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Honors Growth and Honors Advising

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the issue of providing quality honors advising when honors enrollment at Oklahoma State University has increased by 325% since 1988. Following a brief review of NCHC publications that address honors advising and an explanation of the institutional setting addressed by this article, a description of our approach to honors advising will be presented. Qualifications for honors advisors will then be outlined, followed by results of the honors advising evaluation process.

HONORS ADVISING AS AN INTEGRAL PART OF HONORS PROGRAMS AND HONORS COLLEGES

NCHC's "Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program" indicates that there should be "provisions for special academic counseling of honors students by uniquely qualified faculty and/or staff personnel," and honors advising has been the subject of commentary in several NCHC monographs. Ada Long's *A Handbook for Honors Administrators* (1995), p. 15, lists honors advising in a checklist of honors responsibilities: "regularly scheduled formal advising sessions; unscheduled, unpredictable, informal advising sessions; liaison with departmental advisors; career counseling; and personal counseling (usually an inevitable and major part of the job)." Samuel Schuman, in *Honors Programs at Smaller Colleges*, (1999), p. 28, indicates, "The advising of Honors students is a task which often falls to the small college Honors Director, either directly or in some sort of oversight capacity." Schuman then discusses two models: one centered in the honors program and the other with decentralized honors advising. In *Beginning in Honors: A Handbook* (4th edition, 2006), p. 63, Schuman elaborates on this point:

> An important point to keep in mind as regards honors advising is that honors students can be expected to have at least as many, and as complicated, problems as other students. . . . Honors students, just like their non-honors peers, are sometimes plagued with doubts about their academic careers and their

> futures; they are going to have problems with their love lives, fights with roommates (sometimes these last two are the same), scheduling conflicts, health problems, or intrusive parents. In fact, because their academic expectations and goals are oftentimes higher than those of their non-honors peers, honors students will sometimes have more academic and personal counseling needs than other students.

In *A Handbook for Honors Programs at Two-Year Colleges* (2006), p. 23, Theresa A. James writes:

> Honors students need guidance and advice from counselors and advisors as much as do non-honors students, and perhaps more guidance because they have so many options available to them. Honors students have just as many pressures on them and difficulty making wise decisions as do non-honors students. Some honors students may even have special concerns and exit high school with preconceptions that may be counterproductive to their educational well-being.

James then discusses several general models for honors advising that in many ways parallel those noted by Schuman.

More detailed discussion of several approaches to honors advising in different types of institutions is found in "The Nuts and Bolts of Honors Advising" by Andrea Labinger *et al.*, 17 *National Honors Report* 13 (Fall, 1996).

Jacqueline R. Klein, Lisa French, and Pamela Degotardi, in "More Than an ID Number or a GPA: Developmental Advising in Honors," 3 *Honors in Practice* 101 (2007), state that "[i]n a developmental advising relationship, students continuously interact with the advisor to achieve personal and educational goals" in an advising system that "balances challenges and support" and provides a "collaborative advising relationship." They then explain how the City University of New York's Macaulay Honors College addresses the challenges of providing developmental honors advising across seven individual CUNY campuses, each with its own honors director and at least one full-time designated honors advisor.

Tables 8 and 9 in James P. Hill's "What Honors Students Want (And Expect): The Views of Top Michigan High School and College Students," 6 *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* 95 (Fall/Winter, 2005), indicate that honors advising is considered valuable and significant by honors students at his institution.

Bob Spurrier, in "Honors Advising at NCHC Institutions," 22 *National Honors Report* 55 (Summer, 2001), reports the results of a 2000 survey of

NCHC institutions that indicated the following distributions of providers of honors advising, whether honors advising is required or voluntary, and whether there is a formal evaluation of honors advisors at least annually:

Who Provides Honors Advising? (multiple responses possible) (N = 162)
- Administrators = 117 (72%)
- Faculty = 67 (41%)
- Professional Staff = 58 (36%)
- Student Peers = 21 (13%)

Required or Voluntary (N=158)
- Required (at least for some students) = 78 (49%)
- Voluntary = 80 (51%)

Formal evaluation of honors advisors at least once a year (N=162)
- Yes = 32 (20%)
- No = 130 (80%)

