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1-1-2012

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Bradley E. Wilson
Slippery Rock University

INTRODUCTION

University honors colleges and programs come in many shapes and sizes, but one commonality exists: orientation around the completion of a group or series of courses. In some cases, the required courses are honors versions of regularly offered courses, and each semester honors students are able to choose from among those offered. In other cases, the core honors courses are designed to form a sequence, beginning in the first semester and often progressing to a senior thesis or capstone project.

Regardless of the structure, many honors programs face the challenge of designing a program that students can successfully complete in four years. This problem is especially acute at a time when university budgets are being cut; because honors courses are typically smaller than their non-honors counterparts, administrators may be tempted to reduce the number of honors sections offered to balance their shrinking budgets. While the Slippery Rock University Honors Program has been fortunate to have strong support from our administrators, our honors students have frequently expressed frustration at the difficulty of completing the program's academic requirements. In response, we recently took a hard look at the course-oriented structure of our program. In that process, we re-envisioned the program by focusing on the characteristics of some of our most successful honors students: they have diverse academic interests; they participate in international experiences; they have engaged in successful research/creative activities; and they are involved in leadership roles. We then restructured the program in a way that we hope will lead to the development of these valuable characteristics in all our honors students. The result is an outcome-based approach to honors education that is centered on Honors Option Points (HOPs, for short) rather than one that follows the traditional model of honors coursework.

THE SRU HONORS PROGRAM: THEN

Slippery Rock University is a medium-sized state university (approximately 9,000 students) that is part of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) along with thirteen other universities ranging in size from 1,600 students (Cheyney University) to 15,000 students (Indiana University of Pennsylvania). The mission of PASSHE is to provide high-quality education at a reasonable cost, and many of the students who attend PASSHE schools, including SRU, are the first in their family to go to college.

The honors program at SRU was initiated in 1985 and has been functioning successfully since then. In recent years, the number of students in the program has ranged from 225 to 275. Before the introduction of the HOPs system in the fall of 2010, our honors program had a traditional structure. Students were required to complete seven honors courses, either courses designated as honors or honors contract courses, by the time of graduation. In addition to their coursework, honors students were expected to participate each semester in other activities that are an integral part of the honors experience. (This part of the program has been maintained with the new HOPs system.) These activities include attendance at cultural and academic events (e.g., plays, concerts, lectures, and movies with discussion, typically held on campus) followed by a write-up, community service, and participation in leadership roles in campus organizations. Beyond the explicit requirements of the program, honors students have opportunities to participate in other honors events such as local trips to Pittsburgh to attend musicals, plays and concerts; a regional trip every spring to some city of cultural interest (e.g., Boston, Washington, D.C., Savannah, GA, Charleston, SC); and attendance at the National Collegiate Honors Council annual conference. Given the background of many of our students, these opportunities can be eye-opening experiences. Some may be flying for the first time or travelling further than they ever have before.

On paper, the academic requirement of seven honors courses seemed reasonable: honors students would take one honors course per semester, putting them on schedule to graduate with honors designation after four years. But the reality was that students often had difficulties completing this requirement.

The reasons for these difficulties were varied and reflect some of the particularities of the curriculum at SRU. One difficulty was that the majority of honors offerings were lower-level courses that were part of our general studies program (called "Liberal Studies" at SRU). Students at SRU are required to complete a minimum of forty-five credits (typically fifteen courses) in a variety of areas including: the arts, global community, human institutions/personal relationships, and science, technology and math. Approximately thirty credits are offered as lower-level and fifteen as upper-level courses. Most students have completed their lower-level liberal studies requirements by the end of their sophomore years. Upper-level courses, even those that are part of the liberal studies program, are more specialized; since honors sections of these courses are not likely to attract the requisite twenty to twenty-five students, they are

infrequently offered. Consequently, even if students have been able to take one honors course in each of their first four semesters, they would still need to take three more to graduate with honors designation, and these would probably be introductory courses that did not contribute significantly to the student's program.

The problem was exacerbated by the fact that more and more incoming freshman arrived at SRU having already completed some college courses through their high school programs or at community colleges; these would often be introductory courses that might be offered at SRU as honors courses such as English Composition, U.S. History, and Introduction to Psychology. With limited options for taking honors courses after their sophomore year, many students ended up relying heavily on contract courses to complete their requirements.

