interest in honors to central administrators, because it may be that such a focus of attention on honors will not occur again for another five or ten years. Of nearly equal importance is the support and encouragement that an honors director can gain from conversations with a colleague who knows what is happening elsewhere in honors. I have found that a consultation takes on the air of a working holiday—if that is an oxymoron, so be it—as students, faculty, and honors staff are drawn away from their regular schedules to instruct the visitor, to hear of successful ventures elsewhere, and to dream and plan for what might be in the best of all honors worlds. And if the call to be hospitable includes an occasion or two for exceptional dining, the quality of the consultation is enhanced for all.

Hospitality would, however, stop short of bribery. The consultant is, after all, hired to produce an honest and objective report, and probably not all of the news will be good. The consultant is not there to ratify all local decisions or even to approve of all personnel appointments. The unqualified seal of approval may not be forthcoming. It should be expected, however, that bad news, if any, will be presented with positive recommendations, and with encouragement and hope for better days ahead. If there are genuine problems with the program, then it is highly likely that the director already knows about them and that the process of calling attention to them will include a recommendation that there be sufficient administrative and budgetary support to correct them.

And even though the director may have been saying the same thing for years, the recommendation from an outside consultant may carry enough more weight to produce the desired results.

A general program review requires advance preparation. Ideally, it should begin with an honors program self-study in which the goals and objectives of the program are reviewed; student and faculty participants evaluate themselves, each other, and the program elements; measure of alumni satisfaction are gathered; data from assessment instruments are taken into consideration; and hopes realized and unrealized are recorded. The self-study report (if available) would be sent to the consultant well in advance of the visit, along with annual reports, college bulletins, planning documents and other pertinent information. Both the institution and the consultant will do the homework in advance so that the time on campus can be used effectively.

If a new program is to be developed, then the local campus needs to be assessed for its readiness for an honors program and for the resources, including faculty and administrative interest, available to it. In the usual pattern, student demographics and curricular patterns are reviewed for their relevance to honors; working programs in similar types of institutions are searched out for useful examples to follow; a proposal is written by a faculty and student committee; and a response is received from administrators who have the power to allocate budget and assign faculty. In this process, there are several points at which a consultant may be useful.

The most elaborate planning process that I have seen was one in which the internal planning committee had an external counterpart, consisted of five members, which visited the campus on two occasions and responded regularly to drafts of the program proposal as it was produced by the internal committee. After the proposal was adopted, the chairman of the committee was invited to return to address trustees, key faculty, and administrators on the meaning and importance of honors and of that institution’s new program. Most institutions will not seek that degree of consultation, but an experienced director from outside can view the campus situation from a unique honors perspective, can suggest program components to fit it, and can encour-
age the planning process both during a visit and by responding to proposals.

The accompanying schedule of a two-day program review visit is offered as a sample, though rather too tightly scheduled, with acknowledgement that it should be modified to fit the institution, and that if two or more consultants participate, there may be more time for class visits, conversation with students and faculty, and the like.

It is appropriate to expect that a final report will be delivered in a timely fashion. Some time must be allowed for the consultant to catch up on his or her own work, and a team of consultants will need some time to agree on the document, but I believe the report should be handed in within three weeks after the close of the visit.

It is also appropriate to expect that the consultant(s) will continue to show interest by being available for phone conversations and for review and comment on written proposals. For certain kinds of consultation, such as faculty development, a schedule of subsequent visits may be arranged. This ongoing relationship should be anticipated and contracted for as near the beginning of the consultation as possible.

For these services, the institution should expect to pay an honorarium and expenses. There is no established honorarium, but recent experience leads me to suggest a minimum stipend of $25—to—$300 per day [in 1989] for the time of the site visit. To expect to receive these services for less is to identify them as of little value, clearly a mistake when you want your administration to give serious attention to the results of the consultation.

**SUGGESTED SCHEDULE FOR CONSULTANT’S VISIT**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day One</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9:00 a.m.</td>
<td>Meet with deans or provost</td>
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<tr>
<td>10:00 a.m.</td>
<td>Attend honors class</td>
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<tr>
<td>11:00 a.m.</td>
<td>Meet with honors students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Noon</td>
<td>Lunch with honors committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>2:00</td>
<td>Meet with other deans or vice-presidents</td>
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<tr>
<td>3:00</td>
<td>Meet with honors faculty</td>
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<tr>
<td>4:00</td>
<td>Open meeting for interested persons—questions and answers, complaints, testimonials.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Dinner with some combination of central administrators and/or honors staff and committee</td>
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<tr>
<th>Day Two</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<tr>
<td>8:00 a.m.</td>
<td>Breakfast with honors director</td>
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<tr>
<td>9:00 a.m.</td>
<td>Meet with director of admissions, financial aid, and housing</td>
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<tr>
<td>11:00</td>
<td>Meet with president</td>
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<tr>
<td>Noon</td>
<td>Lunch with honors committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>2:30</td>
<td>Time to consolidate notes, draft recommendations</td>
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<tr>
<td>4:00</td>
<td>Informal report to provost and/or honors directors, honors committee, and others</td>
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**SUBMIT FINAL REPORT**

(TIME LINE: THREE WEEKS)

