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# Doing the Honors: How to Implement a Departmental Honors Program in a Business School

JULIE URDA

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Most research about honors has focused on general education honors. Less research is available on honors in management-related fields, two examples being Leong and Wagner's work on honors accounting and Siegfried's on economics. A guide to implementing a departmental honors program at minimal cost might thus be useful as honors programs continue to grow in number and in context. The revival of a departmental honors program in management and marketing at Rhode Island College (see Appendix A for background) provides the model for a nine-step process that can apply to other business school departments in institutions with existing general honors programs or to any department where there is already an institutional commitment to honors studies and where a path to a thesis already exists.

Most institutions attract a diverse population of students whose breadth of ability levels does not necessarily include the best and brightest. Nonetheless, accommodating gifted students is as important as accommodating remedial students (Waggoner); not all bright students are destined for the Ivy League, and many seek lower-cost alternatives in institutions with honors programs (Long; Hébert & McBee). Thus, for many decades institutions of higher learning have offered honors programs to attract and retain the brightest students while keeping costs low (Long).

Honors programs in business school departments are particularly important because students in these fields rarely find research opportunities as undergraduates. The nature of an undergraduate education in management or marketing tends to direct students into professional schools during their post-graduate careers, but gifted students who eagerly wish to attend MBA programs need innovative classes and enthusiastic teachers. A departmental honors program is an effective way of engaging faculty and students in undergraduate research, and it also shows young business majors that careers in research and academia are available to them as well as careers requiring an MBA. Table 1 summarizes some of the benefits of a departmental honors program in business as well as some of the challenges.

**Table 1: Expected Benefits and Concerns Encountered from Implementing a Departmental Honors Program**

<b>Benefits</b>	<b>Challenges</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Challenge the best students</li> <li>• Give students a job market advantage</li> <li>• Prepare students for graduate school</li> <li>• Provide research opportunities to faculty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accept slow initial participation rate</li> <li>• Prepare students for time commitment</li> <li>• Streamline the feedback process</li> <li>• Use social networking as a marketing tool</li> </ul>

The following essay provides a model for implementing a departmental honors program in business and explains nine steps to implement such a program, summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2: Nine Steps to Implementing a Departmental Honors Program**

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Assess existing resources           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information available</li> <li>• Interested faculty</li> <li>• Student interest</li> </ul> </li> <li>2. Define the program           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purpose</li> <li>• Admission criteria</li> <li>• Requirements for Honors designation</li> </ul> </li> <li>3. Attract students to information sessions           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emails to eligible students</li> <li>• Flyers distributed and posted</li> <li>• Faculty announcements</li> </ul> </li> <li>4. Hold information sessions           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presentations</li> <li>• Further inquiry encouraged</li> <li>• Faculty support</li> </ul> </li> </ol>
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5. Follow up
  - Honors Committee debriefing
  - Potential advisors discussed
  - Thanks to presenters and attendees
6. Help students get started
  - Potential advisors
  - Scholarship funds
7. Evaluate the project
  - Due date reminder
  - Two-week process: evaluate, feedback, revise
  - Revisions discussed
8. Showcase the project
  - Poster session
  - Presentation
  - Undergraduate research conference
9. Make the honors designation official
  - Course credit
  - Departmental Honors on transcript
  - Indication at Commencement

The discussion of these steps includes concerns we encountered in developing a departmental honors program in management and marketing at Rhode Island College (RIC) and possible solutions to these concerns. The conclusion summarizes the costs of the program and suggests ideas for future research.

## **STEP 1: ASSESS EXISTING RESOURCES**

An honors program director in business should first take an inventory of existing resources and answer three questions: 1) what information is available about existing honors programs at the institution, especially within the business school; 2) which faculty members are interested in participating either as Honors Committee (HC) members or thesis advisors; and 3) how many students know about the program and are interested in participating. At RIC, three faculty members volunteered to constitute the HC, and six offered to serve as advisors. The HC then asked faculty members to poll their students informally regarding their knowledge of and interest in the departmental honors program.

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Results from this informal poll showed that few students knew of the program, but many were interested once they knew it existed.