The specialized curricula of many majors at SRU made it difficult for honors students to complete the course requirements. Students getting a degree in education, for instance, have a curriculum with highly prescribed requirements for certification in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Within their liberal studies course options, honors students often lacked the choices available in other majors and were required to take specific courses that were not necessarily offered as honors courses. For example, a student getting a BS in education with a major in social studies/history is required to take Introduction to Anthropology and Introduction to Psychology as two of their liberal studies courses, and these are offered as honors courses only occasionally or not at all.

In addition to having many education majors, Slippery Rock University has a number of highly specialized programs in health-related fields, including exercise science, pre-physical therapy, pre-medicine, pre-pharmacy, and pre-chiropractic. These programs offer more choices in liberal studies, but the requirement to take specific courses in sequence created scheduling difficulties even for freshman and sophomore honors students, limiting their ability to take required honors courses early in their academic careers.

The SRU College of Education and the specialized health-related majors include a large number of the university's majors, and honors students in these majors struggled to incorporate the requirements of the honors program into their college experience. Adding to the problem is that exercise science and the health-related programs at SRU are well regarded and highly competitive; they attract some of the most academically qualified students at SRU, many of whom are eager for the opportunities and challenges of the honors program. Approximately a quarter of the students in the honors program are pursuing a major related to exercise science or physical therapy.

Clearly, not every honors program has the same constellation of issues we face at SRU, but SRU is not unique in struggling to make sure that students can complete their honors requirements in a timely fashion.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE HOPS SYSTEM

Despite the challenges for the students, we were able to maintain high graduation rates of students in the honors program. Nevertheless, our overreliance on honors contract courses put an unnecessary burden on both the students who had to develop the contract courses and the faculty who had to direct them. To address this problem, the previous director of the SRU Honors Program, April Longwell, initiated a review of the program in the fall of 2009 to determine if improvements could be made. A subcommittee of the Honors Program Advisory Committee, consisting of faculty teaching in the program and previous directors, was formed to conduct this review, in the course of which we decided to rethink the program structure and develop an alternative.

The guiding idea behind the development of the HOPs system was to encourage honors students to participate in activities that would help them develop into the kind of people we considered ideal honors program graduates. In the jargon of contemporary higher education, our approach was outcome-based. By looking at recent graduates who we thought exemplified the traits that we wanted the honors program to promote, we identified the relevant characteristics mentioned earlier: diverse academic interests, participation in international experiences, engagement in research/creative activities, and involvement in leadership. These particular characteristics were identified by members of the Honors Program Advisory Committee who worked with honors students, primarily as faculty teaching honors courses. The characteristics were not based on possible further measures of success, such as attending graduate school or finding jobs after graduation, but rather on what we found embodied in our ideal honors students, those who had taken advantage of the rich array of opportunities offered by our program and university as opposed to those doing the minimum required to get the "honors designation." We also came to realize that for our students, many of whom would enter the job market upon graduation rather than going on to graduate or professional schools, these characteristics would likely be more valuable to them in the future than taking another honors course.

Given the traits that we wanted to promote among honors program graduates, we needed to find a way to combine new requirements with honors coursework to provide a cohesive program. The basic idea was to build a program that rewarded the desired outcomes. While such a program obviously would not exclude honors courses, neither would it privilege them. Courses would provide the foundation for pursuing research and creative activities, and they would also be a necessary preliminary to international experiences, but we determined to expand our conception of an honors education explicitly to include alternatives to coursework as a central academic component of the program. All that remained was to systematize our new conception: we needed to specify exactly what other activities would be incorporated into the program and how they would be combined with honors coursework.

THE HONORS OPTION POINTS SYSTEM

In developing the HOPs system, our committee was faced with the problem of how to correlate the new system with the existing program. We didn't want to increase substantially the amount of work required to complete the program, nor did we want to make it significantly easier to complete, so, as we discussed incorporating new elements into the program, we tried to keep in mind the amount of work associated with the existing requirement of completing seven honors courses. We came up with a rough metric to weight the new components of the program, but, in order to avoid thinking explicitly in terms of courses, we came up with the idea of HOPs. Rather than require that every student complete seven honors courses, students are now required to earn fourteen HOPs, each roughly equivalent to half of an honors course. We have not eliminated honors courses from the program, and students are still required to complete a minimum of four honors courses (eight HOPs), but the remaining HOPs can be earned through a variety of new options.

