

# A Potential for Improving Honors Retention with Degree Planning

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**Abstract:** Students who begin in honors do not always complete program requirements. As an investigation into student retention, the author introduces a degree-planning workshop into a freshman seminar. The study involves two groups of students from different incoming classes: one (2018) participating in their degree-planning through the workshop and the other (2015) not. Students ( $n = 150$ ) were compared against three retention criteria based on successive enrollment and withdrawal. Chi-square analyses reveal significant differences only for program withdrawal, indicating that those completing the workshop were less likely to be removed from the program due to lack of progress. The workshop group (2018) showed higher levels of voluntarily removing themselves from the program than the non-workshop (2015) group. Seminar materials, procedures, and learning outcomes are presented. Implications for future research involving additional student populations and achievement variables are discussed.

**Keywords:** student retention; student attrition; degree planning; guided pathways; Missouri Western State University Honors Program

Two fundamental goals of honors programs are to provide academic enrichment and to ensure that students complete a course of study that makes full use of this enrichment. Enrichment experiences can include completing smaller and more focused classes, honors-only seminars, opportunities for research, outreach or study abroad, and working more closely with professors. The goals of enrichment and completion are intertwined: if the program fails to retain, then it fails in academic enrichment (Goodstein & Szarek, 2013). Completion rates in honors programs can be as low as 30%

(Goodstein & Szarek, 2013) and as high as 87% (Willingham, 2018). Programs vary in so many factors, from program structure to student admissions requirements, that it is difficult to pinpoint the factors that matter most for retention.

Honors retention is an important focus of study because participation in honors programs benefits the entire university. Participation in honors promotes higher GPAs, retention at the university, and four-year graduation rates at less selective universities (Bowman & Culver, 2017). Honors students bring both tangible and intangible benefits to an institution, including research, scholarly presentations, publications, campus involvement, leadership, and outreach experiences (Johnson & Valentine, 2015). Losing students from honors comes at a cost to future students, to the faculty who teach in the program, and to the university's investment in the program (Goodstein & Szarek, 2013).

Typically, students who begin in an honors program but do not complete it succumb to one of the following hurdles: completing a set number of honors credits, a minimum GPA, and perhaps a capstone experience such as a thesis. Goodstein and Szarek (2013) suggest other reasons such as not having the best classes or other experiences to hold students' attention and requiring too much work to achieve honors benchmarks.

"Lack of progress" (LOP) means that students begin taking classes required for the program but then do not enroll in the future honors coursework needed to achieve the honors degree. These students have the GPA to remain in the program but often find themselves in a predicament. More students than ever are coming into honors programs with IB, AP, and DC coursework, leaving fewer classes required to complete honors. Without careful planning and consultation, students may be in an impossible situation to complete the program's requirements in a timely manner, yet honors students are often left out of classes offering intensive planning or advisement because they are thought to be good planners already (Clark, Schwitzer, Paredes, & Grothaus, 2018). Honors programs often fail to recognize that honors students need help in planning how to complete the requirements for their majors and minors as well as honors courses.

The guided pathways model emphasizes sequencing courses, advisement practices, and encouraging program entrance as soon as possible (see Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015), and it centers on three key features:

1. providing clear roadmaps to student end goals such as course sequencing,

2. creating on-ramps to programs of study such as creation of an academic plan, and
3. embedding tracking and support through advisement. (Jenkins & Cho, 2014)

The primary focus of the model is early major selection and progress through general studies and major requirements. The problem with guided pathways is that it can increase pressure on students to complete general education requirements before entering college, creating difficulty for honors students to complete honors general studies classes with the “room they have left” (Pressler, 2019). The model can also decrease motivation to complete an honors program since it typically requires extra coursework, thus delaying graduation. However, guided pathways can also be positive for honors students, encouraging planning and sequencing to make sure they take classes when they should and complete the coursework needed for their degrees. College students report positive impressions of programs that include educational planning (Fink, 2017).

Missouri Western State University (MWSU) employs many of the guided pathways strategies with the student body. In line with Jenkins and Cho (2014), all programs have a four-year plan of suggested coursework to encourage advanced planning. Students must meet with their academic advisor—a faculty member within their intended major—before registering each semester and continue working with the same advisor throughout their entire course of study unless they change to a different major or select a different advisor. While advisors may differ in approach or strategy, they have ample opportunity to forge strong relationships with advisees and provide individualized assistance (Huggett, 2004). Our university also provides a degree-planning workshop, hosted by our Center for Student Success (CSS) that helps students plan classes for all four years.