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**Honors Web Sites**

- NCHC [http://www.nchchonors.org](http://www.nchchonors.org)
- Northeast Regional Honors Council [http://www.oswego.edu/nenchc](http://www.oswego.edu/nenchc)
- Southern Regional Honors Council [http://www.utm.edu/departments/acadpro/honors/srhc](http://www.utm.edu/departments/acadpro/honors/srhc)
- Great Plains Regional Honors Council [http://www.okstate.edu/honors/gphc.html](http://www.okstate.edu/honors/gphc.html)
- Western Regional Honors Council [http://nebula.honors.unr.edu/wrhc/](http://nebula.honors.unr.edu/wrhc/)
Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program and How They Grew:
A Brief History of Honors Evaluation in NCHC

By Richard J. Cummings


At the meetings of the NCHC Executive Committee and Committee Chairs in Chicago on March 3-5, 1994, there occurred an event which stands as a watershed in the history of NCHC and as a defining moment for the Honors Evaluation Committee. I am referring to the endorsement by the Executive Committee of a document drafted by the Honors Evaluation Committee listing 16 basic characteristics of a fully developed honors program. The stage was set for this event at the St. Louis Conference in October where the Committee planned to discuss and refine the draft of a document containing a list of 13 basic characteristics of a minimally-acceptable honors program, a formulation based in part on a 1961 document endorsed by ICSS (the Inter-University Committee on the Superior Student, the forerunner of NCHC) entitled “Major Features of a Full Honors Program.”

Although the draft was intended strictly as a working document, it had somehow become the subject of so much discussion and controversy among conference attendees that by the time it was introduced at a Committee-sponsored workshop toward the end of the conference entitled “An Overview of Evaluation/Assessment/Accreditation Issues in Honors Education,” there was a strong sentiment in favor of making the document available as soon as possible. Subsequently, it was retitled “Basic Characteristics of a Fully-Developed Honors Program,” modified slightly, marked clearly “DRAFT,” and copies were distributed to those who had specifically requested it.

After the conference, I sent copies to all those in attendance at the workshop with a request for suggestions on improving this draft. Based largely on those suggestions, the document was further modified and four additional basic characteristics were added. Finally, at the meeting of the Executive Committee in Chicago on March 3-5, 1994, some minor additional editorial changes were made reducing the number of characteristics from 17 to 16, and the document was approved.

Although the Committee has repeatedly been given a charge which requires that it “coordinate and oversee all activities of NCHC relating to Honors evaluation and institutional accreditation as it pertains to Honors,” we have not until now succeeded in identifying basic working criteria to inform the evaluation process.

It is the Committee’s considered opinion that, in bending over backwards to allow the broadest possible definition of what constitutes honors education and to avoid offending its members or potential members, NCHC has heretofore avoided establishing basic standards, and that it was high time to move in the direction of formulating explicit guidelines. Before presenting the 16 basic characteristics as finally approved, it may prove useful to provide a brief history of honors evaluation in NCHC.

Since its founding in 1966, NCHC has been concerned about and involved in the evaluation of honors programs. The organization often received requests for qualified evaluators and, accordingly, the Executive Secretary-Treasurer identified experienced members - some of whom were self-recommended - pretty much on an Ad hoc basis, but no formal policy had ever been formulated. At the beginning of the last decade, C. Grey Austin, as chair of the short-lived NCHC Committee on Evaluation and Assessment, authored the Handbook for Evaluation of an Honors Program which was published by NCHC and served as a useful guide in evaluation matters until 1991 when NCHC brought out the successor to the original handbook entitled Honors Programs: Development, Review, and Revitalization. As president of NCHC in 1987, I prepared a questionnaire to poll the membership on its major concerns relative to the organization.

The questionnaire was mailed to the membership with the November 1987 ballots, and the response was very revealing, especially with respect to evaluation and accreditation issues. Although only 27% of the membership responded to the questionnaire, the responses provided a representative sampling. The question that elicited some of the most vigorous reactions was the following: “Would you find it useful for NCHC to develop a more systematic approach to the evaluation and accreditation of honors programs? Please explain.” The respondents were divided quite evenly into three categories:
Thirty-two percent definitely favored the involvement of NCHC in the evaluation and accreditation of honors programs; 31% strongly opposed such involvement; 37% were either undecided or chose not to respond to the question.

Many of those who favored NCHC involvement tended to do so out of a conviction that NCHC could contribute to greater recognition of the importance of honors on their campuses because “administrators want impartial instruments for evaluation” and “accreditation could provide members with leverage to gain additional support at their institutions.” One respondent suggested that NCHC “might want to get ahead of what seems to be a developing trend and work out suggestions/means for doing value-added assessment of honors programs.” Others favored NCHC involvement in the evaluation/accreditation process out of resentment toward rival programs of little substance which they felt should be shown up for what they are—mere facades. Many of those who answered this question in the affirmative made a clear distinction between simple “evaluation” which they favored, and more complex “accreditation” which they opposed.

Others focused strictly on accreditation which they condemned with comments such as “accreditation groups tend to be stifling and uncreative—apologists for the status quo, ugh!”

Those who opposed involvement did so primarily out of a desire to protect the creative and liberalizing dimension of honors from the threat of restrictive codification and eventual calcification. Opponents also tended to feel that the systematic evaluation of honors programs is a virtual impossibility because the structure, philosophy, and priorities of honors programs vary so greatly from institution to institution. As one respondent put it, the idea that NCHC can effectively accredit honors programs “would be a mistake” because “unlike a scientific, literary or artistic professional society, NCHC can expect to exert no control over a university’s honors curriculum or the credentials of its graduates.”

There continues to be a strong consensus that NCHC should not get into the official accreditation business precisely because our mission is not to dictate policy or, even less, to denigrate honors programs whatever their faults, but rather to provide support to all honors programs who seek it, regardless of their size or strength. At the same time, those who wanted to see NCHC involved in the evaluation process however tangentially had a strong case since, sooner or later, all honors programs undergo some form of evaluation, and who better than NCHC is equipped to ensure that the evaluation process is informed and equitable and truly concerned with the best interests of the program.