The new options are designed in accordance with the desired characteristics of a successful honors student. We also polled the entire group of honors students during one of the regularly scheduled honors meetings for their input on which options would be most helpful as well as their ideas for additional options. Honors students can still earn honors credit for honors contract courses, which, like honors courses, each count as two HOPs. Now, however, they can also earn two HOPs for a semester-, summer-, or year-long study abroad experience. Conference presentations can also earn HOPs: a regional conference presentation in a discipline relevant to their major (one HOP); a national conference presentation in a discipline relevant to their major (two HOPs); or a presentation at the National Collegiate Honors Council conference (one HOP). Students can also receive two HOPs for a faculty-directed independent research or creative activity that is not part of a course or contract. Publication of research can lead to additional HOPs: publication in a refereed undergraduate journal (one HOP); publication in a refereed professional journal (two HOPs). A second major earns two HOPs; a minor earns one. Finally, SRU offers a year-long, three-level leadership program that culminates in a leadership presentation; students who complete level three of this program receive two HOPS. (See Appendix A for the planning guide provided to honors students based on the HOPs system; Appendix B is the Honors Option Points Verification Form used by students to report HOPs activities.)

Determining whether to award one or two HOPs led to significant discussions. In particular, we had concerns about honors students earning multiple HOPs for what was a single research project. As the system is set up, a student could write a paper as part of a contract course (two HOPs), present the paper at a conference (two HOPs), and get the paper published in a professional journal (two HOPs). After lengthy discussion, we came to realize that each stage of the process involves distinct skills. To present a paper at a professional conference, the student needs to go through the submission process, which probably

involves editing and reformatting the paper and writing a submission letter. Then, the student needs to prepare an appropriate presentation for the conference, often involving the use of PowerPoint. Similarly, to get a paper published, the student needs to go through the submission process and in all likelihood make revisions based on the comments of referees before final acceptance. While the actual amount of time required for these activities might not be strictly equivalent to a course, the skills needed to complete each stage of the process go well beyond what a student would normally learn from a course, and the development of these skills is valuable to the student.

Students have no limit to the number of honors courses they can take. Furthermore, honors contract courses are normally limited to two, and students can earn no more than two HOPs (one course equivalent) in any of the other categories, thus ensuring that honors students who complete the program by earning HOPs beyond their coursework will have developed in a variety of ways rather than, for example, just completing a second major and two minors. Honors courses still form the basis of the beginning of the honors students' academic career, but as they move into more advanced and specialized courses in their majors, they are rewarded for pursuing in-depth research and creative activities with the goal of presentation and publication.

EVALUATING THE HOPS SYSTEM

The HOPs system was put into place in the fall of 2010 and is now in its second year. While it is still too early to evaluate thoroughly its success, some preliminary observations are possible.

Prior to implementing the system, our committee met with a focus group of honors students at different stages in the program. They were uniformly excited about the proposed changes and approved wholeheartedly. The only slightly negative response was from an English major who expected to be able to complete the seven required courses without great difficulty. For him, the additional options would not make any difference. Since the system has been implemented, many students have said that they love the program, especially students already in the program who can see the advantages over the old system. Honors students majoring in education have quickly discovered that they can earn HOPs by completing a second major or doing their student teaching abroad (we have a program in Mexico City).