Degree planning, as described by Jenkins and Cho (2014), is an on-ramp to programs of study, and the university has designed a workshop that motivates planning for classes now and in the future. This workshop takes place in the University 101 class for first-semester freshmen. The class is not mandatory but highly recommended. With few exceptions, honors students do not enroll in University 101, but almost all honors students complete the honors seminar that is offered to first-semester honors students.

In 2017, the honors program began offering a degree-planning workshop in the first-semester honors seminar courses in conjunction with the CSS. The workshop entailed two fifteen-minute class visits by the honors director

early in the semester and then a whole class period in a computer lab staffed by CSS advisors. Below I describe the workshop materials and procedures and then the outcomes for LOP and retention in the honors program.

METHOD

Participants

First-semester freshmen accepted into the honors program are placed into one of five two-credit freshman honors seminar classes, capped at 18 students. Transfer students are not eligible to enroll in freshman seminar. Each seminar class centers on a theme within the instructor’s discipline, incorporating general studies skills and critical thinking about contemporary questions and issues. Broad goals include mastery of course materials, communication skills, creativity, integration, personal growth, and self-directed learning.

These freshman honors classes provide an opportunity to offer common, in-class workshops. The current analysis compares freshmen in the incoming class of 2015, which had no workshop, with freshmen in the incoming class of 2018, which did include the workshop. These classes were selected for comparison because they were equivalent in the number of seminars offered (five) and other variables collected at the time of the students’ entry into the university. Both classes included students about whom we had data from three semesters, which represents the time period of highest withdrawal rate from our honors program (see Table 1).

TABLE 1. ENTRANCE VARIABLES FOR THE 2015 AND 2018 INCOMING CLASSES

Variable	EY2015	EY2018
Males	40	33
Females	35	42
Total Students	75	75
	Mean (Standard Deviation)	Mean (Standard Deviation)
ACT	27.57 (2.38)	27.54 (1.72)
Weighted GPA at Entry	3.93 (0.33)	4.04 (.28)
# College Courses	2.84 (2.47)	2.61 (2.72)

Note: Number of college courses signifies AP, IB and DC classes completed before attending the university, which were counted toward general studies requirements.

## Materials

The degree-planning workshop built into the 2018 seminar included use of materials regularly provided to the student body:

- The major/minor form: Most universities have major/minor forms outlining which classes are needed to complete a degree in each major.
- The sample plan: Some universities also offer four-year sample plans, containing classes semester-by-semester that the typical student could complete to achieve the degree in four years.
- The honors course rotation: Honors programs often have agreements with departments for when general studies courses will be offered as honors. These rotations are helpful for honors students with tight schedules.
- Honors program benchmarks: Honors programs have varying requirements for achieving honors. These requirements should be made available to students for the degree-planning workshop.
- The degree-planning worksheet: This is a Word file that has columns for several semesters and rows where students can indicate which classes they have taken or are planning to take along with credit hours. An electronic form is most helpful since it allows for easy modification and sharing while also retaining print capabilities for reference. A blank degree-planning worksheet is available at <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1v4FdmMxRLSnLuwd3a7wuOp3X3MoIv-lo9CH8-TIsOYI/edit?usp=sharing>, and an example of an actual student's first two years of degree planning using the worksheet appears in Figure 1.

## Procedure

The degree-planning workshop includes three classroom sessions. During the first week of the semester, the honors director visits each seminar class for a fifteen-minute session to explain the honors program benchmarks (six general studies honors courses and three seminar courses) along with the honors course rotation. The director shows students how to use the online system listing current and past classes as well as needed future classes. The director also shows students how to find major/minor forms and sample plans. The first assignment for students is to find a major form that most closely matches their intended or potential major and the corresponding

sample plan. Students print these out and bring them to the next session, which takes place the following week.

