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Differences Between an Honors Program and Honors College: A Case Study

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“Experience will guide us to the rules,” he said. “You cannot make rules precede practical experience.”

— Antoine de Saint Exupéry

Honors colleges are springing up across the country. In the last several years public institutions of higher education from Vermont to Cal State Fresno and from Maine to South Florida have started honors colleges. Private universities such as Baylor, Hofstra, and Auburn have honors colleges as well (see Digby, 2002). At least one writer, Murray Sperber (2000) of Indiana University, has speculated that the primary purpose for creating such colleges is to solicit funds from one or more major donors. Others point out that the transition from program to college is primarily symbolic, signifying a stronger central commitment to honors students and honors education (Zane, 2002). More recently, Sederberg (2003) lists characteristics an honors college should have beyond a fully developed honors program. Most of these characteristics pertain to infrastructure and operations. Generalizations are difficult to make because of the individuality of various honors programs or colleges, but the truth is more complex and textured than these publications depict. There are few publications available to describe either the more subtle or substantial differences between an honors program and college.

The purpose of this article is describe the shift in practices, resources, expectations and scope as an honors program was converted to an honors college at one institution. It may provide a reference point as other programs consider such a change.

Penn State initiated its own university-wide honors program in 1980 with support from the Faculty Senate. It was designed after numerous honors programs were visited around the country and with input from seven local academic departments that had their own pre-existing honors programs. A vision for expanding the honors program was outlined in 1996 by the then-new president, Dr. Graham Spanier. In the fall of 1997, Penn State received a major gift from William A. and Joan Schreyer to found the Schreyer Honors College (SHC). Its purpose was to build upon the successful honors program already established. The gift was to be used to enrich the learning experience of students enrolled in the college and, more specifically, to nurture a global perspective and support international study with student travel grants; to add

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programs that would inspire responsible citizenship; to offer honors seminars across all four years of undergraduate study; to link the development of innovative honors courses to the Schreyer Institute for the Innovation in Learning (a think tank for reassessing and redesigning undergraduate education that was previously endowed by Mr. and Mrs. Schreyer); and to introduce mentors and fellows who would inspire, serve as role models and help students bridge their academic and future public lives. In return, the university was expected to enhance facilities and staff, including a dean’s position. A large portion of the gift’s funds was directed to scholarship endowments, with none targeted for “bricks and mortar.”

Conversations about the conversion of honors programs to honors colleges tend to emphasize public visibility, reporting lines, and enhancement of the quality of applicants and matriculants (Lawrence, 2000; Mass, 2003). Yet, a list of what a program or college has or doesn’t have, adds or doesn’t add, tells only part of the story. Table 1 is a compilation of the characteristics and program additions made to the honors college in our case. It is admittedly dry and, by itself, unlikely to motivate other institutions to make similar changes. More important is what an honors college *does* that an honors program could not do. The most significant challenge and change, in our case, was one of cultural transformation. The balance of this paper describes the “before and after” differences in vision, mission, and purpose; public visibility and university reach; reporting lines; development and fundraising; operations; and, facilities. The “Discussion and Conclusion” section explores an answer to the “So what?” question and provides examples of some of the college’s impacts.

TABLE 1

COMPARISON OF SELECTED ACTIVITIES BETWEEN AN HONORS PROGRAM AND HONORS COLLEGE AT PENN STATE (ADAPTED FROM *ONE MINUTE* SURVEY BY MASS, 2003)

	Honors Program (1997)	Honors College (2004)
Alumni Society		X
Budget		X
Community outreach/ volunteer activities		X
Course innovations		X
Cultural events	X	X
Development/ Fundraising		X
Diversity planning		X

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	Honors Program (1997)	Honors College (2004)
External Advisory Board		X
Faculty Advisory Committee	X	X
Faculty recruitment for courses	X	X
Faculty development seminars		X
Faculty/Student mentorship opportunities	X	X
Guest lectures by alumni		X
Guest lectures by faculty		X
Honors advisors	X	X
Honors course scheduling	X	X
Honors housing	X	X
Honors Medal Ceremonies	X (2 per year)	X (3 per year)
Honors receptions	X	X
Hosting prospective students		X
Incubator for student clubs		X
Informal student advisement	X	X

