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# The Perceived Value of Honors Work as It Relates to Faculty Promotion and Tenure

**K. Celeste Campbell**
**Oklahoma State University**

Honors programs (and honors colleges as they are called in some institutions) exist to provide enhanced learning environments for outstanding undergraduate students. The benefits for students are many: small and often more challenging classes; access to professors (as opposed to graduate students or teaching assistants); early enrollment; special honors housing; research opportunities; and scholarship money. But what are the benefits for the faculty who teach in such programs or who serve as administrators (directors or deans) of these programs? Many faculty members find personal satisfaction by working with small groups of talented students, but is honors work a help or a hindrance for gaining tenure or promotion? What value do institutions place on faculty work with honors students?

A review of the literature over the last twelve years provides a varied perspective on the institutional value of honors work and the translation of that value to faculty promotion and tenure. These perspectives are included in the "existing views" sections of this article. The "perceptions from the surveys" sections are based on survey assessments of the current perception (spring 2002) of the value of honors work and how this work counts in the promotion and tenure process. For this assessment I surveyed two groups: (1) honors administrators who are members of the National Collegiate Honors Council electronic mailing list and (2) Oklahoma State University faculty who, during the spring 2002 semester, were teaching honors sections of courses or directing honors thesis projects. Eighteen honors administrators responded to the national survey, and 34 faculty members responded to the OSU honors faculty survey. Participants provided written responses to the surveys using electronic mail and postal mail. The survey instruments, composed of open-ended questions, are provided in the appendices.

## THE PERCEIVED VALUE OF HONORS WORK WITHIN THE INSTITUTION

### Some Existing Views on the Value of Honors Work

One measure of value is the allocation of resources. Institutions of higher education are committing a significant amount of funds to working with honors students.

An example is Hofstra University in Hempstead, NY, which designated $1 million in scholarship funds and $325,000 for faculty salaries to their newly formed honors college. "Hofstra officials see the new [honors] college as a way to kick-start a campaign to improve academic standards by attracting better students" (Burghardt, 2001, p. 1). Honors programs help not only when competing for good students but also when recruiting professors. According to administrators at Illinois State University, the honors program "elevates the prestige of the university, making it easier to recruit quality professors" (Samuels, 2001, p. 29). Honors programs are seen as a "public relations bonanza, producing high-achieving graduates and alumni that reflect on the institution" (Samuels, 2001, p. 28).

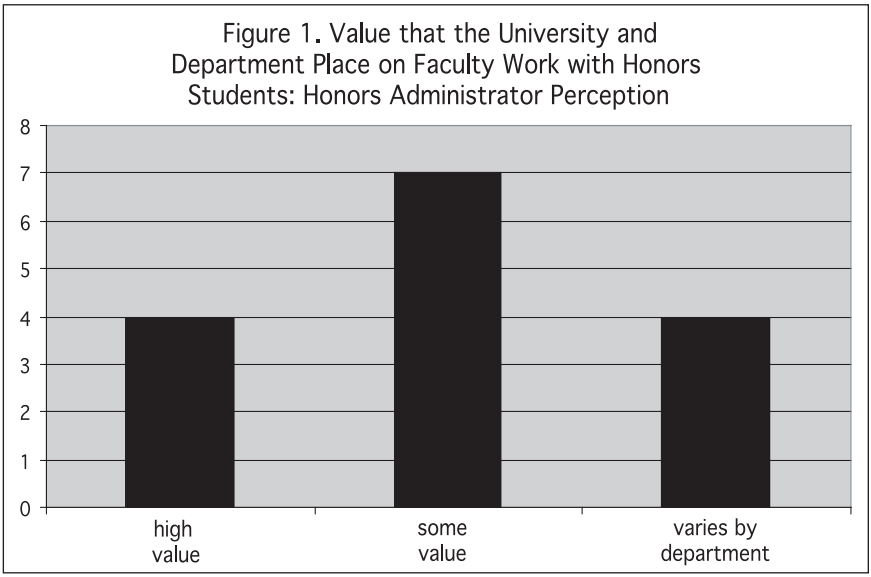
The prestige that honors programs bring to universities is seen by some to camouflage the failure of general undergraduate educational programs. In *Beer and Circus*, Murray Sperber argues that the resources that are pumped into honors programs would be better used in areas that would improve educational conditions for all students. He contends that "Schools publicly promote their excellent and well-funded honors programs and never mention their deteriorating regular undergraduate education ones—as if somehow the flashy honors colleges compensate for the poverty of ordinary classes" (Sperber, 2000, p. 148).