During the second fifteen-minute session, the honors director shares the degree-planning worksheet electronically with the class and brings hard copies. Students begin by listing all their completed college-level classes in column 1 of the degree plan. Next, they list all their current classes in column 2. The

**FIGURE 1. EXAMPLE OF THE DEGREE-PLANNING WORKSHEET (FIRST TWO YEARS)**

Advisement Graduation Planner					
Date:		Name: Anonymous Student		G#:	
First Major: Psychology		Second Major (If Applicable): Criminal Justice		Minor (If Applicable): Spanish	

  

Semester: High School	Year:	Semester: Fall	Year: 2017	Semester: Spring	Year: 2018
Course	Credits	Course	Credits	Course	Credits
BIO 105	5	ENG 112-03 (HON)	3	PSY 200	3
ENG 210	3	SPA 302-1	3	HON 395-02	2
HIS 010, 140, 150	9	HON 195-02	2	THR 113-80 (HON)	3
PSY 101	3	MAT 112-03	3	SPA 310	3
SPA 100, 101, 200, 201	12	PED 158	1	CHE 104	5
		Griffon Edge	1		
Total Hours	32	Total Hours	13	Total Hours	16

  

Semester:	Year:	Semester: Fall	Year: 2018	Semester: Spring	Year: 2019
Course	Credits	Course	Credits	Course	Credits
		COM 104 (HON)	3	ART 100 (HON)	3
		PED 101 (HON)	3	SOC 110 (HON)	3
		PSY 300	3	PSY 303	3
		PSY core	3	PSY core	3
		PSY core	3	PSY core	3
Total Hours		Total Hours	15	Total Hours	15

director presents a PowerPoint that shows completed and current classes and a sample plan for a hypothetical student, Job Weldon (job well done). This PowerPoint is available at <<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1nfG3M6Vtzgfnrw0LqFO7mTDkDMJcETLyF84fdZ38RxY/edit?usp=sharing>>. The director then shows Job's major form with completed and current classes crossed off followed by the the sample plan with the completed and current classes crossed off. Students are asked to cross off completed classes and current classes on their own forms and then examine what classes remain on their sample plan for the freshman year. Students work on creating a schedule for the following semester during this visit, incorporating at least one honors course. Students are asked to bring all these materials to the third session, which is held during week four or five of the semester.

For the third session, students meet in a computer lab, staffed by our Student Success advisors, the honors director, and the instructor. During this session, students try to plan ahead as far as they can on their degree-planning worksheet. Students can receive guidance from advisors who are knowledgeable in major requirements across several disciplines. This workshop takes place before students visit their assigned advisors within their academic departments to schedule classes for the following term so that they can share the degree-planning document and gain meaningful advice from these advisors as well as the honors director.

Students participate in the workshop as part of their freshman honors seminar class. The goal is to produce a degree-planning document that contains the student's general studies, major, minor, and honors courses for their entire course of study. Each student had access to the fillable Word document, which can be easily shared with academic advisors and modified if need be. Students are not graded on the workshop and do not provide a separate assessment of the workshop.

## RESULTS

The success of the program was measured by comparing two groups of freshmen—the entering classes of 2015 with no workshop and the entering class of 2018 with the workshop—across three variables: enrollment in at least one honors class in the second semester; enrollment in at least one honors class in the third semester, and removal from the honors program within the first three semesters due to lack of progress (LOP). These variables were selected because they could be collected from both groups (the 2018 group had just finished their third semester and were enrolled in their fourth

semester) and the highest percentage of students discontinued participation in the program within the first three semesters.

Chi Square tests of independence comparing enrollment in second- and third-semester honors classes by year of entry and sex indicated no significant differences. The percent of students enrolled in second-semester honors classes increased by 1% when comparing non-workshop to workshop groups (68% versus 69%), and by 3% for students enrolled in third-semester honors classes (53% versus 56%) (see Table 2).