We have some limited data on which to base an assessment of the HOPs system. Honors program students have assessed the SRU Honors Program for the last four years in the spring of each year via an online survey. In spring 2009, 101 out of 150 active students responded to the question "Is it easy to complete courses?" Of these, 55% said yes and 45% said no. These results are part of what motivated the review in fall 2009. The HOPs system was introduced in fall 2010, and the next student survey was administered in spring 2011. The number of students responding was 171 out of approximately 235 active honors program students. Most of the questions in the survey asked the

students to rate different aspects of the program using a Likert-type scale: Excellent, Good, Fair, Poor, N/A. Students were also invited to comment on the HOPs system, and 137 students (80.1% of total respondents) did so. Of those who commented, 80 students (58.4% of those commenting) made positive comments; they said, for instance, that they like the HOPs system or that they are happy to have another way to complete honors requirements. Twenty-six students (19% of those commenting) did not know what HOPs were, and 23 students (16.8% of those commenting) said that they were not applicable. This last group probably included students who were graduating. Finally, only four students (2.9% of those commenting) made a negative comment about the HOPs system. Based on this limited data, the HOPs system is functioning as we had hoped. In coming years, we will be able to gather more data based on the annual survey. In addition, I plan to gather data on the extent to which students use the various options to complete their honors requirements, allowing us to better understand the impact of the HOPs system.

Given the number of students unfamiliar with the HOPs system (based on the most recent survey), an important task in implementing the new system is educating current and incoming students about the details of the system, and we have approached this task in a variety of ways. All of the students who were in the program in fall 2010 were given an SRU Honors Course Requirement Planning Guide (Appendix A). For new and current students, the system is explained at one of the regular honors program meetings that occur twice each semester. Through multiple and flexible meeting times, we typically reach 80–85% of the students in the program through these meetings.

The SRU Honors Program also has a mentor/mentee program for incoming students each fall. During the summer prior to their first semester at SRU, new freshman and transfer students are assigned a mentor from among the current honors students with the same or related majors. Early in the fall semester, we have an evening event, with food, during which one of the main objectives is to review the particulars of the HOPs system, and mentors have reported that the new students like the HOPs system. Even with all of these efforts to inform the students about the HOPs system, they still need to be reminded about their options, but I am hopeful that, after it has been in use for a few more years, the system will become a familiar aspect of the program.

The positive response from students indicates that the restructured program is beneficial to them. One benefit is solving the practical problem of enabling them to complete the requirements of the program and graduate with honors designation. Surveys of honors program students in the last two years have indicated an improvement in the perceived ability to complete the program requirements. Somewhat anecdotally, as the program director I have seen numerous students submitting HOPs Verification Forms to receive honors credit for their achievements.

A more important benefit is the development of valuable skills. By shifting some of the focus of the program from coursework to other academically and intellectually valuable activities, our students are better prepared for the sorts of

positions in which they will find themselves after graduation. Those who plan to continue their education in graduate school may benefit most from pursuing research presentation and publication. Those more likely to enter the job market can develop their leadership skills and possibly acquire a broader perspective through an international experience. All will have a more richly developed and diverse academic portfolio because of the HOPs system.

The adoption of the HOPs system also has had a positive impact on the connections between the honors program and the faculty as a whole. Previously, a relatively small number of faculty taught honors courses, and honors students tended to approach a particular group of faculty members to do contract courses. With the additional opportunities for students to earn HOPs, a broader range of faculty have become engaged. For example, faculty in the SRU Department of Modern Languages and Cultures are more likely to realize which of their students are in the honors program when these students participate in study abroad programs. Also, when honors students engage in research for presentation and publication for HOPs credit, the faculty member supervising the work becomes aware that the student is in the honors program. The HOPs system is helping to raise the profile of the honors program among the faculty at SRU as it provides faculty additional opportunities to get to know and work with some of SRU's strongest students.

CONCLUSION

We developed the HOPs system at SRU as a deliberate attempt to move beyond the traditional course-based honors program and create a program based on how we would like to see our honors students develop. While all the details of the HOPs system may not be transferable to every type of honors program or college, our experience suggests that a re-examination of program structure in terms of desired outcomes almost certainly produces benefits for any program.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the work of my colleagues on the HOPs subcommittee: April Longwell (honors director at the time), Jodi Katsafanis (special education), Cindy LaCom (English), Krishna Mukherjee (physics), Langdon Smith (geography), Steve Strain (biology), and Linda Zane (secondary education). I would also like to acknowledge the helpful suggestions of Jean Jones and an anonymous referee for this journal.