While the responses to the first two questions listed above were not unexpected, that only 20% of the respondents indicated that honors advisors were formally evaluated at least once a year was surprising. Jacqueline Reihman, Sara Varhus, and William R. Whipple, in *Evaluating Honors Programs: An Outcomes Approach* (1990), p. 26, comment on the evaluation of honors advising in a general way. Rosalie Otero and Robert Spurrier, in *Assessing and Evaluating Honors Programs and Honors Colleges* (2005), p. 17, include a checklist that asks for information about the evaluation of honors advising as part of the process of external honors program and honors college reviews. Appendices H-1 and H-2, pp. 49-50, to the Otero and Spurrier monograph include honors advising survey instruments from Kent State University and Oklahoma State University.

In addition to or in conjunction with honors advising, numerous honors programs and honors colleges are actively involved with preparing students to compete for prestigious national and international scholarships. See Bob Spurrier, "Major Scholarship Competition Preparation at NCHC Institutions," 22 *National Honors Report* 12 (Fall, 2001).

These NCHC publications clearly indicate that honors advising is a vital part of the honors educational mission.

THE INSTITUTIONAL SETTING OF HONORS ADVISING AT OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY

This section describes how Oklahoma State University has approached providing quality honors advising in The Honors College. Oklahoma State

University (OSU) is a public doctoral institution with 21,235 students on its Stillwater campus in the 2006 fall semester (18,737 undergraduates). Six undergraduate colleges offer baccalaureate degrees and provide regular academic advising to their students. In some colleges faculty members provide the academic advising, but the trend over the years has been toward professional staff advisors. The College of Arts and Sciences began its Honors Program in the mid-1960s and awarded the first OSU honors degrees in 1969. In 1988 there were 282 active honors students in the College of Arts and Sciences. The University Honors Program was established in 1989 to serve students from all six undergraduate colleges, and in 2000 it became The Honors College. In the 2006 fall semester, 916 students were active participants in The Honors College, surpassing our strategic planning goal of 850 students by 2010.

The Honors College Degree at OSU requires that students complete a total of 39 honors credit hours with minimum 3.5 OSU and cumulative grade point averages. The first component of the Honors College Degree is the General Honors Award that requires 21 honors credit hours distributed across four broad subject areas and including at least two special honors seminars or interdisciplinary honors courses for a minimum of four credit hours with 3.5 OSU and cumulative grade point averages. The second component is the Departmental or College Honors Award ("honors in the major") that requires 12 upper-division honors credit hours including the senior honors thesis or other creative component, again with 3.5 OSU and cumulative grade point averages. Finally, students must earn at least six additional honors credit hours to reach the total of 39 and have the required 3.5 grade point averages at graduation. Only honors credit hours completed with a grade of "A" or "B" may be counted toward any Honors College award or the Honors College Degree. Study abroad, off-campus internships, and cooperative education experiences may be used in lieu of regular honors credit hours to a limited degree, and AP/CLEP credit may be used to waive up to 3 of the 39 honors hours (1 honors credit hour for each three AP/CLEP hours, up to a maximum waiver of three honors credit hours).

We discovered very early that we could not expect all regular academic advisors across campus to be fully conversant with our honors requirements or to be supportive of honors in general. Some academic advisors were among our best advocates, many were essentially neutral, and a few were overtly hostile to the entire concept of honors education. If we were going to do a first-rate job of honors advising, we had to do it ourselves; of course, we clearly understood that we would need to work closely with the academic advisors across campus who were responsible for encouraging and tracking their advisees' progress toward their degrees and major requirements and that our responsibility was to do the same in terms of honors requirements.

Honors advising at OSU sometimes begins before students matriculate. We send individually signed letters to high-school seniors who appear to be eligible and who have listed OSU among their top three institutions when taking the ACT. A glossy fact sheet about The Honors College is enclosed with the letter, and potential students are encouraged to contact us with questions. (Additional applicants come from OSU's general online application system, which includes an application to The Honors College along with other application materials.)

For most new honors students, however, in-person honors advising begins when they come to campus in the summer before their freshman year to enroll for fall-semester classes. We have a 20-minute initial session in the morning during which honors advisors and current honors students provide a brief overview of The Honors College and respond to questions from students and parents. This session is mandatory for students already accepted into The Honors College and also open to new freshmen still exploring the possibility of being an honors student at OSU.