The 2015 and 2018 classes were also compared for removal from the honors program within the first three semesters. Removal occurs as a result of one or more of four criteria: a student's GPA falls below 3.00 for two consecutive semesters; a student does not enroll in honors classes for two consecutive semesters (LOP); a student contacts the honors office requesting to be removed from the honors program (voluntary removal); or a student discontinues enrollment at the university (enrollment). After each semester, students with less than a 3.00 GPA receive an email from the honors office with a warning of their status and encouragement to raise their GPA. Students who do not enroll in honors classes and who have not completed the honors program requirements receive an email encouraging enrollment in at least one honors course. If low GPA or LOP occurs for two consecutive semesters, students are removed from the honors program with one exception: LOP students can indicate plans to complete honors courses even with more than a two-semester lapse, and these students are not removed from the program. Students requesting voluntary removal receive an email from the honors director with a request to ensure careful consideration of removal, but

**TABLE 2. GROUP COMPARISONS BY SEX AND CONTINUED ENROLLMENT**

Enrollment	Sex	2015 (no workshop)			2018 (workshop)		
		Count	n	%	Count	n	%
S2 Enrollment	M	26	40	65%	23	33	70%
	F	25	35	71%	29	42	69%
	Total S2	51	75	68%	52	75	69%
S3 Enrollment	M	21	40	53%	18	33	55%
	F	19	35	54%	24	42	57%
	Total S3	40	75	53%	42	75	56%

*Note.* Count represents number of students enrolled in honors courses. The percent represents the count divided by the number of students in the category. Analyses indicated no significant differences for sex or workshop participation.



students are not required to provide a reason for removal. Students who do not enroll in any classes at the university for one semester are removed but are also contacted by the honors director with encouragement to request reinstatement if they return to the university. All the emails encourage students to meet with the honors director if they would like to discuss their status.

Students from the 2015 and 2018 entering classes who were removed from the program within the first three semesters were compared by group (no workshop vs. workshop) and reason (GPA, LOP, voluntary removal, enrollment) using a Chi Square test of independence. The significant interaction ( $\chi^2 [3] = 22.47, p = < .0001$ ) indicated that reasons for discontinuing the honors program differed by group. To determine which of the reasons showed significant differences, each reason was compared by group using z-tests with adjusted probability values (Bonferroni method) to account for type I error. All four reasons were significantly different when compared by group. The workshop group showed significantly lower tendency to discontinue the honors program due to low GPA or LOP when compared to the non-workshop group. However, the workshop group showed significantly higher tendency to discontinue the honors program due to voluntary removal and enrollment (see Table 3). Both groups showed equivalent numbers of discontinuing the honors program at the end of the third semester, with  $n = 25$  (no workshop) and  $n = 24$  (workshop).

If honors students request removal from the program, they are not required to provide a reason, but they are asked why and often respond. For

**TABLE 3. GROUP BY REASONS NOT RETAINED IN THE HONORS PROGRAM**

Reason		2015	2018	Total
GPA	Count (percent)	11 <sup>a</sup> (84.5%)	2 <sup>b</sup> (15.5%)	13 (100%)
	Expected	6.6	6.4	
LOP	Count (percent)	9 <sup>a</sup> (90%)	1 <sup>b</sup> (10%)	10 (100%)
	Expected	5.1	4.9	
Vol. Rem.	Count (percent)	3 <sup>a</sup> (20%)	12 <sup>b</sup> (80%)	15 (100%)
	Expected	7.7	7.3	
Enrollment	Count (percent)	2 <sup>a</sup> (18.2%)	9 <sup>b</sup> (81.8%)	11 (100%)
	Expected	5.6	5.4	
Total		25 (51%)	24 (49%)	49 (100%)

*Note.* Count indicates the actual number of honors students removed from the program by reason. Column count/percent with different superscripts are significantly different, determined by post-hoc z-tests adjusted for type I error (Bonferroni method).

the three students in the no-workshop group, one provided no reason, one wanted to prioritize classes within the major, and one did not want to pay to take the honors seminars. For the twelve students indicating voluntary removal from the workshop group, four expressed concern about maintaining a good GPA for acceptance into their major program, two wanted to graduate in a timely manner, two stated that none of the honors classes pertained to their major, one noted scheduling problems, one was struggling with maintaining the minimum GPA, one indicated personal reasons, and one did not indicate a reason.

## DISCUSSION

Although honors programs vary in many ways, they have the two fundamental goals in common: to provide an enriching educational experience and to increase student retention (Goodstein & Szarek, 2013). Retention in programs has been challenged by two current trends in education: completion of college classes while attending high school and motivation to complete college degrees in the shortest amount of time possible. These motivations are addressed by the guided pathways model (Bailey et al., 2015) and can be acknowledged by allowing students to register early in order to fit needed classes into their schedule and by helping them map out their future course of study rather than assuming that honors students are good planners who do not need assistance (Clark et al., 2018).