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	Honors Program (1997)	Honors College (2004)
Leadership development seminars, courses		X
National conferences		X
Newsletters	X	X
Recruitment/ Open houses	X	X
Scholarships	X	X
Senior awards	X (1 per year)	X (4 per year)
Strategic planning		X
Student Council	X	X
Student fellowship assistance		X
Student internship assistance		X
Study/Travel abroad opportunities		X
Technology planning		X
Thesis requirement	X	X
Travel grants		X (~250/yr)
Undergraduate Research Exhibition	X	X
Web site		X

Vision, Mission, Purpose - The single most important element in transforming the honors program culture originally in place to one that would support an honors college was to create an expanded and explicit vision, mission and goals statement (see Table 2). Previously, there was a common, but tacit, understanding that the honors program was essential to recruit stronger students to the university and to promote academic excellence. However, the new mission statement, created with input from many stakeholders and committees within and outside of Penn State, made explicit for the first time what goals honors education was to achieve at the university. The mission-vision statement expanded the scope, focus, programming activities and measures required of honors education at Penn State. The importance of the vision and mission statements is continuously underscored because all personnel and planning activities are driven by the mission.

With the new vision, mission and goals statement in hand, the SHC administration shifted from a management role focused primarily on student selection and honors courses to a larger leadership role that included the start-up of new programs and activities both within honors and across campus. The SHC became associated with new initiatives and innovations in the classroom, office operations and co-curricular programming. For example, it was the first unit on campus to create a separate strategic plan for technology, and it developed a model strategic plan for diversity. New honors courses were associated with service learning, experiential learning and international perspectives. The SHC also led the campus in an electronic imaging project

TABLE 2

VISION, MISSION AND GOALS OF THE SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

<p>Vision</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To educate men and women who will make important differences in the world, affecting academic, professional, civic, social, and business outcomes. • To improve educational practice and to be recognized as a leading force in Honors education nationwide. <p>Mission</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To promote academic excellence in all fields of study, internationalization, leadership, and social and civic responsibility in our student body and across the Penn State community. <p>Goals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To provide academically talented and highly motivated students with meaningful learning experiences that will prepare them to continuously learn, apply, and create new knowledge throughout their lifetimes. • To provide our students with meaningful opportunities that will challenge them to reach their full potential as thoughtful, creative, responsible, caring, and productive persons. • To provide university-wide leadership in developing, testing, and modeling outstanding educational practices and community involvement in both in-class and out-of-class settings.
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that saves time, money and space as it incorporates all SHC online forms into a unique Web-based student records system accessible to all SHC staff.

Public Visibility and University Reach - The major gift used to found the college attracted a good deal of publicity that, in turn, led to greater notoriety and attention to some of the changes we sought to accomplish. Greater publicity generally comes at a price. In our case, that price was the assumption that we had \$30 million to spend and thus didn't need additional funds. Both assumptions were wrong, and we had to work diligently over time to correct these misperceptions. The gift was pledged in payments over time, and, of course, any available funds would be only a percentage of the interest, not the principal, of the endowment.

However, on the plus side, the publicity also gave us name recognition both on and off campus. It also allowed us to work towards greater alignment around a shared purpose, both on the main campus and at Penn State's twenty-one other colleges and campuses. In addition, the SHC expanded its reach with a seat on the Faculty Senate, solid representation on various committees in the university-wide Teaching-Learning Consortium and a voice in educational technology developments and undergraduate research. Members of the SHC staff were also invited to serve on various administrative reviews and search committees. Even more importantly, the SHC was at the table for discussion of university resource allocation as well as other strategic decisions. None of these opportunities for university engagement existed before the honors program was converted to an honors college.