### **STEP 2: DEFINE THE PROGRAM**

For students to be attracted to the program, they have to understand its benefits to them, its criteria for admission, and its requirements for achieving departmental honors. The framework should start with clear aims such as:

- Challenge students to discover and study topics of special interest
- Encourage development of research skills
- Recognize outstanding performance in the major

Next comes the need for an admission process. For instance, at RIC eligible students apply for admission by submitting an application and research proposal to the HC chair. On the application forms, which students can obtain from the HC chair or on the department's web page, the criteria for admission are defined:

- At least 60 but no more than 90 credits earned, i.e., students in their junior year
- At least a 3.50 GPA in the major and 3.25 overall (including transfer credits)
- Completed application form, including all transcripts from institutions of higher education, letter of recommendation from a current faculty member, and formal research proposal (see sample checklist in Appendix B)
- Successful review of the application and research proposal by two of the three HC members and the department chair

Once students have been accepted into the program, they need to know how to maintain their honors status. These criteria might include maintaining their GPAs at a minimum level, taking required courses, and meeting specific deadlines. At RIC, students must maintain a 3.5 GPA in the major and 3.25 GPA overall while also earning at least B- in all major courses and C- in courses outside the major. Students complete their honors project while enrolled in two successive 400-level independent study courses under the supervision of a member of the department, for which they receive three credits each. Each student's advisor provides a letter grade for these courses based on evaluation criteria defined in the student's accepted research proposal. Honors projects must be completed by April 1 for spring graduation or November 1 for winter graduation. The HC then determines whether the finished project is worthy of departmental honors.

Finally, students need to know what they have to achieve to receive credit for departmental honors, such as an evaluation of Satisfactory by the HC.

Evaluation of the project should be based on criteria announced prior to project production and dependent on the type of research conducted, as described in the research proposal. In the case of an Unsatisfactory evaluation, the committee may suggest revisions, which, if completed in a timely fashion, may result in a Satisfactory evaluation.

### **STEP 3: ATTRACT STUDENTS TO INFORMATION SESSIONS**

A good way to start getting students interested in an honors program is to make a list of all majors in the department who meet both GPA requirements for admission and send them students personal invitations to the information session via email. Next, distribute flyers (Appendices C & D) explaining the event, its time, and its location to all faculty for announcement in class. Third, post flyers in all classrooms in which the department's classes are taught as well as in a display case in the lobby of the business school. Finally, distribute pocket-sized versions of the flyer during class and strategically place them around the business school so students can keep them as a reminder for the session.

The idea is to blanket the area students frequent and to sell the information session actively in order to attract as many students as possible. Personal invitations to qualified students let them know the department recognizes their achievement and wants to give them a special opportunity to further challenge themselves. Students tend to respond positively to the invitation and should be thanked personally and sent a reminder for the event the day before it takes place.

Flyers help, but they are not necessarily the most effective way of gaining students' attention. Between emails, tweets, instant messages, and podcasts, students are always looking at electronic devices rather than old-fashioned bulletin boards. Departments should take full advantage of the digital age in organizing the information sessions and communicating with students about the honors program. For example, social media (e.g., a Facebook page) might work better than flyers. A department might ask students to design the page as a way to get them invested in the program and to give them another skill that might be useful in finding employment. A cash-strapped department can rely entirely on no-cost technology rather than older strategies like flyers.

### **STEP 4: HOLD INFORMATION SESSIONS**

The honors committee should plan an information session each semester and invite key faculty and administrators to give five-minute presentations. Students feel welcome if the session is held in a comfortable place and free food is served. Invited speakers can address topics such as:

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- Why do Honors? (department chair)
- Junior Honors Colloquium and College Honors (head of college honors program)
- Departmental Honors (head of department honors program)
- How to Choose an Advisor? (professor currently advising a student)
- What Is It Like to Do an Honors Project? (student currently conducting an honors project)
- How Do I Get Started? (open forum for questions and answers)

The information session will convince a few students to join the program and prompt others who could not attend to inquire about the program. Students often begin thinking about the honors program and ask about its requirements before the information session is announced.

The HC should hold the information session during the first half of every semester, prior to the registration period, so that first-semester juniors may register for any preparatory classes the institution might offer, and second-semester juniors have time to complete an honors proposal by the end-of-semester deadline. At RIC, students may take a two-credit junior honors colloquium to learn what an honors project entails and begin formulating their proposals. Other students may immediately seek an advisor and begin creating their proposal. It is important to run the session every semester to inform new majors of the honors program and to encourage existing majors to join if they meet the qualifications for admission.

At first, the turnout might not be large, especially if the program is new. It may take several tries before the information session garners significant interest. Attendance can also depend on the time and day chosen to hold the event, so program administrators should conduct the information session during a period when most students do not have class or other commitments.

### **STEP 5: FOLLOW-UP**

Each time an information session is held, the presenters should meet afterwards to debrief. Part of this process should be to consider what can be improved for next semester; this is also a good time to discuss appropriate advisors for the interested students and ways they can help define research topics. At this time, the HC chair should send one more email to the students who attended, thanking them for their participation and encouraging them to contact any of the HC members if they have further questions or are interested in conducting a project.