The current research study introduced another way to encourage honors student retention: conducting degree-planning workshops to help them plan out their future course of study. Such workshops were already being held for non-honors students enrolled in University 101 at MWSU by our professional advisement staff, so extending workshops to honors seminars involved minor adjustments to include honors materials. While two well-matched entrance-year honors classes showed no significant differences in second- and third-semester retention in the honors program when non-workshop and workshop students were compared, and while both classes lost approximately 25 students within this time frame, the reasons they were not retained showed significant differences.

Lack of progress (LOP) was specifically targeted in this research. Honors students who are in good standing but do not enroll in honors classes for two semesters are considered LOP. Better planning through the degree-planning workshop was specifically employed to decrease LOP in our program. However, while workshop students showed lower levels of removal due to GPA

and LOP, they showed significantly increased levels of voluntary removal from the honors program and non-continuance at our university. Two questions arise from this finding: Did this increase come about because of participating in the workshop, and is this result positive or negative?

The answer to the first question is possibly yes. The workshop provides a time to discuss the future and how all requirements are going to fit together. By mapping out classes, some students become aware that perhaps the honors requirements are difficult or impossible to meet without extending the time to complete their degree or that they are not willing to complete such requirements. Students who were voluntarily removed expressed concern about maintaining a good GPA to get accepted into their major and wanting to graduate as soon as possible, indicating their awareness of tracking: those who are not accepted into their majors right away face possible delays in graduation. One of the risks of guided pathways is that students will say “no” to honors due to concerns about their progress (Pressler, 2019). This result inspires development of flexible honors programs that can meet educational goals of enrichment without minimizing the honors experience, and it also indicates the need to promote the importance of honors education.

For the second question about whether voluntary removal and non-continuance are negative or positive, the conclusion is most likely positive. LOP is a greater disadvantage to honors programs than voluntary removal because assessing whether students are not progressing takes time and staff. Many honors programs afford benefits to honors students such as scholarships, early enrollment, and honors housing; if students no longer progress in honors but have not been identified as LOP, they may continue to receive undue benefits. Voluntary removal can be handled more efficiently and can also facilitate future course scheduling such as identifying how many seats are needed in honors courses in subsequent semesters.

## **LIMITATIONS AND PLANS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

The analysis presented here represents only the beginning of a long-term research project investigating the benefits of including degree-planning workshops. The study compares students who did not complete a degree-planning workshop with those who had within their first semester at the university and then tracks whether they continued to enroll in honors classes as well as the reasons they left the program. This time frame encompasses when MWSU loses the most students from the honors program, which is within the first three semesters. As the entry year 2018 class continues to progress, other

variables will be available to include in the analysis. One such variable will be achievement of General Studies Honors, in which students complete six of their general studies classes as honors and take three honors seminars, earning A's or B's in these classes and maintaining a minimum GPA of 3.25. Most students complete General Studies Honors within five semesters. Another variable for consideration is earning honors in the major, which is a collaborative venture between the student's department and the honors program that involves additional coursework within both, culminating in an honors thesis and a presentation at a regional or national venue. The current research did not formally assess students' progress in the workshop or ask them to evaluate the workshop, and these variables will also be taken into account with the development of further research.

Future directions also include support, particularly through individual advisement, in staying on track with degree plans. Currently, the honors program does not monitor whether the degree plan has been shared with the students' individual advisors. Beyond creation of the academic plan, tracking and support for following or modifying the plan takes place with the academic advisor, which is the third feature of guided pathways according to Jenkins and Cho (2014). Communication between the honors program and the academic advisors will yield additional variables of study.

## **CONCLUDING STATEMENT**

Including the workshop proved to be beneficial in some ways to our program; it did not yield all the intended results, but it took little effort to implement and encouraged good discussions from students about planning for their future semesters. Honors advisors recognize the importance of degree planning, especially for students entering college with advance credits (Johnson, Walther, & Medley, 2018). In helping these students and others, degree-planning workshops may be one way to focus attention on mapping out honors achievement along with general studies and major classes. Future research will focus on ways honors programs can work within the guided pathways model to promote retention and achievement of honors students.

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