In the wake of such a vigorous response, 1 became increasingly concerned with the need to address accreditation and evaluation issues, and that concern led to the establishment in 1988 of an Ad hoc Committee on Accreditation and Evaluation chaired by C. Grey Austin. The Ad hoc Committee’s main accomplishment was contacting the six regional accrediting agencies to invite them to consider collaborating with NCHC in assuring that honors programs were not overlooked in the accreditation process and that accrediting teams have an adequate appreciation of honors education when accrediting institutions met with honors programs.

In 1990, then NCHC President Ted Humphrey asked me to chair a Task Force on Evaluation and Accreditation to which he gave the following charge, namely, that “it determine whether NCHC should establish a standing committee to deal specifically with issues relating to the evaluation of honors education outcomes, the accreditation of honors programs, and the participation of honors administrators and faculty on accreditation teams.” The other members were Faith Gabelnick of Western Michigan University, John Grady of La Salle University, Jocelyn Jackson of Morehouse College, Herald Kane of San Diego City College, and William Mech (ex officio). The entire Task Force met for the first time on Oct. 26, 1990, during the annual NCHC conference at the Baltimore Hyatt Regency to discuss the charge and agree on the procedures to follow in addressing the charge. A report outlining the Committee’s proposed policies and procedures was presented to the Executive Committee on Oct. 28, 1990, which stated that the Task Force would “poll the membership through The National Honors Report and a direct mail questionnaire in addition to seeking broadly-based input through regional meetings and through other forms of networking.”

Accordingly, 505 questionnaires were mailed in mid-February, 1991, to the institutional members of NCHC. By early April, a surprisingly high total of 308 (or 61%) were completed and returned. Two things were abundantly clear: (1) that NCHC should not be involved in the accreditation of honors programs (only 29% favored such involvement); and (2) that a standing committee should be established to “coordinate and oversee all activities of NCHC relating to honors evaluation and institutional accreditation as it pertains to honors.” (Sixty-four percent favored a standing committee and 93% noted that the major duties of the committee should be to formalize and refine the evaluation process).

The Fall 1991 issue of The National Honors Report, contained a detailed analysis of the membership poll written by the Task Force chair and entitled “NCHC and the Challenge of Honors Evaluation/Accreditation: Polling the Membership.” In its report to the Executive Committee in October 1991, the Task Force strongly
recommended that “NCHC establish a standing committee to coordinate and oversee all activities of NCHC relating to honors evaluation and institutional accreditation as it pertains to honors, and that, since NCHC does not accredit, nor does it explicitly endorse accrediting honors programs per se, this committee be exempted from such programmatic accrediting activities.” It also recommended that the new committee be designated simply “Committee on Honors Evaluation.”

Precisely because the term “accreditation” had proven to be so controversial in honors circles, it seemed advisable to avoid use of the term in designating the new committee, even though the Task Force recommended that the committee be involved incidentally on a consultative basis in institutional accreditation. It was further recommended that the make up of the committee be as representative as possible of the membership of NCHC with special emphasis on size and type of institution and geographical region, and that appointment to the committee should be for rotating three-year terms. The Task Force’s final official act was to conduct a panel discussion at the Palmer House in Chicago on Nov. 1, 1991, entitled “Windfall or Pitfall: NCHC Involvement in Evaluating/Accrediting Honors Programs.”

The make up of the new Committee on Honors Evaluation as stipulated by then President Sam Schuman after the 1991 Annual NCHC Conference in Chicago was basically an amplification of the membership of the former Task Force on Evaluation and Accreditation with the addition of four new members for a total of ten. I was named to chair the committee and William Mech, the NCHC Executive Secretary-Treasurer, continued ex officio. The initial Committee charge included the following points: (1) Coordinate and oversee all activities of NCHC relating to honors evaluation and institutional accreditation as it pertains to honors, and since NCHC does not accredit, nor does it explicitly endorse accrediting honors programs per se, this committee shall be exempted from such programmatic accrediting activities; (2) The Committee should expand and further refine the existing mechanism within NCHC for identifying and making available consultants to those with consultative needs. In this connection, building on such existing NCHC documents as the handbook, Evaluation of an Honors Program, the Committee should develop guidelines for honors programs, which take fully into account the need to balance quality with flexibility.

In performing this function, the Committee was enjoined to observe NCHC’s basic principle that there is no one model of an honors program that can be superimposed on institutions that are as different as community colleges, liberal arts colleges, and comprehensive universities, and that every effort should be made to avoid normative evaluation; (3) The Committee should consolidate and further refine the present policy of working with regional institutional accreditation agencies.

In the intervening two-and-one-half years, despite minor changes, the charge has remained basically the same. In fulfilling its charge, the Committee has (1) sponsored three or four workshops on evaluation/assessment/accreditation issues at each annual NCHC conference; (2) greatly expanded the list of qualified evaluators available to the national office on the basis of the response to a 1992 questionnaire sent to NCHC institutional members on evaluation experience and interest; (3) co-sponsored with NCHC Vice President Ada Long the NCHC forum on “The Problematics of Honors Assessment and Evaluation” on June 25-27, 1993, at the Palmer House in Chicago; (4) accepted a charge from President Julia Bondanella to collaborate with the Task Force on Long-Range Planning in developing “a short, pithy mission statement for the NCHC – a statement that provides a philosophical (and not merely ideological) context within which we can implement activities and nurture a higher level of discourse about honors education [and which can] more clearly suggest to newcomers and outsiders what we think honors education ought to be and why it is important”; (5) developed the document which follows which has been endorsed by the Executive Committee and will serve as a much-needed initial guideline in coordinating the evaluation activities of NCHC.

Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program (Approved 1994)

No one model of an honors program can be superimposed on all types of institutions. However, there are characteristics that are common to successful, fully developed honors programs. Listed below are those characteristics, although not all characteristics are necessary for an honors program to be considered a successful and/or fully developed honors program.

- A fully-developed honors program should be carefully set up to accommodate the special needs and abilities of the undergraduate students it is designed to serve. This entails identifying the targeted student population by some clearly articulated set of criteria (e.g., GPA, SAT score, a written essay). A program with open admission needs to spell out expectations for retention in the program and for satisfactory completion of program requirements.
• The program should have a clear mandate from the institutional administration ideally in the form of a mission statement clearly stating the objectives and responsibilities of the program and defining its place in both the administrative and academic structure of the institution. This mandate or mission statement should be such as to assure the permanence and stability of the program by guaranteeing an adequate budget and by avoiding any tendency to force the program to depend on temporary or spasmodic dedication of particular faculty members or administrators. In other words, the program should be fully institutionalized so as to build thereby a genuine tradition of excellence.

• The honors director should report to the chief academic officer of the institution.

• There should be an honors curriculum featuring special courses, seminars, colloquia and independent study established in harmony with the mission statement and in response to the needs of the program.

• The program requirements themselves should include a substantial portion of the participants’ undergraduate work, usually in the vicinity of 20% or 25% of their total course work and certainly no less than 15%.

• The program should be so formulated that it relates effectively both to all the college work for the degree (e.g., by satisfying general education requirements) and to the area of concentration, departmental specialization, pre-professional or professional training.

• The program should be both visible and highly reputed throughout the institution so that it is perceived as providing standards and models of excellence for students and faculty across the campus.

• Faculty participating in the program should be fully identified with the aims of the program. They should be carefully selected on the basis of exceptional teaching skills and the ability to provide intellectual leadership to able students.

• The program should occupy suitable quarters constituting an honors center with such facilities as an honors library, lounge, reading rooms, personal computers and other appropriate decor.

• The director or other administrative officer charged with administering the program should work in close collaboration with a committee or council of faculty members representing the colleges and/or departments served by the program.

• The program should have in place a committee of honors students to serve as liaison with the honors faculty committee or council who must keep the student group fully informed on the program and elicits their cooperation in evaluation and development. This student group should enjoy as much autonomy as possible conducting the business of the committee in representing the needs and concerns of all honors students to the administration, and it should also be included in governance, serving on the advisory/policy committee as well as constituting the group that governs the student association.

• There should be provisions for special academic counseling of honors students by uniquely qualified faculty and/or staff personnel.

• The honors program, in distinguishing itself from the rest of the institution, serves as a kind of laboratory within which faculty can try things they have always wanted to try but for which they could find no suitable outlet. When such efforts are demonstrated to be successful, they may well become institutionalized, thereby raising the general level of education within the college or university for all students. In this connection, the honors curriculum should serve as a prototype for educational practices that can work campus-wide in the future.

• The fully developed honors program must be open to continuous and critical review and be prepared to change in order to maintain its distinctive position of offering distinguished education to the best students in the institution.

• A fully developed program will emphasize the participatory nature of the honors educational process by adopting such measures as offering opportunities for students to participate in regional and national conferences, honors semesters, international programs, community service, and other forms of experiential education.

• Fully-developed two-year and four-year honors programs will have articulation agreements by which honors graduates from two-year colleges are accepted into four-year honors programs when they meet previously agreed-upon requirements.
An Honors Program Review: A Case Study
By Jay P. Kopp, Loras College

Introduction

Loras College, in Dubuque, Iowa, is a private liberal arts college with a total enrollment of 1775 students. The honors program, which was initiated in 1989-1990, currently serves 69 students. Each academic department/program at Loras completes an extensive self-study and review every five years. The college-wide review process began in 1994-1995. Approximately half of the departments have completed or are completing a review, and the honors program review was scheduled for 1997-1998. This experience in program-evaluation is now shared with our readers. This article will summarize the general program review process, outline the steps taken by the honors committee in its self-study, and indicate the current status and preliminary results of the honors program review.

Program Review Process

The following list identifies the features common to all program reviews at Loras. The steps, to be followed in the order given, are carried out over a two-semester time period.

1. The department/program mission statement and objectives are submitted to the Academic Council for discussion.
2. Candidates to serve as external reviewers are contacted, selected, and approved by the Academic Council. Two or three individuals typically serve as the review team, depending on the size of the program.
3. A modest stipend is budgeted by the Vice President for Academic Affairs.
4. Credentials sought include experience at institutions comparable to Loras, experience with assessment and evaluation, and association with an appropriate national organization. Since the majority of the students in the Loras Honors Program are women, we wanted a woman on our review team, and we also made a special effort to contact individuals who have served at the NCHC Consultants' Lounge. We invited Dr. Suzanne Molnar, College of St. Catherine, a Catholic school, as is Loras, and Dr. Earl Brown to serve as consultants for the Loras Honors Program review, and they graciously agreed.
5. A program self-study is written. Included in the self-study are the following components: mission, goal statements, and objectives; department/program strengths and weaknesses; student outcomes assessment process, results, and department responses; standardized enrollment, teaching load, and budget data; identification of majors, alumni, and awards; available resources and facilities; faculty credentials and activities; governance and administrative policies in department.
6. The self-study is submitted to the President, Academic Dean, the Academic Council, and the review team in advance of a campus visit by the review team.
7. Over a two-day period, the review team meets with the President, Academic Dean, all faculty teaching in the program, representative students who are served by the program, and other faculty as available.
8. The review team is asked to write a report, which is forwarded, to the Academic Dean and the head of the department/program.
9. The department/program, in conjunction with the Academic Dean, prepares a response to the review team report and identifies prioritized five-year goals, opportunities and needs.
10. A summary of the review team report, the department response, and the five-year goals is prepared for the Academic Council, the President and the Vice President for Financial Affairs. The latter two steps in the process are currently underway for the Loras Honors Program review.

