A Meaningful and Useful Twofer: Enhancing Honors Students' Research Experiences While Gathering Assessment Data

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Abstract: Engaging students in assessment practice benefits honors students, faculty, and administrators. Students gain meaningful research experience while honors programs receive data to help assess student learning and prepare for program review. A one-semester course, Program Evaluation Experiences, tasks students (n = 10) with collecting and analyzing data from peers and faculty and then articulating its value for their personal academic development. Qualitative and quantitative instruments and measures include an online survey (*Qualtrics*), personal interviews (*Rev*), and focus groups (rev, n = 30). Students complete various analyses of data using *SPSS* and *NVivo*. Results indicate that students' active participation in applied research methods for program assessment benefits both student and program and, because anchored in student experience, helps to reveal data that might otherwise remain unexpressed. The author asserts that this type of hands-on learning provides honors students with a wide range of practical experience not offered in non-honors curricula. A short history of program assessment in honors is provided.

Keywords: student engagement; high-impact practices; program evaluation; effective teaching; Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

Honors programs and their faculty must devote time and attention to the assessment of student learning despite strong reservations about the value of these efforts given the time and methodology involved (Carnicom and Snyder 2010; Digby 2006; Freyman 2006; Mariz 2006; Otero and Spurrier 2005). Honors students can, however, be actively involved in collecting and analyzing data that the honors program can use to document student

learning and to bolster arguments for administrative support during program reviews. What I describe is, hence, a two-fer: a course that provides meaningful enhancement of students' research skills and that creates data for justifying and improving the honors program.

ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Researchers at the American Sociological Association argue that by 2011–12 the "assessment of student learning was a universal activity for sociology departments" (Spalter-Roth, Kisielewski, and Van Vooren 2013: 11). One assumes that other academic units have had similar experiences because all the regional accrediting bodies for higher education and many of the specialized accrediting bodies mandate that programs document the extent to which students are meeting the learning objectives that faculty establish for them (Ewell, Paulson, and Kinzie 2011). Certainly, honors programs are not immune to this call; in fact, a special issue of the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* fully thirteen years ago included nine essays in its "Forum on Outcomes Assessment, Accountability, and Honors" (cited in Driscoll 2011), and the National Collegiate Honors Council published a monograph on the topic of assessment and evaluation in 2005 (Otero and Spurrier 2005).

Meanwhile, it is an understatement that not all faculty have embraced assessment with enthusiasm. Faculty criticism of assessment focuses on the top-down, bureaucratic nature of many assessment initiatives; on threats to academic freedom in reducing faculty prerogatives to evaluate students learning on their own terms (often by grading); on the extra (uncompensated) work required; on the suspect methodology underlying some data gathering for assessment; on the disconnect between assessment findings and administrative efforts to improve students' experiences; and on the divide between institutions that easily document the success of their already well-prepared students and those that struggle serving students who enroll with limited college preparation (Eubanks 2018; Gilbert 2016; Lederman 2019; Snyder and Carnicom 2011; Worthen 2018). Honors faculty, in particular, are concerned that the kinds of educational growth promoted by honors programs are not easily documented, requiring sophisticated qualitative analyses rather than the more common quantitative analyses and standardized testing found in many assessment studies (Frost 2006). Honors faculty have also argued that the transformational learning resulting from involvement in honors programs is best recognized later in life when students, as graduates, assume positions of civic responsibility (Digby 2006; Freyman 2006; Mariz 2006).

Counterarguments exist, of course, with some authors arguing that the honors community should not just embrace but take the lead on evaluation and assessment, in part as a defense against the imposition of standardized testing (Wilson 2006); Achterberg (2006: 39) argues that "honors cannot survive the future on anecdotal evidence." Several scholars provide concrete suggestions for implementing an assessment program for honors (Wilson and Perrine 2005; Lanier 2008) or for embarking on an effective honors program review (Smith 2015). Jones and Wehlburg argue that we need to know what students are learning "to know what needs to be modified or changed" (2014: 19).

While not ignoring criticism of mandated evaluation efforts, I have argued elsewhere that assessment can be made manageable and meaningful and that the best assessment activities promote student learning by being integrated into the curriculum rather than a burdensome add-on for faculty (Senter 2001). In making this argument, I assumed that students would be the subjects assessed and that assessment activities would be embedded into their existing coursework. For example, in a capstone course, students might complete research projects that faculty would evaluate for assessment purposes. The case I make now, however, is that students can also be directly involved in the creation of assessment instruments and gathering of useful data and that these student-focused activities can form the core of an honors course for undergraduates. Further, students can be guided to gather both qualitative and quantitative assessment data as a lesson in good research practices that use multiple sources. In this way, students are modeling and learning a multi-method program evaluation approach that draws on the strengths of each data-gathering technique. If student involvement in assessment activities can lead to enhanced student learning, then even the most strident critics of assessment might see some positive element in the enterprise.

My semester-long class for honors students, which both introduced them to program evaluation and collected valuable data for program assessment and review, illustrates a positive assessment practice. The two-fer is that while the students engaged in assessment were in a learning-rich setting, the honors program faculty and administrators were relieved of some of the burden of collecting and summarizing assessment data.

THE CONTEXT AND THE COURSE

The Central Michigan University (CMU) Honors Program, founded in 1961, enrolls approximately 800 students or about four percent of the

undergraduate student body. Most students (85%) begin the honors program as first-year students although some students enter the program as transfer students or after completing their first year at CMU through the honors Track II admission process. The honors program, like all academic programs at the university, is required to submit assessment reports each fall, summarizing the assessment data collected in the previous year and outlining any improvements in the program suggested by the data. Every seven years, all programs go through an academic program review process that requires the creation of a detailed self-study, including assessment findings and a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis. The self-study, along with a report from an external reviewer, is submitted for commentary to the relevant dean or vice provost and, in the end, to the provost.

The honors program director is a senior faculty member with reassigned time to administer the program. He has extensive experience working with honors students and conducting research on the experiences of young adults. The program reports jointly to the Honors Council, a faculty/student/staff committee of the Academic Senate, and to the Senior Vice Provost for Academic Affairs.

To graduate with honors, students must complete fifteen hours of honors coursework in addition to an introductory course, first-year seminar, senior project, writing course, and other cultural diversity and service requirements. The fifteen hours of honors coursework can consist of special sections for honors students offered by departments, such as an honors section of Foundations of Cell Biology offered by the biology department or Women and Politics offered by the political science and public administration department. