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The Above-and-Beyond Experience

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A discourse on “The Value of Honors” opens a window of review and reflection, an opportunity to shine a light on how honors programming has become a differentiating attribute of South Dakota State University, an enabling contributor to the university’s strategic direction, and a living example of the land-grant mission of educational opportunities for all people. The presence of the Van D. and Barbara F. Fishback Honors College can be seen across the university and across the various stages of the student life cycle at South Dakota State—from recruitment and retention, to student leadership, to faculty growth and development, to innovation and excellence.

Talented, motivated young people make decisions about where they will pursue a degree based, in part, on the portfolio of programs, the co-curricular opportunities, and the lifestyle amenities presented to them by competing universities. Today’s young people are sophisticated consumers in the higher education marketplace. They are seeking “above and beyond” academic experiences such as study abroad and undergraduate research. They are looking for a personalized academic experience, and they aspire to be in community

with others who share a similar sense of purpose and drive toward success and personal fulfillment. The honors college thus becomes a lead card in this recruitment process, packaging and highlighting the components expected by some of today's most discriminating college shoppers.

The value of honors only begins with the recruitment process. It continues with retention and completion rates and measures of student engagement and achievement—all important institutional metrics. Students pursuing honors designations complete general education, upper-division and interdisciplinary courses, research projects, and creative and scholarly endeavors. This developmental approach engages honors students at every level of their academic experiences and adds breadth and depth to their studies. Internal research also indicates that these undergraduate experiences prepare honors graduates for prestigious graduate and professional schools and provide them with rich, value-added competitive edges as they enter their careers of choice.

The honors experience develops tomorrow's leaders. Approximately seven percent of undergraduate students participate in honors courses, yet a disproportionately high percentage of these students lead student government, discipline-specific student organizations, academic competition teams, and university-wide community service programs. Undoubtedly, these programs benefit and thrive from the special abilities, drive, diligence, and higher-level thinking of honors students. Quite simply, honors students bring high expectations to their classes and co-curricular experiences, thus elevating the learning environment and volunteer value for everyone.

The presence of honors at South Dakota State also adds value to the experiences of our faculty from across the university. These faculty teach smaller honors sections of general education courses, collaborate on interdisciplinary theme-driven courses, and guide students' undergraduate courses as mentors. One honors faculty member found in a recent survey that most faculty describe their honors involvement as "highly satisfying." Anecdotally, many honors faculty share stories about the challenge, fulfillment, stimulation, and joy they derive from working with honors students.

At SDSU, the honors college also serves as an institutional driver of innovation and excellence, starting in the classrooms and extending beyond the walls of the academic disciplines. When faculty experiment with new pedagogical approaches in their honors classrooms, their innovations are often adapted more broadly across the curriculum and reach a larger portion of the general student body. The inference can be made that these teaching

approaches, applied across the university, enhance the academic experiences of all students.

The Fishback Honors College and its faculty lead the university's Common Read, undergraduate research, and student leadership development initiatives, efforts that reach far beyond the honors student body. In addition, Honors Hall is now home to the university's only residential living and learning community, featuring an on-site dean's office and honors-specific classroom. The honors college is also the first college at this university to secure a named endowment. These distinctive characteristics have enriched the university and have provided examples for other academic units to consider and to propose endowed positions and programmatic initiatives.

The impact of honors programming and its numerous influences at South Dakota State are hard to quantify. However, the ripple effects are noteworthy. Through broad engagement in the life of this university, honors students and faculty add value to SDSU far beyond the walls of their individual classrooms, laboratories, and residence hall rooms.

As president of South Dakota's 1862 land-grant institution, I take very seriously the commitments to educational access, academic excellence, research and discovery, and service and outreach to people in this state and region. The Fishback Honors College at SDSU provides world-class educational and undergraduate research opportunities and engages some of the country's brightest minds in disciplines such as agriculture, engineering, nursing, pharmacy, education and human sciences, and the traditional liberal arts. These honors experiences open wide the doors of opportunity to hundreds of talented, motivated students, many of whom come from low-income and first-generation college families. These important dimensions of the honors value proposition align with the original intent of the Morrill Act: to provide access to higher education for the sons and daughters of the working class who otherwise would be excluded from realizing their potential.

The late economist Theodore W. Schultz, the lone Nobel Prize laureate among SDSU alumni, was an eastern South Dakota farm boy who first described the theory of human capital. One could argue that the development of human capital among faculty and students is the greatest value honors brings to contemporary higher education. I share a common background with Schultz: eastern South Dakota farm roots, a degree from South Dakota State, and a passion for economics. It would be natural for an economist to study the transactional nature of higher education, to seek more clarity on the value of the degree. The value of honors, however, might be best understood

as a transformation rather than a transaction; it extends well beyond the completion of a degree or the awarding of a medallion to students who complete a rigorous undergraduate curriculum. Rather, the transformations are made real in the individual and collective work and impacts of students and faculty—empowered with knowledge, experiences, and relationships—who are well-positioned to make positive differences in the lives of universities, communities, and even nations. At South Dakota State University and across the higher education landscape, this transformation—the above-and-beyond experience—is the true value proposition of honors.

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