

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# Fostering Student Leadership in Honors Colleges

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### INTRODUCTION

Strong student leadership groups enhance honors colleges while honors student leaders can benefit from strong faculty and staff mentorship. In a 2006 call to action, “Ah well! I am their leader; I really ought to follow them’: Leading Student Leaders,” honors college dean Keith Garbutt challenges his decanal colleagues and directors of honors programs to take an active role in developing leadership capacities among the motivated, curious, creative, and energetic students we serve. He also warns that “different structural models can have different impacts on students” (Garbutt 46). For example, student representation on advisory committees with majority, long-term faculty membership may lead to students feeling tokenized or trivialized. In light of that admonition, how should honors colleges create meaningful leadership opportunities

for students and how do these honors leadership groups support the honors college? This chapter identifies structural models for student leadership and compares how those structural models are employed and how they impact students in numerous examples across honors colleges in the United States.

## RELEVANCE

Honors deans and other stakeholders tasked with developing and leading honors colleges must make informed decisions about programming while also balancing the pros and cons of competing priorities. It is vital that honors college decision makers understand the structures of student leadership across the honors college landscape and how those structures affect students' development as leaders. As a decision point, the architecture of student leadership within the honors college not only frames the college but strongly influences levels of student engagement. Student leadership in the honors college not only supports the ideals of an honors education in student learning and student development but also sustains the practical operations of the college. Indeed, effective student leadership groups in honors colleges can "have responsibility for the social and academic programming upon which the honors college depends" (Leichliter 156). For example, student leaders can help facilitate orientation, run peer mentoring programs, serve as tutors and classroom assistants, liaise with stakeholders, act as ambassadors to prospective students and local high schools, run social media campaigns, plan and implement social and/or community-based activities, and publish newsletters. Insight on effective models can provide helpful foundational information that will inform institution-specific student learning and program assessment goals. A broad view of student leadership structures and functions across honors colleges can also help directors of honors programs as well as honors deans benchmark against peer and aspirational institutions.

The National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) recognizes that a hallmark "of honors education is the community that emerges from a shared experience featuring intense student-to-student and mentor-to-student interaction in an engaging learning environment"

(“Shared” 6). That sense of community established within honors colleges is distinct from other academic units, and deans must ensure that the values of the honors college are understood throughout the community. Developing strong student leadership groups can aid the honors college in developing its mission and promoting those values. And given the typically larger scale of honors college operations relative to honors programs, honors colleges need to be more intentional about establishing community and enacting their missions. In fact, Adam Watkins makes a compelling argument for student leadership as a driver of culture. He considers how student leadership in the honors college at Purdue University affects those leaders’ sense of belonging and their sense of connectedness with the college’s mission-based value of inclusive excellence (Watkins 105). In a two-year study of 160 student leaders in their “peer mentor program” (a Mentorship Cadre structure, which is discussed below), Purdue researchers demonstrated that, in addition to gains in leadership skills, student leaders in the program developed a “greater sense of connection with the honors college and its values” and that the students’ sense of community and level of involvement in the honors college increased (Watkins 111–13). Their mixed-methods study, which included survey results and focus group interviews, also revealed student leaders’ feelings that they had a greater connection with honors faculty; it was “an integral part of their enhanced sense of connection with the college” (Watkins 114).

## DEFINING STUDENT LEADERSHIP

Definitions of student or peer leadership are described infrequently in the present honors literature. Authors rely on a shared cultural understanding of the nature of leadership and how it is practiced. Leichliter, quoting Peter Guy Northouse, provides a useful definition for student leadership in honors as encompassing both *action and process*—“a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (qtd. in Leichliter 156). For the purposes of this chapter, the scope is restricted to student groups, organizations, and/or opportunities that support honors college goals, functions, and operations, that

is, student leadership *in* the honors college. Although honors students frequently serve in leadership roles across campus (Polk 146), that aspect of student leadership development is understood as a secondary effect and not addressed directly in this essay.

The development of student leaders, their capacity and efficacy, needs to be situated within the honors college's mission. One such example occurs in West Chester University (Pennsylvania) Honors College's statement that "leadership involves shared responsibility for creating a better world in which to live and work which manifests in a passion to engage others in bringing about purposeful change" (Polk 140). Honors colleges can and should embrace a definition of student leadership that will accentuate their unique mission. Therein is an opportunity to distinguish aspects of the honors college and its institution.

## **STUDENT LEADERSHIP AS A FUNDAMENTAL PART OF HONORS EDUCATION**

According to one honors college director of programming, "Providing intentional, rigorous, and intellectually challenging education opportunities for students to develop leadership skills is a core mission of honors programs and colleges . . ." (Leichliter 155). While NCHC's "Definition of Honors Education" does not prescribe leadership mandates, the call for honors education to be "measurably broader, deeper, or more complex" and to rely on a "distinctive learner-directed environment" is consistent with student leadership goals, activities, and outcomes. As Paul W. Ferguson and James S. Ruebel explain in "The Catalytic Impact of Honors," developing leadership capacity is a fundamental value of honors endeavors:

Traditionally, discussion about the value of honors education focuses on the outcomes for students: enhancement of skill sets that are a) academic, b) social, c) leadership-oriented, d) personal, and e) vocational or professional. These are all real outcomes, but they can also be achieved outside honors. What makes honors special is that it provides a place, a program, and the resources for nourishing these outcomes in the company of other high-achieving students

who are undergoing the same transformation and who show respect for these high ambitions in their peers. (12)

NCHC's "Shared Principles and Practices of Honors Education" calls for honors students to be "assured a voice in the governance and direction of the student-centered honors program or college" (3) and suggests that a student governance committee is one way to achieve this purpose. This guiding document also calls for honors student representation on other advisory committees and explicitly positions leadership as an important component of co-curricular programming. Honors colleges might also consider students' prior leadership experiences as part of honors college admissions decisions, include leadership development in the honors college curriculum, integrate leadership into the honors college's policies and programs, and showcase leadership opportunities and success in college development and external relations. George L. Hanbury II and Don Rosenblum describe the necessity of student leadership in the honors college when they state that the Farquhar Honors College at Nova Southeastern University in Florida "was born out of our recognition that high academic performance is coterminous with leadership. . . . Our honors college is designed to unleash a crucial potential in all students: the ability to lead" (92).

Available data show that developing student leadership is an embedded, if not explicit, tenet of a majority of honors colleges and a goal in terms of outcomes. In the 2021 "Census of U.S. Honors Colleges," a survey of 248 U.S. honors colleges, 69.7% of honors colleges indicated they use co-curricular activities (volunteer work) in high school as part of admission decisions. The percentage of honors colleges at R1 institutions employing this criterion is higher, at 81% (Cognard-Black and Smith 58). Furthermore, 43.3% of honors colleges describe *leadership* as an overall pedagogy or curricular orientation that "best describes" the honors college experience at their institution (Cognard-Black and Smith 61–62). In a survey of 106 honors alumni from the honors college at South Dakota State University, 63.9% of respondents felt they had gained skills from their honors experience in the area of "demonstrating effective leadership" (Kotschevar et al. 146).

## MODALITIES OF STUDENT LEADERSHIP

Several common modalities of student leadership in honors colleges are recognizable although titles and specific details vary. For the ease of establishing a shared vocabulary for this discussion, four common modalities are summarized in Table 1. In terms of function, student leadership in honors colleges often cross lines and are packaged in different combinations.

- **Governance Committee:** most closely aligned with NCHC's call for assuring student participation in the governance and future direction of the honors college, this approach involves students in policy discussions, new directions, and program assessment. These committees are sometimes structured as a representative body and may have elected membership.
- **Programming Committee:** frequently associated with residential honors colleges, this group allows student leaders to design, plan, and execute programming, such as tutoring services, academic enrichment, and social activities, for the benefit of honors students. Programming committees may be specialized, perhaps focusing on organizing community outreach opportunities or service.
- **Mentorship Cadre:** frequently involved with mentoring activities for new students during their transition into college life, selected honors college students work directly with first-year and/or newly admitted honors students. They may or may not be associated with a new student transition course and are frequently compensated.
- **Ambassador Committee:** focusing on external relations and closely associated with the admissions and recruitment activities of the honors college, this group typically has a high social media profile and members may be compensated.

Other student leadership models combine one or more of the common modalities described here, or they adapt their functions to meet the needs of the honors college. For example, a diversity, equity, and inclusion committee may involve elements of all four

of the common modalities listed here to support the success of traditionally underrepresented communities within honors. Honors college staff can support the success of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts by reaching out directly to students to encourage them to consider the leap into a leadership role. This kind of proactive support can be especially effective when students do not envision themselves as leaders in the honors community.

The structural implementation of these modalities typically engages three key issues: the extent to which the leadership group is open, the extent of the training requirements, and whether the students are compensated. Table 2 summarizes some basic questions related to these characteristics while also acknowledging that

TABLE 1. COMMON MODALITIES OF STUDENT LEADERSHIP IN HONORS COLLEGES

Structure	Function
Governance Committee	focuses on honors college policy and planning
Programming Committee	focuses on college-wide programming, which may be associated with residential living
Mentorship Cadre	supports new student transition
Ambassador Committee	externally directed to support recruitment and external relations

TABLE 2. CHARACTERISTICS ACROSS STUDENT LEADERSHIP MODALITIES

Modalities	To What Extent Is the Group <i>Open</i> ?	To What Extent Is <i>Training</i> Required?	To What Extent Are Student Leaders <i>Compensated</i> ?
Governance Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• is there an application or selection process?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• is training required?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• are student leaders paid?</li></ul>
Programming Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• are members elected?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• what training is required or offered?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• do student leaders receive non-monetary compensation, or perks, such as housing benefits?</li></ul>
Mentorship Cadre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• is membership limited or restricted?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• is training one-time or ongoing?</li></ul>	
Ambassador Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• how are members recruited?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• are there training prerequisites or corequisites?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• do student leaders earn credits?</li></ul>

a wide variety of approaches to these questions exist across honors colleges.