Reporting Lines - What difference does having a dean make? First, it increases communication with higher administration through direct and regular access to other deans, the university Provost, the President, and the Board of Trustees. It also creates a new peer group for the dean of the honors college, namely other college deans. The Honors college dean gains a set of powerful colleagues to consult and partner with in resolving problems or starting new initiatives. He or she also gains the opportunity to address undergraduate education and quality concerns at all deans' meetings, has direct access (or at least as much access as other deans) to the development office/foundation, university attorneys and university leadership in Budgeting, Finance, Business, Public Information, Admissions, the Alumni Association and the Registrar's Office. A dean also assures that honors is part of the university-wide strategic planning process.

Having a dean at the helm of the SHC helped to ensure that honors could shift from a mode of transactional leadership with a quid-pro-quo exchange to transformational leadership that incorporates an inspirational element. A key element in this transformation was the opportunity for the SHC to create its own policy for honors education at Penn State such as enrollment numbers, criteria for student admissions, and faculty selection. Such authority was previously beyond reach. Oversight shifted from the Vice-Provost of Undergraduate Education and the Faculty Senate directly to the Provost. Now the Faculty Senate is consulted for curricular issues only. Moreover, the President appointed the SHC dean to a seat on the Faculty Senate, where she routinely participates on all committees that focus on undergraduate

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education or internationalization, thus creating an active partnership between the Schreyer Honors College and the Senate. Finally, the honors administration has always had to work “over, under, around and through” other departments and organizations on campus, and we still do; our primary strategy was and still is “moral suasion,” but fortunately, with new programs, opportunities, resources and authority, the SHC now has a bigger arsenal to work with and a more prominent bully pulpit.

Development or Fundraising - College status has provided access to the university development office that was never afforded previously. Although the SHC has had only a part-time assignment of a development officer with a large portfolio, it has been able to increase the number of donors, the size of donations, and thus the number and amount of scholarships. For example, the SHC became a part of the university’s capital campaign, which gave the college the opportunity to interact with major donors at all development events. A strategic plan for fundraising was also made for the college. More recently an Executive Development Committee was established for the Schreyer Honors College, comprised of ten external alumni and other leaders who share a commitment to the SHC’s mission and a deep desire to help it raise further funds to forward that mission. None of this would have occurred had we remained an honors program.

Operations - Key changes also occurred in the everyday operations of our offices. The organizational chart was revamped, with leadership transitioning from professional staff to faculty with tenure. Four new positions were added, but reorganization, renaming and reassignment of positions and responsibilities were at least as important as new additions in accommodating new functions. Appointments were also changed from nine or ten to twelve months. Significant additions beyond the dean include an associate dean, a full-time information technology officer, a part-time coordinator of alumni activities and a part-time internship fellowship coordinator as well as staff assistants.

Another key change in operations relates to the establishment of an External Advisory Board currently consisting of sixteen members. This board is shared with the Schreyer Institute for Excellence in Teaching and meets twice each academic year. Members review and advise the SHC on recruitment, publications, development, curriculum, assessment and other issues. An Alumni Society Board was similarly established for the newly formed Honors Alumni Society.

Facilities - The former facilities that housed the honors program could only be described as humble and cramped. The inauguration of the Honors college stimulated the university to find a more suitable space for the operation that was larger, airier, centrally located and more functional. We eventually renovated space in one of the honors residence halls along with an addition that created 18,725 square feet of good-looking offices and meeting spaces including study halls, a computer laboratory, conference room, classroom, kitchen and social meeting spaces for students and staff.

DISCUSSION

After cataloging differences in resources, activities and operations between Penn State's former honors program and current honors college, it is important to question what the added value of such an enterprise is. There are numerous quantitative indicators such as number of honors students, the average SAT score of such students, students who study abroad, number of honors courses, students who complete an honors thesis, number of national award winners, students who attend graduate and professional schools, and average college GPA. All of these are important indicators and reflect, to some degree, what impact an honors college might have within an institution. Many might be tempted to stop the assessment with these measures alone. However, measures of this type must always be seen for what they are: *indicators of quality*. An honors college (or program for that matter) stands for nothing if not for quality. Donors, administrators and legislators will not be willing to contribute or invest precious and limited resources into an honors college if it means only "business as usual." **Therefore, honors colleges should make a distinctive qualitative difference in the life of a university as well as a difference in the entry statistics for each freshman class.**

