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Tangible and Intangible Student Success

MARC A. JOHNSON, PRESIDENT

University of Nevada, Reno

HONORS DIRECTOR: TAMARA M. VALENTINE

First are the obvious benefits. The value that honors programs hold for universities lies in the tangibles.

Honors programs help an institution pinpoint and cultivate the talents of its finest students. They help these students achieve undergraduate research and encourage them to seek further inquiry and creative endeavor. They provide the counsel, advising, and encouragement that can lead to nationally and internationally competitive, prestigious scholarships in all academic fields and endeavors. They help bring renown to the university they serve by ensuring that the institution's finest students receive the care and attention needed to succeed in challenging academic and research environments. They can and usually do lead the student down a transformational career path.

These are the tangibles. In many ways, they are the tidy end products of what is often assumed to be a successful and smooth four-year process that ends with a happy student holding his or her honors diploma during commencement weekend. And why shouldn't it be? Honors programs, by their very definition, deal with the best and brightest of an institution's student

population and can expect these tangible outcomes. Certainly my institution, the University of Nevada, Reno, has an honors program that can attest to the validity of such outcomes.

Without diminishing in any way the tangible end product, let me make an equally compelling case for the personal byproducts that are often just as important, just as meaningful, that can be gained from our honors program. In many ways, the true value of any honors program, in both a theoretical and a practical context, lies in the intangibles. Typical honors students are highly, richly, and wonderfully human, not computerized automatons programmed for perfection. They are young, sensitive human beings who, though they may be extremely talented, intelligent, and driven to succeed, are by no means guaranteed to reach their ultimate academic potential. The reality for almost all college students is that at some point the ground can seem to tilt upward, and every step can seem to be tortuous and paved with frustration. Our students can be like delicate flowers, and it is our student enrichment programs such as our honors program that can provide the encouragement and support that help talent rise and help develop the reserve of steel needed to persist and to flourish in a highly competitive college environment.

We've seen this to be true at our university. Our honors program helps change the lives of the students it serves, both tangibly through academic achievement, and intangibly through a stronger sense of direction and self-worth.

Let me give you just one example. Late this summer, a December 2013 graduate of our University, Jonathan Carral, visited our campus before heading back to graduate school at Columbia University. Jonathan, an honors program student, majored in international affairs. When he enrolled as a student at our university, Jonathan did not see himself as an honors student. He says now that his test scores weren't the greatest. As a first-generation college student, Jonathan admits that even seeking a college degree "was a bit questionable."

Yet Jonathan made a key decision early on during his academic career. Following the advice of a friend, just weeks into his experience as a student here, he paid a visit to our honors program office, which has been ably directed by Tamara Valentine since 2004. Jonathan says now that Valentine and her staff "saw something and exposed something in me that I didn't even know was there."

What followed was one of our university's most remarkable student success stories. Jonathan earned a Truman Scholarship in 2013, citing his two

years of study and public service in China. An exceptional amount of work was involved, including a public service component, research, and a thesis. “The Honors Program doesn’t exist to baby the students,” Jonathan says, but he adds that the staff of the honors program was always there to interact, to help, to suggest possibilities, to advise, or simply to listen. By the time he graduated, Jonathan, who is now beginning the final year of his graduate studies in international affairs at Columbia, felt he was fully prepared for the next important chapter in his life. He says, “The Honors Program really spoke to me—it helped me find qualities that I didn’t necessarily realize I had.”

Of course, challenges, both expected and unexpected, can occur before this sort of acute and wonderful self-realization happens. Over the past several years, the state of Nevada has grappled, like many other states, with the post-recessionary economy. The allocation we receive from our state has diminished since the recession of 2008. Between 2009 and 2013, we lost 35% of our state budget. Yet our university, through a series of strategically targeted reductions that aimed to protect the size and quality of programs that served the most students and produced our most robust research, has managed in 2015 to find itself in a place of record student enrollment, retention, achievement, and graduation as well as faculty productivity. We have positioned ourselves in a unique way in the ever-changing landscape of higher education. We are classified by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching as an “Arts and Sciences/Professions Balanced” institution, which means our offerings are often broader and more robust than other institutions of our size as we offer degrees in the humanities, the arts, medicine, engineering, agriculture, and business, to name just a few.

The improvement of the economy has helped us come back with great momentum, but some of the seeds for this resurgence were also sown through the effectiveness of our honors program. A remarkable educational experience, with a focus on experiential, hands-on learning and on students’ personal capabilities and potential, has helped us focus squarely on meaningful educational outcomes. Combine all of these factors and you can see why the academic core GPA and composite ACT scores of our incoming freshmen have climbed every year over the past five years while the geographic expanse of our enrollment has broadened considerably. We have become well-known in the West as an institution that offers a quality education at an affordable price with outstanding faculty who excel in teaching and research and with a student body that is increasingly diverse and accomplished. Not surprisingly, we are also at record numbers of National Merit Scholars on our campus.

Our honors program is a key driver in this picture of achievement as a proven example of our institution's commitment to student quality and success. Even before the academic year begins, our honors students gather at nearby Lake Tahoe for a retreat, and the bonds they form during this introductory time often carry on throughout the rest of their academic careers; they are housed in the Honors Residential Scholars Community, which is part of a larger residential community catering to our many academic disciplines; they are given first priority in class selection and online registration, allowing them flexibility in the field of study they have chosen; their curriculum features small classroom settings, taught by many of our most distinguished professors; they commit to at least fifteen hours of community service, a total that they annually exceed as the group often totals more than two thousand hours of such service per academic year; they are encouraged to participate in our rigorous undergraduate research program; and they develop a comprehensive honors thesis.

Often, our honors students go beyond what is expected. A recent engineering graduate, Steven DelaCruz, became a Goldwater and Udall Scholar and founded our university's Sustainable Energy Network. Another Truman Scholar, Ivon Padilla-Rodriguez, became a Glamour Top 10 College Woman, received Phi Kappa Phi's Marcus L. Urann Fellowship, was a Rhodes Scholarship finalist, and co-authored a well-received book on undocumented youth with one of her professors. Our most recent Goldwater Scholarship recipient for 2015, Josh Regalado, a neuroscience major and only a sophomore, is working in one of our many labs in the psychology department, actively researching sleeping behavior in starvation-resistant flies.

As these samples show, our honors students graduate with a notable breadth of experience that fully positions them for immediate employment or acceptance into the country's finest graduate programs in all fields and throughout all disciplines. Perhaps more impressive is that they realize through their participation in our program who they can and should be.

Students such as Jonathan Carral, because of their involvement in our honors program, come out poised to change the world. One day, Jonathan, who spent this last summer as part of a non-profit educational internship in the Congo, hopes to form his own international, non-governmental organization to help the children of the world's developing countries. And to think it all started with a last-minute decision to visit our honors program office, which sits overlooking one of the most picturesque spots on our campus, Manzanita Lake. "The view of the lake from the Honors office is pretty amazing,"

Jonathan says. Amazing, too, are the tangible and intangible benefits an institution of higher learning such as the University of Nevada, Reno can provide when it places high priority on an effective, humanistic honors program.

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