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APPENDIX A

Slippery Rock University
Honors Course Requirements Planning Guide

Your Honors Program courses and Honors Option Points (HOPs) are designed to give you an opportunity to excel both academically and professionally. It is to your advantage to complete as many HP courses as you can during your freshman and sophomore semesters. (See the Honors Courses section below for the minimum requirement for this area.) By the end of your freshman year, it will also be important for you to identify or consider areas in which you can earn Honors Option Points, if you are so inclined. These option points will not only assist you in completing your 7 Honors course requirements (5 if you are a 3+3 student), but offer you the opportunity to develop the breadth of academic and professional experience that will showcase your accomplishments for graduate school and career opportunities.

Mix and match choices from the categories below, combining Honors courses, contract courses, and HOPs to equal your 7 course requirements (5 if you are a 3 + 3 student). The list below will help you to familiarize yourself with all options available. **Please note that two HOPs equate to one Honors course, so plan your course work accordingly.** Use this guide to track your accomplishments. Your HP director can assist you in getting started.

Honors Courses (Try to complete 4 Honors courses, if possible.)

Honors courses are enriched liberal studies courses, not libersl studies courses made harder, and grading standards are the same as in other college courses. Honors courses avoid the passive learning approach to education. They stimulate your thinking and provide the informal, small class environment that encourages discussion and debate on important topics. Honors courses also introduce you to Honors faculty who can assist you with your academic development as an Honors student. Strive to enroll in 1–2 Honors courses each semester during your freshman and sophomore years. *List your Honors courses below. Make an appointment with the HP director if you cannot meet this minimum.*

FOR HP CREDIT: Sign up for your Honors courses in the HP office.

Course: _____ **Course Totals:** _____

Course: _____ **Course Totals:** _____

Course: _____ **Course Totals:** _____

Course: _____ **Course Totals:** _____

Course: _____ **Course Totals:** _____

Course: _____ **Course Totals:** _____

Course: _____ **Course Totals:** _____

Contract Courses (Try to keep the contract course option to a minimum.)

A **Contract course** is designed to allow you to gain Honors credit for a course that is not an Honors course. The course can be in your major or minor program of study or an area of interest to you. A contract course involves your completion of a 20-page research paper or project of equal value under supervision and guidance from your professor. Papers and special projects create wonderful opportunities for you to present your work at regional and national conferences and our SRU Research Symposium. The completion and approval of a contract proposal is required prior to beginning a contract course. *Make an appointment with the HP director, if you want to do more than two contracts.*

FOR HP CREDIT: Schedule a meeting with your HP director before beginning this process.

Contract:_____ **Course Totals:** _____

Contract:_____ **Course Totals:** _____

International Experience (See individual HOPs values below.)
Maximum 2 HOPs

International Study Abroad Programs allow you to study abroad for a semester or year of study. These 19 programs are either exchange (students from each university swap places) or direct enrollments (SRU students enroll at the host university at a reduced cost.) Both offer the most affordable options, but at times enrollments may be limited due to the need to balance exchange programs. Contact the International Services office in Carruth-Rizza Hall to get started. **(2 HOPs)**

International Student Teaching is offered in Dublin, Ireland during fall semester, or Mexico City, Mexico during spring semester, and is six undergraduate semester credits. Contact the International Services office in Carruth-Rizza Hall to get started. **(2 HOPs)**

FOR HP CREDIT: Complete and submit the Honors Options Points Verification Form.

Intl Study Abroad: _____ **HOPs Totals:** _____

Intl Student Teaching: _____ **HOPs Totals:** _____

Conference Presentations (See individual HOPs values below.)
Maximum 2 HOPs

This option gives you the opportunity to present your research or creative activity at a regional or national conference. Contact the HP director or your professor to get started.

Regional conference presentation in a relevant discipline (1 HOP)

National conference presentation in a relevant discipline (2 HOPs)

National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) presentation (1 HOP)

FOR HP CREDIT: Complete and submit the Honors Options Points Verification Form.

Presentation:_____ **HOPs Totals:** _____

Presentation:_____ **HOPs Totals:** _____

Research Project/Thesis (See individual HOPs values below.)
Maximum 2 HOPs

This option offers you the opportunity to carry out research or to experience writing a thesis under the direction of a faculty mentor. Contact your professor or academic advisor about this option.