In brief, the status of the review is that the self-study identified a list of ten items that included both strengths and needs for the program. The reviewers agreed with the recommendations but did not agree with the priorities assigned to them. Specific strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-study were reinforced through the reviewers’ report. The honors committee is now preparing its reactions and a list of prioritized action steps to present to the Loras administration.
Honors Program Review

The review of the honors program followed the standard process outlined above, with some variations. Three aspects of the review process for the honors program warrant description. (1) The honors committee used the occasion to thoroughly evaluate and redefine the program’s mission and objectives. (2) Extensive use was made of the NCHC’s Evaluation Committee’s “Basic Characteristics of a Fully-Developed Honors Program” (printed elsewhere in this issue). (3) Student outcomes assessment results were summarized and evaluated.

The Loras College Honors Program was created in 1990 by an Ad hoc Committee. A set of program goals was adopted in 1992. A committee of five faculty, one student, and the director has the responsibility of overseeing the curriculum, soliciting honors courses to be offered by academic departments, inviting students to participate in the program, and monitoring the completion of students’ capstone requirement. Students complete a curriculum consisting of six specially designed honors courses, nine elective credits in “all college” honors courses, a senior honors project; they must also maintain a certain minimum grade point average to receive the ‘Honors Degree” in addition to the degree in their chosen major.

When the committee realized that the program had evolved as a consequence of the innovations and successes of the courses it had sponsored, it revised the program’s original mission statement. Part of the revision (1997) now reads

The Loras College Honors Program is designed to offer an integrated sequence of courses to academically superior students who wish to pursue a broadly based, comprehensive liberal arts education. The program emphasizes a humanistic and synoptic approach to the various academic disciplines that comprise the liberal arts.

The committee also determined that (a) courses needed student-centered objectives that can be assessed; (b) there should be guidelines for the academic content for the courses that constitute the required curriculum, and (c) there should be threads of continuity between and among the courses, which a student cohort completes. This work, now underway, is one of our highest priorities.

A comprehensive list of student competencies has been adopted, a portfolio system to assess the achievement of these competencies is being developed, and a preliminary list of possible themes to serve as linkage between the honors courses has been created.

Use of the NCHC document, “Basic Characteristics,” was most beneficial. Foremost was the fact that several members of the Loras community, including members of the honors committee, had periodically posed questions about how and why other honors programs are created, their requirements, and what exactly makes a program an honors program? Each of the sixteen characteristics was listed with evidence showing how the Loras program met them and showing areas of specific shortcomings. The following is taken from the self-study.

In summary, the principal conclusions from the comparative study with the NCHC guidelines are:

- The Loras Honors Program satisfies most of the NCHC criteria.
- There needs to be a greater commitment of faculty available to teach honors courses. This is needed to give stability to the program and to assure students the opportunity to plan their schedules.
- More resources need to be allocated to release time for a director and for encouraging faculty to develop honors courses. The program has served as an excellent prototype for campus-wide initiatives. Among the additional duties for the director would be promotion of the program and student recruitment.

Three assessment/evaluation processes were used for the self-study: (1) special honors course evaluation surveys administered in each honors course; (2) reflective, summative essays written by all students in the senior honors capstone course; and (3) responses to a questionnaire about the strengths and weaknesses of the program which was sent to the thirty-nine alumni who had completed the current make-up of the honors program.

Each of these methods provided data, which, although qualitative, proved to be consistent. From the surveys, several needs and successes of the program were verified with specific reasons, and came with suggestions.

The committee also compiled a list of campus leadership positions and activities by current honors students.

As mentioned above, the honors committee recognized that the program needed student-centered objectives which could be assessed and has begun the task of articulating these expectations and
developing a portfolio project to document the achievement of program objectives. The external review team concurred with the need for a portfolio system and also made suggestions pertaining to how the program serves the mission and strategic plan of the college. One remaining, unresolved issue is how to use the assessment results for the evaluation and selection of faculty. The honors program at Loras continues to rely on academic departments volunteering faculty to offer honors courses, and it is a sellers’ market.

Summary and Now What?
The honors committee is most satisfied with the work that was required for the self-study and the results it is bringing. The project gave structure and focus to several issues which were being discussed, or which needed attention. Clearly, one of the results of the process is the development on campus of a greater awareness of what the honors program is about. It is not the intent of this article to publicly discuss the strengths or weaknesses of the Loras program. To make the process clearer, however, it is instructive to list the seven general areas which have been identified as important following the study.

1. Clarify the honors program mission statement/goals and show connections to the Loras College Strategic Plan.
2. Examine the program structure and reassign time for the director.
3. Review the curriculum of required honors courses.
4. Revise student involvement and organization.
5. Examine the capstone experience, assessment, and portfolio project.
6. Study the role of elective credits and “other” honors courses.
7. Investigate possibilities for honors space and programming.