The value of working with honors students varies by institution and by individuals within an institution. This value will affect the tenure and promotion process for faculty who are spending their time doing honors work. The tenure system should motivate faculty members to concentrate on continuous improvement of their teaching and scholarship (Tierney & Bensimon, 1996). Honors can be an avenue for such improvement. For example, honors faculty can use the honors curriculum to serve as a prototype for educational practices that would work campus-wide in the future. The honors program can serve 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 (Basic characteristics, 2000).

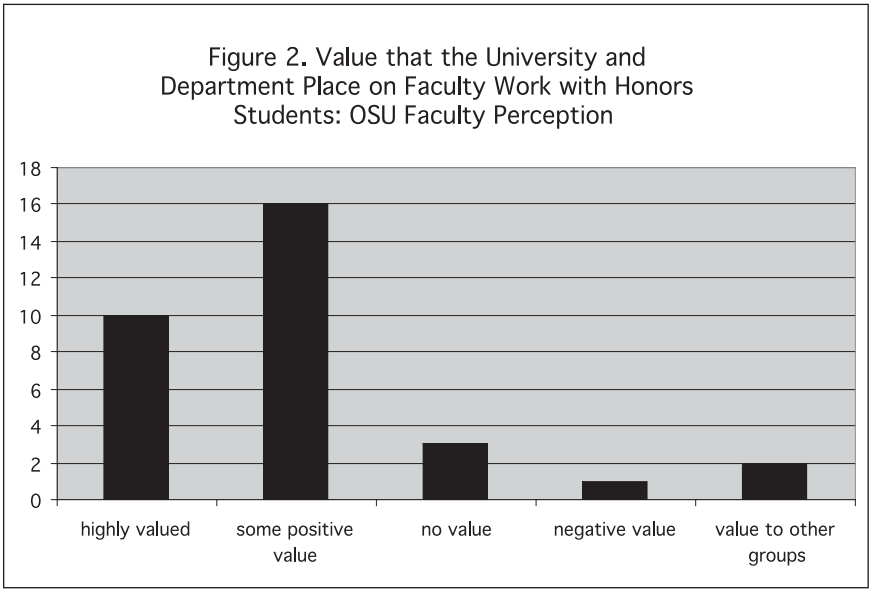
## PERCEPTIONS FROM THE SURVEYS ON THE VALUE OF HONORS WORK

When asked to describe the value that their institutions or academic departments place on faculty work with honors students, 4 of the 18 honors administrators who responded to the survey (22%) indicated that their institutions or academic departments place a high value on faculty work with honors students (see Figure 1). Seven (39%) indicated some value, and four (22%) said that the value varies by department. Three people did not respond to this question. Regarding demonstration of the value of faculty work with honors students, two respondents (from Radford University and State University of West Georgia) reported that honors work is included in their institutions' promotion and tenure criteria, and three reported evidence that honors work helped faculty achieve tenure.

Most of the 34 Oklahoma State University faculty survey respondents who are currently involved with teaching honors classes or supervising honors theses think that honors work is seen to have at least some value by the university and by their




departments. Ten respondents (29%) reported that honors work is valued highly, 16 respondents (47%) reported some positive value, 3 respondents (9%) reported no value, and 1 respondent (3%) assigned negative value to working with honors students. Two people did not respond to the value question. Two others discussed value to students and to the Honors College, but did not address the value to OSU or to the academic department (see Figure 2).



Thirteen of the faculty commented on the manner that this value is demonstrated. Four (31%) indicated that honors work is specifically used in the tenure/promotion/pay criteria of their departments (English, Philosophy, Psychology, and Zoology). Nine respondents (69%) said that honors was valued or appreciated, but that this value is not demonstrated in tenure/promotion/pay criteria. Although an assessment of the personal value of honors work was not specifically sought on the survey, several faculty commented on the great personal and intrinsic value of working with motivated honors students in small-group settings.

One OSU faculty member whose response was counted in the "no value" category commented that honors work was not purposefully assigned no value, but that "it has never come up." In other words, no one has suggested or required that honors work be viewed as an important and valuable activity that is worthy of a faculty member's limited time. It is the job of the honors administrator to call attention to honors work and to help elevate the value of honors work within the institution. Joan Digby, Honors Director at Long Island University and former President of the National Collegiate Honors Council, stated in her survey response,

> I have done a great deal to give honors a good name. I think that is the most essential job of an honors director with respect to protecting honors faculty. Unless we draw attention to faculty working with honors students they will be invisible.

# HONORS ADMINISTRATIVE WORK: PERCEIVED EFFECT ON PROMOTION AND TENURE

## SOME EXISTING VIEWS ON THE EFFECT OF HONORS ADMINISTRATIVE WORK ON PROMOTION AND TENURE

The faculty member who acts as director (or dean or coordinator) of the honors effort usually performs administrative duties, teaches honors courses, advises honors students, and directs independent study for honors students. Within their administrative positions, honors directors continue to define themselves at least in part and most often primarily as faculty members who maintain strong connections to their disciplines and academic departments (Long, 1995). The vast amount of time devoted to honors often prevents productivity in the "home" discipline, however, and can be an obstacle for faculty who are trying to earn tenure. For junior faculty who are also honors directors, dividing time between honors administration and meeting the requirements of tenure, promotion, and salary recognition is a constant tension and a persistent negotiation (Ponder, 1991).

For the part-time honors directors, those who receive partial release time from their teaching loads to run honors programs, tension can run high when balancing honors work with other academic responsibilities.

> Some disturbing research has indicated that a substantial number of honors program directors believe that their professional careers, which usually means their advancement within their disciplines in such matters as publications or even achieving tenure, have been or

> might be retarded by their administrative duties; as a result, some faculty members have been reluctant to accept honors appointments or to remain in them for very long. (Ward, 1992, p. 26)

In 1992 Ada Long, Honors Director at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (and 1995 President of the National Collegiate Honors Council), conducted a nationwide survey of honors administrators to discover how their administrative/faculty duties are carried out and to gather suggestions for improvements in the way that their jobs are done. One section of the survey addressed the issues of tenure, promotion, and merit raises as they relate to honors. The trends that emerged from the responses indicate that the criteria for awarding tenure and promotion to honors administrators are the same as for any faculty member: research, teaching, and service. Tenure is awarded through the honors director's affiliation with an academic discipline and department. Many of the survey respondents thought that tenure and full professorship should be earned *before* taking on the position of honors administrator. Regarding whether honors counts in the tenure process, "The survey would seem to indicate that, when honors counts at all, it counts rather little and primarily in the realm of service" (Long, 1995, p. 38). Several respondents expressed the opinion that honors *should* count and that the categories of teaching, research, and service could flourish within the field of honors.

Long (1995) is clear in advising that faculty members who have not yet achieved tenure should agree to be named honors administrators only if there are precise, written indications of how and how much honors activities will count within each of the categories of teaching, research, and service. Without such clarity, it would be wise to attain tenure and the highest academic rank to which one aspires before taking on administration of honors.

In keeping with this viewpoint, Sam Schuman's *Beginning in Honors* handbook, a guide for colleges and universities that are in the process of starting honors programs at their institutions, contends that the honors director should be a faculty member with academic integrity who is well respected within his or her own discipline and by the university at large. The handbook also warns that honors directors should work under reasonably clear contractual conditions, including the knowledge of how honors leadership will affect such career developments as promotions, sabbaticals, and salary increases (Schuman, 1995).

In rare cases, honors functions as an independent academic discipline with the power to grant promotion and tenure. Rosalie Otero, Honors Program Director at the University of New Mexico (2002 President of the National Collegiate Honors Council), earned tenure as a faculty member in the General Honors Program, a department within the University College. Her tenure process followed much the same path as that of other faculty on her campus. The determining criteria were teaching, scholarship, service, and personal characteristics. Teaching was a very important component. Because her Ph.D. is in English, the Chair of the English Department served as chair of her tenure and promotion committee. Other committee members were faculty who had been involved with the honors program. Her colleagues from the National Collegiate Honors Council served as outside evaluators. The arduous and time-consuming process resulted in the granting of tenure and the title of Associate Professor in Honors (Otero, 1997).

## PERCEPTIONS FROM THE SURVEYS ON THE EFFECT OF HONORS ADMINISTRATIVE WORK ON PROMOTION AND TENURE

Each of the 18 respondents to the honors administrator survey serves as director or dean of the honors program or college at his or her institution. Seventeen are tenured faculty members, and one is a faculty member in a tenure-track position who has not yet earned tenure.

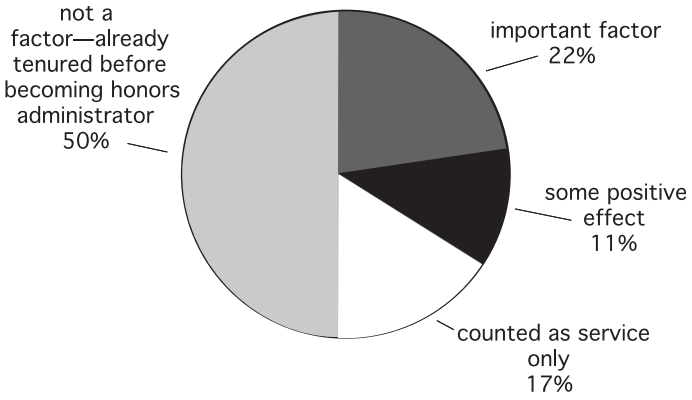
Four respondents (22%) said that honors administrative work was a very important factor in their earning tenure. According to John Zubizarreta of Columbia College,

> Honors definitely contributed positively to my tenure and promotion. The work I have done to promote academic excellence and to recruit and retain higher quality students has been valued and recognized in personnel decisions. Serving on regional and national honors boards and committees and publishing in honors have counted as important contributions to my professional growth and to the college's efforts to win more attention as a strong liberal arts college.

Two respondents (11%) said that honors administrative work had some positive effect on the tenure process, and three (17%) reported that honors work counted as service only. Nine of the respondents (50%) said that they had already earned tenure before becoming an honors administrator, so it was not a factor for them. (see Figure 3).

A few common themes emerged from responses to the survey question, "What advice would you give a non-tenured faculty member who accepts an administrative position in honors?" Six of the respondents stressed the importance of securing support for honors work from the department chair, dean, and other administrators. Five

Figure 3. Effect of Honors Administrative Work on Tenure: Honors Administrator Perception



considered it crucial for the faculty member to clarify the expectations for earning tenure, particularly how the honors administrative work will be viewed in the tenure process. Three cautioned that prospective honors administrators should carefully consider their other responsibilities before accepting an honors position for reasons such as work in the discipline suffering due to the time commitment that honors administration requires. Three respondents advised that, if someone really wants to take on an honors administrative position, he or she should jump in and enjoy a rewarding and exciting job without worrying too much about the opinions of others. Four expressed the opinion that it would be unwise for a faculty member to take on administrative responsibilities for an honors program until after tenure has been earned.

# HONORS FACULTY WORK: PERCEIVED EFFECT ON PROMOTION AND TENURE

## SOME EXISTING VIEWS ON THE EFFECT OF HONORS FACULTY WORK ON PROMOTION AND TENURE

The university reward system has been a hot topic of discussion and debate for the last few years. Much of the focus is aimed at the concept of tenure—the need for reform and the question of whether it should exist at all. These tenure and reward systems are not conducive to rapid change; nevertheless, calls for change abound.

> On campuses across the nation, there is a recognition that the faculty reward system does not match the full range of academic functions and that professors are often caught between competing obligations. In response, there is a lively and growing discussion about how faculty should, in fact, spend their time. (Boyer, 1990, p. 1)

In order for faculty to commit their time and energy specifically to honors work, they must view this work as worthy of their time and should have some understanding of how this work will count toward promotion and tenure.

Honors work should be recognized as a valued part of the faculty role.

> Efforts to broaden what is understood as the scholarly work of faculty are built into new tenure and promotion guidelines; and innovative ways of assessing the scholarly role of faculty in teaching and learning, as well as professional service, are gaining ground. (Rice, 1996, p. 34)

In this climate, honors administrators have an opportunity to ensure that work with honors students is included in the new assessment of the role of faculty and in the related reward system.

