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# Honors *Ex Machina*: Changing Perceptions of Honors through Horizontal Integration, A Case Study

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Honors programs and colleges face numerous pressures from raising money to managing growth to developing and maintaining curricula. None of these challenges, however, are unique to honors. What has, unfortunately, proven to be unique to honors has been the continuing question of relevance. Over the years, “making honors relevant” has been an ongoing part of the national honors discussion.

In the fall/winter 2007 volume of the *JNCHC*, Ira Cohen used a Robert Burns poem to remind us that others often do not see honors as we see ourselves: “The observation by Burns clearly applies to honors: the viewpoint of those within honors education is frequently at variance with those administrators working outside the framework of honors” (p. 27). Nowhere is this difference more apparent than in the operational differences between honors and the wider university community. The emphasis in honors on individual attention to students, carefully considered curricula, and enhanced learning opportunities stands in marked contrast to non-honors academic units that struggle to staff large classes, provide meaningful academic advising, and keep students engaged. These differences can lead others to see honors education as a luxury or as elitist; in this time of financial exigency, neither is an acceptable option.

While we find inherent worth in the services we provide to students, others often view what we do as secondary to the principal work of the university: at best, they see honors as ancillary to the educational mission of the university; at worst, they consider it an unnecessary drain on resources that could be more profitably used elsewhere. These perceptions have many consequences, some of them dire. From limited budgets to inefficient reporting lines, honors programs and colleges suffer when they are not seen as integral to the overall university mission of educating undergraduate students.

## HORIZONTAL INTEGRATION

Integrating honors into the operations of the larger university relies principally on how resources are reallocated from honors back to other academic units. Extending honors operations into other academic units (known in the business world as “horizontal integration”) facilitates the development of fully realized partnerships. Horizontal integration allows for effective economies of scope, allowing honors to share resources with other units to accomplish shared goals. Though universities are often organized vertically (i.e., as separate “silos” operating in parallel to each other), enhancing learning within universities is an inherently horizontal process: units must engage with each other to support common learning goals like critical thinking, information literacy, and writing skills.

For honors programs and colleges, integration affords a number of benefits that include shared faculty resources, shared opportunities to support faculty development, high visibility, and contact with potential honors students. This process may flow naturally from existing relationships between honors and other academic units or it may require forging alliances. Of course, sharing resources in this way requires careful planning. All parties must understand their respective responsibilities and share a common vision.

In what follows, I present one model for weaving honors programs and colleges into the fabric of their universities. This example is based on the particular situation of our honors college, but I believe many of the issues we face are common to honors at other universities. The strategy that we embraced involved the creation of permanent financial ties to the other academic units in our university through the creation of new, shared faculty positions and disciplinary honors programs. Fiscal constraints imposed on many honors programs and colleges do not allow for implementation of this model. However, other elements of the plan (streamlining the honors curriculum, creating long-term staffing agreements with non-honors academic units, pooling resources) may be useful in enhancing the integration of honors activities into those of the larger institution.

### A CASE STUDY

By 2003, the University Honors Program at Virginia Commonwealth University had reached a critical juncture. The program, created in 1983, had seen tremendous growth but had also become a source of controversy. Following a series of recommendations from an *ad hoc* Task Force to Evaluate the Honors Program in 1990, the program was moved from its original home in the College of Humanities and Sciences to the provost’s office. While this move improved accessibility and visibility, the program’s status within the university remained uncertain. Another *ad hoc* committee was formed in 1996 to again evaluate the program and make recommendations to be included in a new strategic plan for honors. A new suite of recommendations, many similar to those offered by the previous committee, was put forward.

In 2001, a new provost requested an external evaluation of the honors program. Consultants from the NCHC were engaged. They produced a detailed report on the status of the program and offered suggestions for its improvement. Yet another *ad hoc* committee was drafted in 2002 to consider the consultants' report and review the status of the program for the third time in twelve years.

Raising the profile of the (then) honors program was an important goal for VCU, but contained within it was a subtle criticism: the profile of honors was low because the program was not a full partner in the undergraduate educational mission of the university. Worse, honors was not seen as the "center of excellence in undergraduate studies," which had been the rallying cry when the program was created, but as an ancillary program centered on student service rather than academic activities. Both of these issues resulted in large part from insufficient resources and inadequate staffing, and although both had been raised in each of the committee reports, they had never been effectively addressed. Nonetheless, the perception that the honors program was not an integral part of the educational life of the institution was pervasive.

When I was hired in 2004, my first task was to initiate a new strategic planning cycle. I used this opportunity to engage faculty and administrators in a detailed discussion about the actual and potential role of honors at VCU. The principal outcome of that process was a decision to integrate our operations formally with those of certain academic units outside honors by sharing faculty and resources in ways that we had not before. We believed (and continue to believe) that by engaging with the broader university, we could simultaneously raise our profile and become a more integral part of the institution.

In cooperation with our honors council and the deans of those units that maintain undergraduate programs, we developed a six-point strategic plan that recommended creating a new honors curriculum, increasing the ethnic and geographic diversity of honors students, increasing support for honors students to study abroad, improving our relations with honors alumni, and renovating and expanding the space we occupy. As part of this plan, we also recommended the addition of two new staff positions and formal reclassification of the honors program as the VCU Honors College.

Admittedly, securing a budget increase, even in relatively good budget years, is not easy. In an effort to provide transparency and ensure that progress could be measured, we tied budget requests to specific programs and included explicit partnerships with other academic units in the plan. We also premised our budget request on the position that money given to honors returns directly to the academic units of the university; any new money given to us would contribute directly to the academic mission of the university.