As mentioned above, the review process has not been completed, so it is not clear how the priorities that the study has identified will or can be implemented. The honors committee has decided that it has a very strong, well-documented case for how to make improvements on a quality honors program at Loras College. Stay tuned!

Annual meetings of the NCHC offer pre-conference workshops:

Beginning in Honors®
(for newly-appointed honors administrators);
Developing in Honors
(for more experienced administrators);
Students in Honors
(for students about nuts and bolts issues);
Celebration of Honors Teaching
(for faculty to discuss innovative approaches to the teaching/learning process).

Chronology of Annual NCHC Conferences

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Future conference sites

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An Evaluator's Experience
By Suzanne Molnar, College of St. Catherine

The following suggestions may be of help to both those seeking a consultant for their honors program and those who are or wish to be consultants. In writing this, I have used my experience as a member of the evaluation team for the Loras College evaluation in 1998, my experience as an honors program director at the College of St. Catherine, and my observations both as a reviewer and reviewee involving my own discipline. I use the words reviewer, consultant, and evaluator interchangeably here, since any or all of those roles may be appropriate. These are my own thoughts, not to be taken as those of the NCHC's Honors Evaluation Committee, of which I used to be a member.

Most of what follows concerns a comprehensive review of an honors program. In some cases, however, a program may seek particular advice about how to incorporate service learning or portfolios for their honors students or faculty, or how to engage students in the program. That is, the program already knows what it wants to do and needs a consultant from an institution with such models to offer. Even so, the suggestions that follow may be useful.

1. What is the purpose of the visit by an evaluator?
   The person who makes the initial request may give you an idea; you should certainly try to find out. Keep in mind that the evaluation may be part of an institutional cycle of program review, it may be to lend advice about a particular aspect of the program, it may be part of an administrative agenda to change directors, or it may be part of institutional review for regional accreditation.

   Did the program director invite you? If an academic officer other than the honors program director has suggested such a visit, has the director been involved in the selection of an evaluator? Has the NCHC been involved in this selection process? The home office has a list of evaluators and their vitas. Whatever your purpose and regardless of who asked you to campus, you should make it clear to all concerned that the NCHC is not in the business of accrediting honors programs, a publicly-stated policy of the Honors Evaluation Committee.

2. Who should the consultant be?
   As we all know, there are as many models of honors programs as there are programs and institutions. Each is unique not only because of its particular requirements but because of the students it serves. A successful visit involves at least one consultant from an honors program similar in size from an institution similar in type (public/private, two-year/four-year, college or university, religious affiliation, historical background, etc.). Initial discussions about the evaluation/review should address the issues important to the director so neither the director nor the consultant finds themselves in uncharted territory at a later time.

3. Should there be just one consultant or more?
   That depends on the purpose and goals of the visit, as well as the resources available. If more than one consultant is invited, these consultants should try as much as possible to coordinate their requests for information and for individuals to interview so as not to overburden the organizer of the visit.

   Depending on the institution, it may be a staff member who organizes the schedule and sends out the materials as part of several program reviews. In many cases, it is the honors program director.

4. What materials should the consultants be provided before a visit?
   Once consultants have been selected and are reasonably clear as to the purpose and depth of the review and final report, the following (if available) are particularly useful.

   (a) For an overview of the institution and the honors program's place in it: appropriate university or college catalog, strategic institutional plan, annual schedule of courses, admission materials (both generic and specifically honors program related). (b) For an overview of the program itself: an honors program brochure, a self-study report (if available), honors program newsletter, honors program handbook or other honors program related documents/forms. If there is concern, for example, about the recruitment process, appropriate letters of invitation and materials included can be useful to the consultants. (c) For specific components of the program: honors seminar or course syllabi, including non-honors sections if similar non-courses are taught.

   In addition, if the institution or program has a Web site, that address should be shared with the consultants. A brief history of the program, its evolution, and where it may be headed can be communicated to the reviewers, perhaps not in written form but in conversations before the visit.
(5) What else should be available?

A mission statement is important not only to an outsider, but to the program itself. The program’s mission should further the mission of the institution. It can serve as an aid to determining a set of issues, plans, and priorities that can help the evaluator direct efforts and discussions. It is also important to articulate to whom these issues, plans, and priorities belong!

The NCHC’s “Basic Characteristics of a Fully-Developed Honors Program” (see elsewhere in this issue) is one model that many directors have used as a starting point for evaluating their program’s strengths and weaknesses. Using this document as a template can also provide the director and the evaluators with ideas about other documents and individuals to be consulted for a successful review. For example, a program budget or articulation agreements may be useful for a particular review.

(6) What else could be available?

Determine what the program currently uses for assessment and evaluation. Does it plan to use other means, such as portfolios?

Summaries of written student evaluations of honors courses and/or the program may be provided. This should include specific reasons or evidence to substantiate their opinions. That is, it should not be completely anecdotal. Some programs have faculty evaluate their course/students. I have said little about numerical data. As a mathematician, I know it can be used and abused, so I am often skeptical about its validity. If a particular program is concerned about retention, the numbers do not tell the whole story. The reasons students leave a program often have nothing to do with the program itself, but with personal matters unrelated to academics. If numerical data is important to you as a reviewer or director, request it or provide it. It may be required as part of an institutional review process. In any case, it should be clear as to its source and potential use.

Some examples of non-numeric ways of evaluating a program include (a) articulation of how the program meets its own mission and that of the institution, (b) involvement of honors program students in leadership areas on campus and in the community, and (c) alumni evaluation of the program as to how the program met their academic and career goals.