This section offers specific examples within each of the four common modalities and some distinguishing characteristics across a range of honors colleges that are diverse in terms of location, size, and type of home institution.

## **Governance Committees**

- The Clemson University Honors College (1,500 students) has an Honors Student Advisory Board. Their HSAB “is a group of students from all majors and years within the Clemson University Honors College who aim to represent the interests and needs of students within the college. We strive to serve as a link between the Honors College staff and the honors student body. The goal of the HSAB is to increase the amount of communication and student input that is exchanged between the student body and members of faculty to better plan and improve the college.” (Clemson University)
- At the W. A. Franke Honors College (4,000 students) at the University of Arizona, the Honors Student Council seeks to “be the collective voice for the Franke Honors students.” In addition to liaising with staff, this student leadership group also allocates funding, provides programming, and works to create “a small community atmosphere.” (University of Arizona)
- The honors college (800 students) at the University of Wyoming relies on the Wyoming Honors Organization (WHO) to serve as the student voice of the honors college. “WHO is committed to promoting the qualities of Scholarship, Service, Excellence, and Community, to increasing student and faculty involvement [through] activities within the College, University, and Community, to determining and suggesting goals and requirements for the Honors College so as to ensure quality for the students, faculty, and curriculum, and to recognizing student and faculty excellence.” (University of Wyoming)



## Programming Committees

- In the honors college (2,600 students) at West Virginia University, the Honors Student Association (HSA) is associated with the college's Living Learning Community. The HSA "provides opportunities for Honors College students to engage with one another, serve the community, enrich their academic experiences, and also serves as a source of information and fellowship for students." (West Virginia University)
- In the Clarke Honors College (400 students) at Salisbury University, the Honors Student Association (HSA) focuses on community service. Their goal is "to create an environment to foster social and intellectual interaction among students, striving to build a strong bond with the surrounding city of Salisbury through community service, outreach events, and honors student presence at social activities." (Salisbury University)
- Mahurin Honors College (1,300 students) at Western Kentucky University has an Honors Social Planning Board that serves to "create enjoyable experiences through service, community and development by providing meaningful opportunities for MHC scholars." (Western Kentucky University)

## Mentorship Cadre

- Referenced earlier in this chapter, the Mentor Program in the honors college (2,200 students) at Purdue University provides student leaders with the opportunity to work with faculty in leading "small teams of first-year students in HONR 19901: Evolution of Ideas . . . [and] guid[ing] students through project-based coursework, helping them develop the academic and teamwork skills they need to become successful Honors College students. This context provides mentors a unique leadership laboratory, in which they can observe how

teams function and discover best practices for teambuilding, inclusion, and problem solving. Mentors are also provided a structured environment in HONR 299: Mentors, where they engage in personal reflection and guided discussions to ensure they get the most out of their leadership experience” (Purdue University).

- The honors college (700 students) at the College of Charleston “employs approximately 20 Honors students to serve as Peer Facilitators for the Honors FYE course.” Their Peer Facilitators serve as “mentor, teacher, advisor, coach, and crucial connecting link for first-year students.” They receive training through the Center for Excellence in Peer Education. (College of Charleston)
- The honors college (950 students) at Washington State University offers an Honors Facilitators program “intended to help incoming students adjust to college life, to build a sense of community, and learn to work with the Honors curriculum” as well as an Honors College Mentors program that “pairs incoming freshmen with current Honors students based on shared academic areas of interest.” While the Honors Facilitators take the lead on a “one-credit freshman course, Honors 198,” the Mentors “strive to integrate the new students into the Honors community . . . by being resources to answer questions and by organizing activities where new friendships are forged” outside of a particular course. (Washington State University, “Honors Facilitators” and “Honors College Mentors”)

### **Ambassador Committee**

- In the honors college (2,000 students) at Rutgers University, Honors Ambassadors are “current students who share their experiences and stories with prospective students and their families. Ambassadors volunteer in providing tours of the Honors College, connecting with prospective students at events such as showcases, open house, and other special

on and off campus events. . . .” Lead ambassadors facilitate ambassador recruiting, prospective student outreach, events, and ambassador development. (Rutgers University)