To increase honors visibility within the institution, Schuman's *Beginning in Honors* handbook recommends that the honors director make an effort to inject honors program work into the institution's faculty reappointment, promotion, and tenure review mechanism. "The Honors Director can certainly send the faculty personnel committee or appropriate administrative office timely letters commending Honors

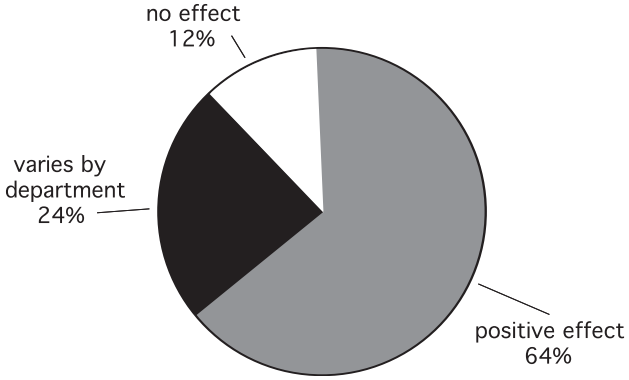
teaching. Honors work can become a factor in promotion and tenure deliberations simply through the agency of an alert Honors Director" (Schuman, 1995, p. 23).

## PERCEPTIONS FROM THE SURVEYS ON THE EFFECT OF HONORS FACULTY WORK ON PROMOTION AND TENURE

Honors administrators were asked how honors teaching and the supervision of individual honors work (e.g., contracts, theses) affects the tenure process for faculty who work with honors students at their institutions. Eleven respondents (64%) indicated that honors faculty work counts positively toward tenure at their institutions (see Figure 4). Two of these institutions specifically mentioned work with honors students in their promotion and tenure criteria. Donald Wagner, Dean of the Honors College at State University of West Georgia, said, "Our institutional criteria for promotion and tenure specifically mention honors teaching. It is one among a number of criteria that a faculty member can use to show meritorious work in teaching." Four respondents (24%) indicated that the effect of honors work varies by department. Two respondents (12%) reported no effect or the same effect as teaching regular courses. One person did not respond to this question. A few directors mentioned that they are often asked by faculty to write letters supporting tenure applications.

More than half of the honors faculty who responded to the OSU survey think that honors teaching and the supervision of individual honors work positively affect the promotion and tenure process for the faculty who engage in such work (see Figure 5). Specifically, 4 respondents (12%) said that honors work has a strong positive effect on promotion and tenure, 15 respondents (46%) said that honors work had

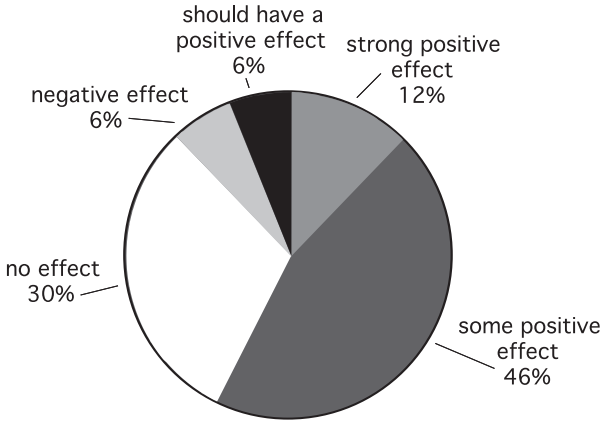
Figure 4: Effect of Honors Teaching or the Supervision of Individual Honors Work on Faculty Tenure: Honors Administrator Perception



some positive effect, 10 respondents (30%) said that honors work had no effect, and 2 respondents (6%) said that honors work had a negative effect on the promotion and tenure process. Two respondents (6%) said that honors work *should* have a positive effect on promotion and tenure, but did not specify whether this effect now exists. One person did not respond to this question.

Maureen Sullivan, OSU Psychology Department Head, said that honors work is viewed positively as a promotion and tenure criterion and that she acknowledges honors work during annual faculty reviews. Although honors work is not considered a substitute for deficiencies in other areas, she said, "It is certainly one way for faculty to demonstrate involvement of students in research and involvement with undergraduate teaching." According to Eric Anderson, Associate Professor of English, "Work with honors students could sort of nudge faculty closer toward tenure/promotion, but would not make or break a person's tenure file."