(7) How should consultants prepare for visit?

First, be familiar with all the materials that have been provided and request others that may come to mind. With whom should consultants meet? Without saying, the honors program director and the person to whom they report. If the latter is not the chief academic officer, that individual should be scheduled. In addition, other administrators may be involved, depending on the purpose of the visit. Schedule a brief meeting with the president of the institution, if possible. For a large university, that may not be in the cards.

Faculty who have taught honors courses and/or served on an honors program advisory committee should be scheduled, and, of course, current students in the program, especially student officers of the student honors organization. The Director of Admission and Dean of Students may provide insight into the recruitment and retention of these students; the development director or chief fund-raiser may also be helpful. Additional insight can be gained from faculty naysayers, and students who have either withdrawn from the program, or who chose not to accept an invitation to join.

If possible, get a schedule of your commitments in advance of your on-campus visit to make sure you have some down time.

Third, come with a list of questions generated by the materials received, and your own experience in honors.

(9) What should be provided at the host institution once the consultants arrive?

If at all possible, provide a space with computer access. Schedule free time to give the consultants some time to walk around campus to interview persons about their perception of the honors program. Take a consultant to an honors place (and some programs have no space to call their own), for a visit and allow the consultant to find out how students use it. The consultant needs to visit the director’s office, look at classrooms and/or labs where honors courses are routinely held. If new buildings or renovations are planned, a review could influence how, or if, the honors program is involved in the design. If time permits and faculty are agreeable, the consultant can attend an honors seminar or class for what may provide valuable insight into a program.

(10) What about the final report?

That clearly depends on the nature, goals, and purposes of the review. In drafting the final report, you will need to know who your audience is. If it’s the chief academic officer, you need to know if that person has an agenda. If possible, let the honors director see a copy of the draft first. The honors director will see the implications of what you’ve written and will know the political realities of the campus.

You might also want to keep in mind who’s paying you. Is it the institution or the honors program? That might influence for whom the draft is written.

Keep in mind that this evaluation process requires time for consultants to reflect on what they have heard and to prepare for the next round of interviews. Unscheduled time is useful because it allows for requests to see someone whose name has come up but who was not on the interview schedule. It can also can be one in which everyone gains: the program being reviewed, the consultants’ own program after seeing alternate ways of doing things, and, ultimately, the honors students themselves.
Using Assessment Properly
By William Whipple
From The National Honors Report 4.3 (Fall 1988): 10-11

How, then, do we use assessment responsibly? Here are some suggestions.

1. First, think about who or what is being evaluated. Assessment of students implies by definition that the results are relevant to the evaluation of someone or something other than the students themselves. Knowing why the assessment is needed helps to prevent selection of inappropriate measures.

2. Specify, as precisely as possible, what it is that needs to be measured. If, for example, you want to know how students are changed as a result of participation in an honors program, try to identify the ways in which you would like the program to affect them. Think about “indicators” – easily measured things that indicate the presence of something harder to measure.

3. Once you know what you want to assess, search for tools that assess these dimensions. Do not be tempted to use an instrument simply because it is there, or because it is popular. The ACT-Comp test is a very popular and readily available instrument; but I would probably not use it to assess students in my honors program, because I consider the abilities that it measures peripheral to the purpose of honors education. Others might disagree, and for them the ACT-Comp might be a sensible measure.

4. If you do not find ready-made tools to assess what you want to measure, think about designing your own instruments. Only if you are primarily concerned with comparing your students’ outcomes with national norms is it essential to use standardized measures. Useful assessments have frequently resulted from the use of custom-designed instruments. Since designing instruments to order can be tricky, you may want to seek expert advice.

5. Be careful in your method: selection of control samples, statistical treatment of data, and so on. Here again, unless you are trained in evaluation techniques, expert advice should be both helpful and easy to find. Remember that one can exercise methodological care even when the instruments being used are not standardized tests.

To define the ends of education entirely in terms of scores on the ACT-Comp or similar instruments is absurd. To eschew the benefits of carefully applied assessment out of fear that it will lead to standardized education is equally foolish. Assessment, well conducted, gives honors directors, faculty, and students vital information about what their program is doing and what it could do. Assessment, poorly planned and executed, wastes time and money, and may misinform, leading to faulty conclusions. Assessment, allowed to become an end in itself, can undermine the educational process. Using assessment properly is a skill; mastering it is no harder than learning to drive a car. The fact that careless drivers can cause accidents does not make us afraid of automobiles. We need not fear assessment. Let us use it wisely; and as for those who abuse it, let us respond by simply turning away.

• To join the honors listserv at George Washington University, email <listserv@hermes.circ.gwu.edu> with the following command: <sub honors (put your name here)>. The listserv will automatically pick up your email address.

• To post to the list after subscribing, mail your message to <honors@hermes.circ.gwu.edu>.

• If you have problems with the listserv itself, contact the webmaster at <uhpom@gwu.edu>.

• To remove your name from the listserv, send the command <unsub honors your name> in the first line of the message box to <listserv@hermes.circ.gwu.edu>.
Assessment is no longer a fad. More and more state legislatures are mandating formal assessment due to grade inflation. When employers hire recent college graduates with high GPA's, they expected these students to have certain skills which many of these students lacked. It was not long before they demanded that state legislatures make colleges and universities more accountable. Today assessment is the name of the game. All departments at state institutions throughout the country and even more and more private institutions have been required to come up with some form of assessment to demonstrate that students who graduate from their department have the knowledge and skills commensurate with a degree in that discipline.