## **STEP 6: HELP THE STUDENTS GET STARTED**

Students tend to apply to the honors program knowing they want to conduct honors research but not necessarily knowing their research question or who their advisor should be. Therefore, HC members should be available to listen to their ideas, help them narrow the focus of the project, and recommend who among the faculty who volunteered to be advisors (see Step 1) is the best person to guide them through the process. It is then up to the student to talk with that professor and begin the project. At RIC, students are also made aware of a college fund to which they can apply to help defray up to \$500 of their project costs.

At this time it is important to remind students of the time commitment involved in an honors project. Students may show interest in doing a project but, on discussing it with a potential advisor, decide they do not have time for it. Because students know they will receive credit for two courses, they should expect to spend as much time on the project as they would for two regular college courses, but they might underestimate the extra time it takes to conduct research and complete an honors project. Time-management issues can be especially problematic at community colleges and other institutions with commuter campuses where students often balance full class schedules with full-time jobs and family responsibilities. If students start and stop a project, they get frustrated, and they also place a burden on advisors and HC members. Therefore, time commitment should be a concern addressed by both the HC and the student's advisor before the project starts.

## **STEP 7: EVALUATE THE HONORS PROJECT**

While the HC should monitor the thesis progress, at this stage the student and advisor do the work. How advisors guide students through their thesis year differs depending on the nature of the research. Some advisors run an independent study course during the first semester to expose students to theory and research on their topics; students might write short papers throughout the semester as a way for advisors to chart their progress, evaluate their efforts, and give them material for their theses, which students then construct and finalize during the second semester. Other advisors might assign starter reading lists and tell students to find other articles to fit the outline of their proposals; students can teach the material back to their advisor and create a database of material so their advisor can chart their progress and evaluate their efforts. In this latter model, students can spend the second semester drawing on their earlier research to construct their theses. In either model, students should submit their theses to their advisors in chapters, writing successive sections while their advisors comment on previous ones.



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The HC should remind students of the project due date a month beforehand and then develop a schedule for evaluating the project, giving feedback, and accepting revisions with the students and their advisors. It is important to streamline the evaluation process through the HC chair. Having each member evaluate the project and give feedback to students individually could produce conflicting advice, confuse the students, and create unnecessary work for them. Ideally, the HC should meet after each member individually evaluates the project but before giving feedback to students, much as a dissertation committee does, and decide, as a unified group, what needs to be revised. The HC chair should then communicate these revisions to students and their advisors. The HC chair should likewise coordinate future revisions to ensure timely and uniform feedback. The length of this process will depend on the extent and nature of the requested revisions and the availability of the HC. Once the HC has deemed the project Satisfactory, the HC chair signs the approval form and forwards the project to the department chair for final approval of departmental honors.

### **STEP 8: SHOWCASE THE PROJECT**

The institution should hold an event or reception to showcase each honors student's work. For instance, just prior to spring commencement, RIC invites all students who have completed honors projects that academic year to showcase their projects at a poster session called the Convocation of Scholars. The college's library also makes two bound copies of each honors thesis available. Alternatively, a department could ask honors students to give an informal thirty-minute presentation of their project to department faculty. The institution could also encourage honor students and their advisors to submit projects to undergraduate research conferences, possibly offering financial assistance if a student's project is chosen for presentation.

### **STEP 9: MAKE IT OFFICIAL**

Once the honors project is deemed Satisfactory and signed by the HC chair and department chair, the department chair should inform the institution that the student has received honors standing within the department. Departmental honors (along with other honors, if applicable) should then be added to the students' official transcripts. Typically, honors recipients are also indicated in the graduation program distributed at commencement.

## **CONCLUSION**

While the departmental honors program in management and marketing at Rhode Island College is still small, it holds promise and, because it is so inexpensive to run, the administration is encouraging its continuance. A

departmental honors program can be developed and implemented without huge inflows or outputs of funds. Implementing the program did not take a Herculean effort at RIC. Professors who act as advisors receive compensation for one credit hour of teaching per semester for each independent study they conduct with honors students. Faculty on the HC put in no more extra time than professors would normally spend on service activities for their institution. There is no need to develop a new curriculum or hire new people to teach it. The cost of printing flyers amounts to \$9 per semester (and then only because they are in color), so the financial outlay is minimal. Thus, any department can implement a viable honors program at almost no expense.

The literature on departmental honors programs in management and marketing is still rather sparse. Further research on assessment of such programs and on relationships between admissions standards, program formats, and outcomes would be useful to honors programs in management and other business fields. Comparative research might focus on what traits have the highest impacts in business honors programs. Finally, researchers could explore ways of incorporating practical skills into business honors programs so that graduates of these programs are prepared for both professional and academic careers.