Research/creative activity project done under the direction of a faculty member that is not part of a course or contract course **(2 HOPs)**

Thesis/independent study project completed under the direction of a faculty member not as part of a course or contract course **(2 HOPs)**

FOR HP CREDIT: Complete and submit the Honors Options Points Verification Form.

Research Thesis: _____ **HOPs Totals:** _____

Research Thesis: _____ **HOPs Totals:** _____

NOTE: If you would like to use Honors Options Points that exceed a maximum, please contact the Honors Program Director.

Publication of Research (See individual HOPs values below.)
Maximum 2 HOPs

Contact your professor with your interest in this area.

Refereed undergraduate journal in a relevant discipline (1 HOP)

Refereed professional journal in a relevant discipline (2 HOPs)

FOR HP CREDIT: Complete and submit the Honors Options Points Verification Form.

HOPs Totals

Published Material: _____ **HOPs Totals:** _____

Published Material: _____ **HOPs Totals:** _____

Major/Minor Options
(Maximum 2 HOPs)

Dual Majors or Dual Degrees (2 HOPs)

If you desire to earn two or more majors or dual degrees you should first seek the advisement from the specific academic departments that would be involved. This should take place normally after your freshman year.

(This does not include Pre-Physical Therapy or LECOM.)

Minors Earned (1 HOP)

A minor is a set of courses that meet specific guidelines and that allow you to complete a sub-major concentration in a specific area of study. Discuss your interest in a minor with your advisor as well as the academic department of that area of study.

FOR HP CREDIT: Provide a Degree Audit showing major/minor completion.

Dual Majors/Degrees: _____ **HOPs Totals:** _____

Minor: _____ **HOPs Totals:** _____

Minor: _____ **HOPs Totals:** _____

Compass Leadership Completion (2 HOPs)

The **Compass Leadership Program** is designed to enhance your academic experience by assisting you to develop your skills, abilities and practices of leadership. The process fosters critical thinking about leadership through workshops, active experiences, discussions and reflection. You will develop and demonstrate your understanding of the following competencies: leadership theory, the role of leaders in supporting diverse communities, skills of facilitation and advocacy, ethical leadership, conflict resolution and communication skills, service learning and community service, and the articulation of your personal leadership plan through a culminating leadership presentation.

FOR HP CREDIT: Turn in a copy of your final Compass Leadership certificate of completion.

Compass Leadership: _____ **HOPs Totals:** _____

Student Name:_____

Grand Total (Courses and HOPs): _____

Revised: 1/20/2012

APPENDIX B

Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania
Honors Option Points Verification Form

Student Information
Turn in form & paperwork when Option is completed.

Name _____

Major/Minor/Specializations _____

Local Phone No. _____

Email _____

Class Standing (Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior) _____

A: International Experience

- International Study Abroad: Semester(s)
- International Student Teaching: Semester(s)

Location _____

Attach a copy of either a grade report or transcript with form.

B: Conference Presentations

- Regional Conference Presentation in a relevant discipline
- National Conference Presentation in a relevant discipline
- National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) Presentation

Name of Conference_____

Title of Presentation_____

Academic Discipline_____

Description_____

_____

Professor's memo should include competitiveness of proposal acceptance rate (required minimum is 50–60%) and a description of the student's presentation.

C: Research Project/Thesis

- Research/Creative Activity Project that is not part of a course or contract course
- Thesis/Independent Study Project that is not part of a course of contract course

Description_____

_____

_____

Professor's memo should include a brief description of the research and explain the student's role. (May include preparation prior to research as well.)

D: Publication of Research

- Refereed Undergraduate Journal in a relevant discipline
- Refereed Professional Journal in a relevant discipline

Name of Journal _____

Title _____

Professor's memo should include attachment of publisher's email/letter verifying student's work and date of publication.

E. Faculty Memo (Needed for sections B, C, or D)

- A signed memo from your professor verifying that all information is true and accurate must be attached to this form.

Faculty Name (Please Print) _____

Date_____

See above for important memo content requirements.

F. Approval

_____

Honors Program Director Signature and Date

Revised: 1/20/2012