Many departments have spent long hours determining what knowledge and skills a college graduate in their department ought to have. Whether it be knowledge of historical facts and periods and/or the ability to analyze and synthesize the major historical theories and trends, colleges and universities have been fortunate in that individual departments can determine these objectives and how they intend to measure them. Many use standardized tests to measure; others use a portfolio approach; still others require students to take a capstone or senior seminar course; some departments have even created their own tests to measure the success of their students. But whatever measures they use, these measures have been created reluctantly by faculty many of whom believe that assessment will be used to demonstrate their incompetence as instructors.

While the articles in this issue demonstrate not only the growing importance of assessment but also ways to carry out assessment successfully, most of them seem to imply that assessment is just one more burden for the poor overworked, under-appreciated faculty member. That simply is not true. Assessment is the honors director's best friend.

Let me explain. Most university administrators see honors as a poor stepchild, deserving money only to recruit the best and the brightest to their campus. What happens to those students once they matriculate is a whole other story. Most institutions have grudgingly realized that they have some obligation to these students and so have a program in place—offering some formal honors experience, usually a set of courses with some extra-and co-curricular activities to sweeten the pot. If I were an upper level administrator—which thankfully I am not—I would feel the same way. How much can I afford to fund a program serving the needs of some 5-10% of the student body, especially with rising costs and less and less state support.

In the hands of a skilled director, however, assessment can be the means not only to insuring the survival of the program and a line-item budget but to guaranteeing a larger and larger share of the pie. Step one in the assessment process is to look at the institution's mission and goal statements—I know, I know mission statements are nebulous and tend to say nothing. Even so, the Honors program/college must determine what aspects of the institution's mission and goals it can further better than other departments and programs. Model your mission statement on these aspects. If the institution's mission includes words like serving the needs of the region, like recruiting the best students, like retaining these students, the honors mission needs to reflect those values.

Step two is creating goals and strategies to further the program's mission and by implication the institution's mission. So let's say that one of the program's goals is to recruit better students. The program needs to devise several strategies to do that—have honors students visit local high schools, write letters to prospective students the Admissions Office has identified, host an honors day on your campus for top-achieving high school seniors and guidance counselors, distribute the Peterson's Guide to NCHC Honors Programs and Colleges to area high schools, and work closely with your office of admissions. Here is where assessment comes in. What's the use of wasting energy on strategies that are not succeeding. The program needs to determine which strategy or combination of strategies is most successful in recruiting students or, to paraphrase Bob Holkeboer, "in closing the deal."

For every program goal, the program must devise several strategies and then assess their effectiveness. By the end of several years of assessment, the program will be able to provide quantifiable evidence of which
strategies are most effective in furthering the institution’s mission. Just as the program needs to assess what it’s doing to improve the academic standing of the university, it also needs to assess its students and not just through grades. It needs a way to assess that students have met the objectives established for students to graduate from the program. Too many programs use quantifiable measures only—so many hours in honors with such and such a grade point average, ignoring what the assessment movement is all about. Quantifiable measures and goals are simply no longer enough where employers and state legislatures are concerned. The program needs to determine what knowledge and skills every honors graduate must have in order to graduate from the honors program. Some programs, as part of their objectives, require a knowledge of calculus; others require competency in a foreign language or even study abroad experience; others require service learning; others expect students to be able to synthesize and communicate effectively; and others require a capstone project. Whatever the program’s objectives, they should be determined by faculty and students from that institution. Once they are approved, all students who wish to graduate from that program must demonstrate that they have that knowledge and those skills.

Once the objectives are in place it’s time to create a curriculum and a set of extra-and co-curricular activities which will help students attain those objectives. That is the curriculum must be tied into the program’s student objectives. If, for example, the program requires students to have a basic understanding of computers, the program must either offer computer courses or devise a test to measure computer literacy. If the program requires that students be able to synthesize a broad range of materials, then the program needs to provide courses (usually interdisciplinary seminars) that give students an opportunity to develop that skill. If the program requires the ability to come up with a proposal (an hypothesis) and a methodology and then test the hypothesis, the program needs to require contract courses or independent studies or final projects in order for students to develop those skills.

Assessment measures must include quantifiable measures—a certain minimum number of hours while maintaining a certain grade point average. It must include non-quantifiable measures such as those discussed above; and it should also include affective measures, which are difficult at best to assess and at worst impossible. What evidence can your program provide that, thanks to the program, students have developed leadership skills or greater tolerance or a sense of obligation and responsibility towards their fellow creatures. There are just too many variables. But one can begin to assess some of these through before and after testing, by requiring students to assume leadership roles in the program and then in the university, and by asking students to turn in a vita at the end of each year detailing their accomplishments and then after they graduate detailing their professional and vocational successes.

All of these are internal assessment measures. They will go a long way to insuring the survival of your program and its stature at your institution. With success and importance will often come greater financial resources. To validate the success of your program, you may want to compare your program to the “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program” developed and approved by the NCHC or you may want to bring an outside evaluator or consultant to your campus. The NCHC, thanks to the work of John Grady and the Honors Evaluation Committee, has certified a list of consultants. All of these consultants had to attend a workshop given by the Honors Evaluation Committee on assessment and evaluation of honors programs/colleges. The NCHC headquarters office maintains a list of certified consultants/site visitors or you can find the list in your copy of the NCHC Handbook.

Assessment has become an essential tool in the arsenal of a successful honors director. It can be the difference between a highly visible and nationally recognized program and a backwater program struggling to survive.

Please Note:
The NCHC has a new web address.
You can access all the news that is the news at:

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