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Moving Mountains: Honors as Leverage for Institutional Change

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President Gary A. Ransdell has a vision; he wants WKU to be “A Leading American University with International Reach.” Hired back to his alma mater in 1997, the Board of Regents tasked him to undertake a fundamental transformation of the campus. Changing the culture of an academic institution can be compared to moving mountains, but he undertook the challenge. He invested the first years of his presidency on infrastructure, bricks and mortar, curb appeal, student population, and improving the overall financial health of the institution. In 2005, satisfied that the institution was on a solid financial footing and moving in the right direction, he turned his energy to dramatically changing the academic reputation of the institution. The (then) honors program was selected as the vehicle to enact this change, so honors became a top university priority. The president’s strategy was and still is to use investments in honors as institutional leverage as part of the overall transformation of WKU into a leading American university with international reach.

WKU is not the first, or the only, institution to invest in honors education in order to effect institutional change. This strategy goes back to Frank Aydelotte and the creation of the country’s first honors program at Swarthmore in 1922 (Rinn 70) and is seen in the growth of honors education at all levels of higher education. Ransdell’s experience in alumni relations and development at two institutions with robust honors colleges and programs allowed him to see first-hand the role honors can play on a university campus. He understood that a well-designed honors experience can be an institutional transformative investment, not simply a marquee program for the recruitment and care of small number of academically gifted and high-achieving students.

Building a robust honors college or program is not an inexpensive proposition. The per-student cost of an honors scholar in an appropriately funded honors college can rival the cost per student of varsity athletes. Leaders of every academic unit will argue that the funding provided to honors is best

invested in their unit. If an institution chooses to invest \$1,000,000 of reoccurring funds in a single academic discipline, that unit will undoubtedly improve dramatically, but the investment might do little if anything to improve the academic reputation of other departments on campus or the educational experience of students in other units. Less self-interested faculty might argue that the university's finite resources should be invested across a range of academic units, not concentrated in honors. This "let's give everyone something" mentality is undoubtedly equitable, but equally distributed investments are typically so small as to result in no noticeable improvement to any units or the institution as a whole. Ironically, an investment in a university-wide honors structure can have the effect of helping multiple units. Put another way, the concentration of resources in a university honors college can have the effect of diffusing the benefits to more academic units. The key point is that strategically investing resources in a properly constructed honors experience produces opportunities for students and faculty across the university, creating the possibility of enhancing the reputation of the entire university, not just a select department or two.

Appropriate investments in honors education can facilitate one of the fastest enhancements of an institution's undergraduate reputation for academic excellence: success with nationally competitive and prestigious scholarships such as the Fulbright, Goldwater, and Truman. The past several years have seen NAFA, NAFSA, and NCHC job boards and listservs full of advertisements for well-paying new positions related to helping identify and cultivate students for success securing national scholarships. These positions create the kinds of success stories that help justify strategic investments in academic excellence and provide support for agendas of institutional transformation (Brownstein). In only takes a few minutes on any search engine to find a plethora of university websites, press releases, and promotional literature touting favorable comparisons between the home institution and this or that nationally ranked institution in numbers of successfully awarded prestigious scholarships and fellowships, which are a factor in determining university rankings. The annual *Forbes Magazine* ranking of colleges and university, for instance, designates 7.5% of the overall institutional score to success in selected national competition (*Forbes* 12). Universities, seeing the role that honors and national scholarships can play in changing an institution's academic reputation and rankings, are making financial investments based on these trends.

Like many institutions, WKU made the strategic decision to invest in a scholarship office in 2007. Following the standard model, the scholarship office has a university-wide mandate but is housed in and reports to the honors college. The return on investment has been that that WKU can and does

regularly compare itself (favorably) to Ivy League and other top institutions in the nation on select prestigious scholarships. For example, WKU is able to point to recognition by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* as a leading producer of Fulbright Grants for several years running. Student success begets more success, and the investment is changing the way students, faculty, administrators, alumni and donors view the institution. While early success stories in national scholarships were almost exclusively honors scholars, increasingly the applications and successes are from non-honors students. As a result, WKU, like so many other institutions making similar investments, is seeing a transformation. What started as a campus culture of “our students do not apply for those scholarships” has evolved through “those are only for honors scholars” to a burgeoning culture of “any talented, motivated students can and should apply.” In short, universities can use the investment in honors as leverage to transform the institution-wide culture.

A well-developed honors experience also provides major assistance in recruiting both gifted, high-achieving students and, of equal importance, students just below the threshold of honors eligibility. Honors professionals hear regularly from students, “Were it not for the honors college (or program), I would not have applied to your university.” This anecdotal evidence is supported by data published by the Oklahoma State University (OSU) Honors College, which demonstrated that 94.9% of their new honors students in fall 2010 stated that the honors college was “Very Important” or “Somewhat Important” (56.7% and 38.2% respectively) in their selecting OSU as their university. In addition to highly sought-after students, honors may help recruit other students to the institution, students who are not eligible immediately for participation in honors programs or colleges, because honors creates a reputation for excellence that can be marketed and used in recruitment literature. The excitement created by the success of a small percentage of students produces a “halo effect” for the entire university and helps attract other students who may not be as academically gifted but are often just as serious about their university experience. These “solidly average students” are the heart and soul of any university’s student body, and a strong honors program can assist in attracting them to an institution.

At WKU, the period of time corresponding with an emphasis on honors and the creation of an honors college has seen a significant growth in the number of students with a minimum 25 ACT or 1130 SAT—the top 20% of all scores in the nation—electing to matriculate at the institution. Between 2001 and 2005 the percentage of such students at the WKU Bowling Green campus grew by less than one percent (18.2% to 19.1%), but from 2005 to 2009 the percentage grew from 19.1% to over 24% (*Honors College*). This significant growth in students scoring in the top 20% of the country on the

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ACT/SAT corresponded with dramatic growth of nearly 33% in the institution overall. Over the past five years, faculty members at WKU have reported a noticeable difference in the number of gifted/high achieving students in their classes. Both quantitative and qualitative data thus demonstrate that investments in honors education can increase the percentage of very good honors and also non-honors students on a campus, thus potentially altering the overall intellectual demographic of an institution.

Anecdotal, experiential, and empirical evidence thus provides support for the proposition that strategic investment in honors education on a campus can be used as leverage to transform an institution. The history of our profession and the discipline of honors education are based on the belief that honors can be and has been used to effect positive change on campus. Progressive presidents seeking an academic transformation on their campus understand that a well-conceived and implemented honors college or program can help move mountains and change the culture of a campus.

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