Figure 5: Effect of Honors Teaching or the Supervision of Individual Honors Work on Faculty Promotion and Tenure: OSU Faculty Perception




Opinions varied within the same department. For example, of the five OSU mathematics department faculty who responded to the survey, two stated that honors work had a small effect on promotion and tenure, one reported no effect, one mentioned a negative effect (because it took time away from publishing), and one said that honors work, particularly the direction of honors thesis projects, should be considered a scholarly activity and should count in promotion and tenure decisions. It seems that it is up to the individual faculty member, with the help of the honors director, to make a case for his or her choice to spend time working with honors students—and such a case can definitely be made.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although there is no single, all-encompassing perception of the value of honors work as it affects the formal reward process for honors faculty and administrators, honors work is perceived by most faculty who participate in it as a positive factor in that process. The variety of survey responses is indicative of the variety of environments that exist in higher education. This variety is evident among the various types of institutions represented by the honors administrator survey respondents and among the diverse departments within the single institution of this study, Oklahoma State University. Although the honors-administrator portion of this study is limited by small sample size and the honors-faculty sample is limited to a single institution, the study provides an enlightening snapshot of the variety of perceptions that exist regarding the value of honors work. It also displays examples of what is possible—institutions where honors work is highly valued and where this value is reflected in the reward system for the faculty who invest their time in honors students.

Further research in this area would be enhanced by surveying a larger pool of honors administrators and extending the honors faculty pool to multiple institutions of varying sizes and types, e.g., public, private, two- and four-year institutions, and those with honors colleges versus honors programs. A document analysis that examines a wide range of institutional guidelines for promotion and tenure would provide additional insight regarding the extent to which honors work is valued in the faculty evaluation process.

The honors administrator can clearly make a difference in the institutional perception of the value of honors work, in the effect of honors administrative work on his or her own promotion and tenure, and in the ability of honors work to help advance the careers of the faculty who teach honors courses and supervise honors projects. This institution-wide awareness can be accomplished by ongoing communication with department heads and other university officials in the form of letters commending faculty for honors teaching, ads in the campus newspaper thanking faculty who work with students individually on honors contracts, etc. The honors faculty members must also take the initiative to make their department chairs aware of their work with honors students, particularly individual work (such as supervising honors contracts or honors theses) that may otherwise go unnoticed.

Another important step to increase the value of honors work for faculty is to see that it is included specifically in the institutional promotion and tenure criteria, as is done at Radford University and the State University of West Georgia. Although honors work will not override deficiencies in other areas, the inclusion of it as one of several promotion and tenure criteria will increase its value and the willingness of faculty to participate.

Lastly, the institutional value of honors can be elevated by active participation in the National Collegiate Honors Council. In addition to fostering a fertile environment for professional development and networking, the Council provides ample leadership opportunities for honors administrators, honors faculty, and honors students. It also serves as an outlet for scholarly work in honors through the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* and the *National Honors Report*.

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# APPENDIX A

## Honors Administrator Survey Instrument

**General Information:**

Institution: _____

Name and title of respondent: _____

**Regarding the Honors Director:**

Who is the honors director? Tenured faculty? Tenure-track faculty? What discipline? Non-tenure-track administrator?

If not yet tenured faculty, how does the administrative work of directing the honors program "count" for tenure?

If already tenured faculty, did honors work assist with gaining tenure? How?

Is honors work considered to be teaching, research, and/or service?

Is there room for faculty "scholarship" within the honors director position? If so, is it within the director's academic department? Within honors?

What advice would you give a non-tenured faculty member who accepts an administrative position in honors?

**Regarding honors faculty:**

How does honors teaching or the supervision of individual honors work (e.g., contracts, theses) affect the tenure process for faculty who work with honors students?

When related to promotion and tenure, is work with honors students considered to be teaching, research, and/or service?

What value does your institution or academic department place on faculty work with honors students? How is this value demonstrated (e.g., tenure criterion, promotion criterion, status with the university administration)?

# APPENDIX B

## Oklahoma State University Honors Faculty Survey Instrument

## Perception of the Effects of Honors Work on Faculty Promotion and Tenure

Name and title of respondent: _____

Department: _____

How do you think that honors teaching or the supervision of individual honors work (e.g., contracts, theses) affects the promotion and tenure process for faculty who work with honors students?

When related to promotion and tenure, is work with honors students considered to be teaching, research, and/or service?

What value do you think that OSU and your academic department place on faculty work with honors students? How is this value demonstrated (e.g., tenure criterion, promotion criterion, status with the university administration)?