What evidence is there in this case study for important qualitative impacts on a university-wide basis? Several developments are worth noting:

Faculty Travel Fund – The Schreyer Honors College began a program to fund travel costs for faculty who developed and taught short-courses at an international location for honors students as a means to promote internationalization. The model encouraged more faculty and students to go abroad so effectively that the International Programs Office now offers a similar fund to faculty university-wide.

Technology Learning Assistants – The Schreyer Honors College piloted a program where faculty received one-on-one tutoring about computer technology/course management systems from Honors students enrolled in a one-credit course on computer technology consulting. The faculty learned how to use new teaching technologies in the privacy of their offices, and students developed important teaching and consulting skills. Penn State benefited with more syllabi and course materials being made available on the Web as well as more faculty using ANGEL, Penn State's course management tool. The program was so successful it was adopted by all campuses, university-wide.

Leadership Seminars – The value of honors seminars as an educational approach was made evident in the honors program. Faculty experience in this venue helped to instigate and support a university-wide first-year seminar requirement, which is no small feat in itself. The Schreyer Honors College also added a new dimension to the first-year seminar with rigorous academic study of leadership accompanied by outdoor team-building experiences. The approach was so popular that two academic colleges have adopted the model for all their undergraduate students and a third college will now require an introductory course about leadership for all students beginning Fall, 2004.

Signature Courses – The Schreyer Honors College helps faculty develop and implement interdisciplinary honors courses that blend all three parts of its mission. These courses typically cross two semesters, often with an applied summer international experience in-between. For example, one course entitled “Geographic Perspectives of Juarez” had students write a field guide of La Ciudad Juarez (with chapters on water, air quality, education, trade, art, and music, etc.) during spring semester. In May, the class went to Juarez, built a home in one of the poorest neighborhoods and collected in-field information. The following fall, students revised the field guide based on their experiences, wrote self-reflective essays and published op-ed pieces in their home newspapers. The course had a transformative effect on its participants; almost half the students changed majors and/or career goals based on their experience. This model has been replicated in courses on poverty in Philadelphia, housing among the northern Cheyenne, education in Madras, India and freedom of the press in South Africa. These courses have fostered an unprecedented commitment to service learning, promoting dozens of other innovations in a wide variety of courses and colleges.

CONCLUSION

None of the changes, programs, or impacts described in the “Discussion” section alone could have been anticipated or planned at the founding of the Schreyer Honors College. However, none would have taken place without the Honors College. They are the result of having a recognized unit empowered by the resources, authority and imagination to make a difference. The differences observed are both far-reaching and long-lasting. They supercede and enhance the changes in organizational effectiveness that resulted from the early stages of transition from honors program to college. It is important to point out, however, that these university-wide differences in teaching practices and educational culture grew out of the improved environment that the establishment of an honors college created.

To summarize and reframe the discussion about the creation and transition of an honors program to an honors college, I offer the following observations:

- A shift in authority must occur, conferring the legitimacy and degree of freedom to act as a college.
- A change in infrastructure must occur to implement such authority effectively, i.e., the organization must behave like a college.
- Additional resources are required including space, staff and budget to provide the tools necessary to work as a college.

Many honors programs have an infrastructure in place. Some honors programs have the resources in hand already to act as a college. But, few have sufficient authority to lift their honors program to college status. When all three elements are braided together, the outcomes should be qualitatively different, beyond a simple summation. These outcomes have an impact on honors students, advisors and faculty in meaningful ways, but they can also influence the larger university context and

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community. And shouldn't it be our desire to improve the quality of teaching and learning in our colleges and universities overall?

The changes both near-and long-term associated with an honors college will necessarily be different in each institution. However, this case study indicates that the potential impact is important not only to honors students but campus-wide. We urge you to explore what difference an honors college might make in your setting as well.

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