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## APPENDIX A

**BACKGROUND ON THE DEPARTMENTAL HONORS PROGRAM IN  
MANAGEMENT AND MARKETING AT RHODE ISLAND COLLEGE**

Rhode Island College is a public institution, founded in the mid 1800s, that enrolls approximately 9,260 students, 7,883 of whom are undergraduates. The School of Management has 24 faculty members and 1,002 students within three academic departments comprising six majors: Management and Marketing (MM), Accounting and Computer Information Systems, and Finance and Economics. The Management and Marketing Department has 10 faculty and 535 students, of whom 399 are management majors and 136 are marketing majors, including double majors (another field plus management or marketing; Rhode Island College, 2010).

Rhode Island College offers general education honors and departmental honors. General education honors is a college-wide program to attract academically advanced high school students and provide challenges beyond the normal curriculum. These students take special honors sections of the four core general education courses required of all undergraduates. Because the college is publicly funded, financial constraints prohibit it from offering separate honors curricula for each major. To receive departmental honors, students prepare senior honors theses. Additionally, students may receive what is called College Honors if they complete their general education requirements in honors courses, attend a two-credit junior-year research colloquium to prepare them for writing a senior thesis, and then successfully complete their major's requirements for departmental honors.

**The Management and Marketing Department Honors Program**

The Marketing Departmental Honors Program (MMHP) had existed in various forms for over twenty years. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the honors program has existed at least since the late 1980s. However, the former program director retired leaving no documentation dating before 2001. The program had lain dormant for at least eight years due to faculty and student apathy. Despite the availability of information about the program posted on the department's website, students did not know the program existed. At the same time, students were searching for opportunities to differentiate themselves academically from the thousands of other graduates of local colleges and universities. A growing number of highly talented MM students also desired more challenging work than what they received in their normal course of study, and some expressed interest in working with faculty on research projects just to gain experience. Additionally, faculty needed more research opportunities because the School of Management was seeking AACSB accreditation. Because Rhode Island College was historically teaching-oriented, faculty did not normally have a series of research projects in the pipeline. Thus, during the fall of 2008, the MM faculty resurrected the MMHP as a means to challenge their best students, give their graduates an edge in the labor market, and create more opportunities for faculty to conduct research.

## APPENDIX B

### HONORS PROPOSAL CHECKLIST

The student, in consultation with his or her advisor, must prepare a 4–6 page proposal for a two-semester independent study. The proposal must be approved by the faculty advisor, whose signature on the cover sheet indicates the document has been evaluated in light of the required components below and satisfactorily addresses them.

The proposal should be summarized in a 100–150 word abstract on the cover sheet. The body of the proposal essentially should expand on the abstract by providing more detail. It should contain the following elements:

- A brief summary of the current state of the area in which the student intends to do research. This summary of the intellectual background of the area should provide a context for understanding what the student is trying to accomplish. It should refer to works in the bibliography (see last bullet), briefly indicating how each work is related to the area.
- A clear statement of what the student intends to do and how it relates to the current state of the area.
- The methods, theory, techniques, or materials to be used in the project, and why these have been chosen.
- An approximate timetable for the project, divided between two semesters.
- A means to evaluate progress.
- A bibliography of at least five works that relate to the area.

The cover sheet and the proposal should be submitted to the departmental honors committee for its approval no later than April 15, if the project is to begin in the fall semester, or November 15, if the project is to begin in the spring semester.

Once the honors committee approves the proposal, the student should sign up for independent study with the project advisor.

## APPENDIX C

### ORIGINAL INFORMATION SESSION FLYER

#### **Departmental Honors Information Session**

##### *Management and Marketing Majors*

**Please come and learn about:**

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| ➤ Why do Honors?                               | Chair, Dept. of Management and Marketing         |
| ➤ Junior Honors Colloquium and College Honors  | Director of General Education and College Honors |
| ➤ Management and Marketing Departmental Honors | Head of Management and Marketing Honors Program  |
| ➤ How do I choose an adviser?                  | Honors Program Adviser                           |
| ➤ What's it like to do an honors project?      | Honors Program Participant                       |
| ➤ What do I need to get started?               | Q&A between students and faculty                 |

***Thursday, December 3, 12:30 p.m. – 1:30 p.m., Room 103***



APPENDIX D

NEW INFORMATION SESSION FLYER

**HEY!**

- *Looking for a challenge?*
- *Have a good GPA?*
- *Interested in research?*

**Then why don't  
you do  
the honors?**

  Find out more about  
**Management and Marketing  
departmental honors  
Wednesday, March 2  
12:45-1:15, Room 105**