- Schreyer Honors College (1,900 students) at Pennsylvania State University has a Scholar Ambassador program in which students “represent the College at special events for alumni and donors, provide tours of campus and honors housing, develop and lead philanthropic campaigns, meet with visiting families, and share their experiences as Schreyer Scholars.” (Pennsylvania State University)
- In the honors college (1,100 students) at James Madison University, honors students apply to serve as an Honors Ambassador and if selected “assist in formal recruitment events, including fall Open Houses . . . and Orientation.” They also assist with outreach efforts, attend alumni receptions, and present information to prospective students. (James Madison University)

Characteristic of honors colleges, student leadership groups like those described above may also combine with and/or complement other student leadership groups in honors, thus creating a suite of student leadership opportunities for their students.

- In the Brinson Honors College (1,200 students) at Western Carolina University, where this author serves, an ambassador group embodies many of the characteristics above. We also have an Honors College Student Board of Directors—which serves both as a Governance Committee and a Programming Committee—and a Mentoring Cadre in our Honors Peer Academic Coaches: these students work with faculty and students in our first-year Honors Forum transition course. Our Student Board also sponsors a more informal and social Mentoring Cadre made up of experienced students who engage socially with new students one-on-one or in small groups during the first few weeks of the semester to ease their transition and welcome them to campus. (Western Carolina University)

- Barrett, the Honors College (6,900) at Arizona State University has honors student leadership options organized at each of its four campuses. Barrett's Honors College Council is "composed of elected students from all four campuses who work together to foster community within Barrett." They aim to "improve the well-being of Barrett students and advocate on their behalf," working with other Barrett student groups and the administration. Barrett has Ambassador Committees, Mentoring Cadres, and Programming Committees at each campus. For example, the Honors Devils assist with prospective student recruiting activities; the Barrett Leadership and Service Team works on events to serve the community; and the Barrett Poly Mentoring Program supports first-year students at the Polytechnic campus. (Arizona State University)
- Fishback Honors College (700 students) at South Dakota State University has an Honors College Student Organization that serves as a Programming Committee and "hosts a multitude of service and social events" (South Dakota State University, "Honors"). Comprising honors student members from each of the academic colleges at the university, a separate Dean's Student Advisory Council advises the Dean on "matters relevant to honors students and implement[s] programs and initiatives that support student success." The college offers a Peer Mentoring Program (volunteer mentors who "serve as resources for the incoming students") and a Teaching Assistants opportunity for their Honors Orientation course "and other introductory Honors courses." Fishback also has a Student Recruitment Team that offers prospective students "a better idea of what it is really like to be an Honors student at SDSU and allows current honors students to gain communication skills and experience." (South Dakota State University, "Student")

## ASSESSING LEARNING GOALS OF LEADERSHIP

Once a leadership program is adopted, the honors college will benefit from having a rigorous assessment of the leadership goals in order to identify key program components that lead to those desired outcomes, articulate return on investment (ROI) for stakeholders, and provide data for making incremental improvements over time. Three broad categories for assessing student leadership development are generally accepted, ones based on position (specific roles), capacity (knowledge, skills, and behaviors), and efficacy (beliefs) (Komives et al. 60–62). Learning goals for student leadership, if they are to be meaningfully assessed, must be well defined within the context of the honors college's own goals and mission.

A 2020 paper by Leigh E. Fine reports on an outcomes assessment of the “first-year seminar facilitators,” a Mentorship Cadre, at the University of Connecticut, in which honors students serve as peer leaders in a first-year honors seminar. This study may serve as a model for how honors college deans and staff can design assessments that address learning outcomes for leadership goals in honors. Fine used a pre-test/post-test survey design to evaluate effects of the leadership experience in three dimensions of leadership development: leadership efficacy, teaching efficacy, and sense of belonging to the [honors] program (64–67). Quantitative results showed significant gains ( $p < 0.001$ ) in both student self-reported leadership efficacy and teaching efficacy for these peer mentors and modest gains ( $p < 0.05$ ) in sense of belonging to honors (Fine 69). Qualitative results indicated that their training had a strong effect on their learning, especially in the dimension of empathy as a skill (74).

## CONCLUSION

Honors colleges typically go beyond having a single student leadership organization or token representation of students on faculty/staff committees. Today's honors colleges support and celebrate student-led efforts across many aspects of the honors college enterprise, providing specialized leadership structures that serve in numerous ways to support the mission, values, and activities of the

honors college. Student leaders have been shown to benefit from these leadership experiences in understanding, in skills, and in the affective domain. Similarly, important functions of the honors college such as external relations, retention efforts, and program development benefit from having these energetic, capable, and creative student leaders taking an active role in meeting the mission of honors colleges.

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