Even so, our request for a significant increase in our curriculum budget (used to remunerate departments for faculty who teach honors classes) would not have been possible without the support of the Dean of the College of Humanities and Sciences, the university's largest academic unit. This dean had stated unequivocally that we would never be able to hire his best faculty until

we could offer departments the actual cost of faculty members' services (12.5% of annual salary plus associated fringe benefit costs). This sum represented a significant increase over the fee-for-service arrangement that had existed previously. In that model, departments were reimbursed \$2300 for a single, three-credit course, regardless of the rank or salary of the faculty member, the result being an honors program in which adjunct faculty taught virtually all honors classes.

Formal approval of the strategic plan came in early 2005. It included a commitment from the university to provide the resources required to transform the honors program into an honors college (formal board approval of the change to an honors college came in June of 2006). These resources included the more than 100% increase in the curriculum budget that we had requested.

Increasing faculty remuneration was an important step in improving our engagement with other academic units, but the budget increase also gave us opportunities to work with them in novel ways. We settled on a three-part strategy: 1) creating a new honors curriculum; 2) hiring the faculty to teach these new courses from the other academic units on a per-instructor rather than per-course basis; and 3) working with the units to create disciplinary honors programs to supplement the new honors curriculum.

VCU recently implemented a university-wide core curriculum designed as a "compact with students." This compact provides "a shared undergraduate experience that enhances student engagement and learning, fosters a sense of community, and emphasizes the development of a set of skills essential for educational and professional successes and lifelong learning" <<http://www.vcu.edu/uc/compact>>. As of the fall 2008 semester, all freshman students take a linked, two-semester writing course that is tied to our common reading program and focuses on research, writing, and critical thinking. Students then take courses in quantitative literacy, rhetoric, humanities/fine arts, social/behavioral sciences, and natural science/mathematics.

We worked with faculty members in various disciplines to design an honors core curriculum that facilitates the intellectual goals of, but does not mirror, this compact. Beginning in the fall 2008 semester, all first-year honors students at VCU take the following honors courses: rhetoric, creative writing, conceptual mathematics, international political economy, philosophy of knowledge, and current applications of the scientific method. These courses satisfy the university core requirements and also count toward our requirements for graduating with university honors.

Given the number of students who enter the VCU Honors College each year and our policy of limiting honors course enrollment to twenty students, we need to offer approximately six sections of each of these classes each academic year. We have turned to the units that had helped us create these courses to staff them. We struck a deal with the deans of the colleges whose faculty would teach these courses: in return for the honors college's binding agreement to provide two thirds of the funding (\$40,000 *per annum*) for a new, tenure-track, assistant-professor position for five years, each of the six relevant departments

assigns a portion of these faculty members' responsibilities to teaching two or three honors sections per year while existing faculty teach the remaining three or four sections. We thus disburse a total of \$240,000 per annum, \$40,000 to each of the six departments. In this way, we are able to facilitate new hires for the departments and meet our staffing needs. We also participate in the annual review of these faculty members and have a voice in their tenure decisions, something we have not been invited to do previously.

These faculty partnerships have created a sense of connection between the honors college and the colleges within which these departments reside. The agreements have increased our visibility within these units significantly. We are now seen as a partner in the academic mission of these units in a way that we had not been before. We are better able to ensure the academic rigor of our courses by providing prior approval for faculty appointments to honors classes and participating in the teaching portion of annual evaluations, and we have improved our ability to schedule courses.

We are using the remainder of our curriculum budget to create and support honors programs within the disciplines. Working with those departments (or schools) that have significant numbers of honors students, we have helped departmental and school curriculum committees design (or in some cases re-design) and implement departmental honors programs. In return, we provide financial support (at 12.5% of salary up to \$8,000) for one departmental honors course per semester.

The advantage to our students is their increased ability to take honors classes throughout their undergraduate careers and in their majors. The advantages to the departments include increased funding for operations and the ability to provide enriched learning opportunities for their best students. The advantage for the honors college is that we are now involved directly in supporting the departments' curricular efforts and have been able to extend our offerings to include classes and faculty that had not been part of honors before. The honors college has begun to function as the "center of excellence in undergraduate education" that the honors program had been created to do twenty-five years earlier.

## CONCLUSIONS

I must offer a caveat: The financial situation that I describe will not necessarily mirror that of other honors programs. Indeed, the *ex machina* in the title is intended to refer to the unlikely resolution we were able to achieve. Although the scale of available money may differ among programs, the problem of integrating honors into the academic mission of the university remains. While our specific solution may not be an option for some, the overall goals (streamlining the honors curriculum and then working systematically with the units to create long term staffing agreements) do, I think, represent reasonable objectives. As I have tried to show, the increase in funding that we were able to secure was made possible largely because we convinced others that tying honors directly to other academic units was beneficial to the university.

## HONORS *EX MACHINA*

The degree to which our efforts succeed will not be fully known for a few years. However, what we can say at this point is that our move to create more formal and permanent ties to the other academic units has already changed perceptions of the VCU Honors College. Honors college staff members now regularly serve on departmental hiring committees, the dean sits on the advisory council of the College of Humanities and Sciences, and our Arts and Design campus in Doha, Qatar is about to graduate its first honors student.

Integrating our honors college into the fabric of undergraduate life at VCU required us to rethink both our curriculum and the ways we staff our classes; it meant finding new ways to work with and support departmental efforts to improve opportunities for top students; and it meant sharing our resources with other academic units in ways we had not done before. These strategies and the process of implementing them have changed our relationship to the rest of the university.

We hope that these efforts will address concerns about our “relevance.” By assisting other academic units in their efforts to expand their faculties, by providing curriculum development expertise and classroom laboratories for teaching innovation, and by participating directly in departmental efforts to improve their academic services, we are attempting to demonstrate the myriad ways in which honors can help improve the education of all students.

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