Later in the enrollment process, entering freshmen meet individually or in groups with academic advisors in one of the six undergraduate colleges to prepare a draft class schedule for the fall semester. The students then come to The Honors College to meet individually with an honors advisor who discusses honors course options that are available within the confines of the draft schedule. (A student may not enroll in honors courses until an honors advisor has made an honors entry in the student's electronic data on the university's enrollment system.) On occasion, the student and his or her honors advisor may conclude that a different honors course would be preferable to a course on the draft schedule. In this situation, the honors advisor contacts the regular academic advisor to be certain that the proposed schedule change is acceptable. If the academic advisor is not immediately available by telephone, the honors advisor sends an e-mail message explaining the schedule change and making it clear that, if any problems arise, the change can be undone as soon as the academic advisor contacts The Honors College.

During the summer enrollment process, honors advisors explain Honors College requirements and also make certain that the entering freshmen understand the definition of being an "active participant" in The Honors College. Active participant status is required on a semester-by-semester basis to earn Honors College fringe benefits including priority enrollment, extended library checkout privileges, use of the Honors Study Lounge and computer laboratory, and living in the honors residence hall. First-semester freshmen must undertake a minimum of 6 honors credit hours. In succeeding semesters, honors freshmen and sophomores must achieve a running total of 12 honors credit hours combining the previous semester's honors credit hours earned

with grades of "A" or "B" plus a minimum of 6 honors credit hours in the current semester. Juniors and seniors must undertake a minimum of 3 honors credit hours each semester for active participant status, but there is no running total requirement that takes into account the prior semester's work for juniors and seniors.

When the fall semester begins, new Honors College freshmen are encouraged to make initial honors advising appointments within the first two or three weeks of the semester. These sessions allow the students and their honors advisors to become familiar with each other. During the initial advising appointments, honors advisors review Honors College requirements and let the students know that they should feel free to contact The Honors College with any question at any time. If necessary, the advisors explain the mechanics of undertaking an honors contract project in a regular course.

The next cycle of honors advising precedes priority enrollment, and honors advising is mandatory each semester. The Registrar places an enrollment hold on the record of every active participant in the Honors College student to block enrollment in *any* courses for the next semester, and only honors advisors may remove this electronic hold. This procedure ensures that honors students contact their honors advisors at least once each semester, but much more frequent contact certainly occurs and is encouraged.

Between individual honors advising appointments, honors advisors frequently email students about approaching deadlines; opportunities for scholarships, study abroad, and undergraduate research grants; speakers and other events on campus; and anything else that might be of interest and benefit to Honors College students. Honors advisors are available, of course, for students who simply want to drop by the office. If questions arise that the honors advisors cannot answer, they carefully determine the appropriate contact person or office on campus (Bursar, Counseling Services, Study Abroad Office, Institutional Technology, etc.) so that they can make an immediate referral.

With such extensive honors advising and the 325% increase in the number of honors students since 1988, the obvious question is how to continue to meet the honors advising needs of our students. In 1988, all honors advising was the responsibility of the Director of the Arts and Sciences Honors Program. In 2007, the Director and Assistant Director of The Honors College advise approximately 100 students each. In addition, three full-time administrative and professional staff Honors Academic Counselors, our formal designation for honors advisors, advise approximately 250 students each. All five of these positions are full-time, twelve-month appointments. With the exception of one of the Honors Academic Counselors, these positions are funded from the regular Honors College budget. The third Honors

Academic Counselor's position is funded through the Provost's Office from the academic advising fees paid by all OSU undergraduates. With central administrative support and increased budgetary resources, we have kept pace with the increased number of Honors College students, but without that support we could not hope to continue providing top-quality personalized honors advising.

QUALIFICATIONS FOR HONORS ACADEMIC COUNSELORS

Given the importance OSU places on honors advising and the resources committed to it, what are the qualifications for our Honors Academic Counselors? Our most recent position announcement included the following criteria:

> An Honors Program or Honors College Bachelor's Degree, preferably from an institution affiliated with the National Collegiate Honors Council, is required by university policy. Advanced degree preferred. Minimum 3.50 undergraduate cumulative grade point average. . . . Excellent communication skills needed as well as the ability to work with students from different colleges and majors and a demonstrated record of ability to work independently with minimal supervision. Election to Phi Kappa Phi or Phi Beta Kappa desirable. Computer experience is required.

An advanced degree is a plus in our selection process, but according to university policy it cannot trump the lack of an honors program or honors college degree. Merely graduating with honors based on grade point average is insufficient. OSU requires an honors program or honors college degree for a variety of reasons. Among the most important is that it gives honors advisors instant credibility in the eyes of their advisees. Whether in the initial freshman inquiry about whether honors is worthwhile or in a response to a junior with apprehensions about undertaking an honors thesis in the senior year, the Honors Academic Counselor can respond on the basis of personal experience and success.

In addition, individuals who have completed honors program or honors college degrees typically are self-starters who learn quickly and can be brought into our honors advising system smoothly and swiftly. They tend to be articulate, enthusiastic, and willing to do what it takes to maintain our record of excellence in honors advising. Given the value they place on their own honors achievements, they know the importance of making certain that their advice to others is accurate and appropriate.

The question may arise whether requiring an honors program or honors college degree rather than simply a high grade point average unduly limits the pool of applicants. Our most recent Honors Academic Counselor search resulted in applications from thirteen fully qualified individuals from six states, and we were pleased with the range of applicants from which we made our selection.

The one drawback to our approach is that, by hiring such extremely talented individuals for entry-level positions, we have on occasion faced turnover problems, which have frustrated students whose honors advisors have changed during their undergraduate careers. OSU has addressed this problem on a university-wide basis by developing a promotion program based on additional degrees earned and length of service in academic advising in general. In addition, we in The Honors College encourage our Honors Academic Counselors, if they are so inclined, to pursue graduate degrees at OSU, and we adjust work schedules to make it possible for them to enroll in the classes they need for their graduate programs.

EVALUATION OF HONORS ADVISING

Although we may believe that we hire outstanding honors advisors, we cannot simply rely on our own assertion that this is the case. The Honors College employs two instruments to gauge student response to honors advising. A questionnaire is distributed each spring semester to all active participants in the Honors College. Based on a four-point scale, with the numerical response average for each person responsible for honors advising being given equal weight to reach the composite score reported here, the 2007 questionnaire produced the following results:

Knowledge and explanation of Honors College policies	3.83
Assistance in planning honors class schedule	3.85
Ability to refer to other services on campus (if requested)	3.81
Availability to answer questions	3.89
Cares about you as a person	3.87

In addition to the annual spring honors advising questionnaire, our exit questionnaire for Honors College Degree candidates includes the following item: "Was having an Honors Advisor in The Honors College Office beneficial to you? Please explain briefly." Some representative responses are provided below:

> It was very beneficial for me (I had . . . for 3 years). She was able to offer me insight that helped me take classes that would fulfill multiple requirements in a short amount of time.
>
> Yes, having an Honors Advisor in the Honors College Office was extremely beneficial to me because I could always come to them with questions and get the help I needed.
>
> Yes! I don't know what I would have done without . . . ! First of all, she convinced me that it really wouldn't take that many more hours to get my honors degree, instead of just my general honors award. Secondly, she helped me arrange all my classes so I could graduate on time with honors. I have emailed her numerous times with many questions and she has always been quick to respond and extremely helpful.
>
> Yes, having an Honors Advisor in the The Honors College was definitely beneficial. My advisor has been amazing, always helpful, and fun to talk to. I feel that my advisor has helped me to remain in the Honors College even when I was thinking of quitting.

Not every student believes honors advising to be particularly beneficial, of course. One of the less positive responses is given below:

> During my freshman and sophomore year, yes. After that I knew what was going on and having to go in for enrollment got a bit annoying. But it was nice to have someone to approach with questions.

The consistent pattern of evaluation responses over many years on both survey instruments demonstrates a continuing pattern of student satisfaction with honors advising at OSU.

CONCLUSION

Honors advising is recognized as a crucial part of the overall operations of an honors program or honors college, and NCHC publications indicate that a variety of models are employed to provide this essential support for honors students. This article has summarized one approach that has been demonstrated to be successful over an extended period of time, but it is by no means held forth as one to be adopted regardless of institutional context. Whatever model is selected, however, it is well to recall that NCHC's "Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program" call for "uniquely qualified faculty and/or staff personnel" to perform this vital task.

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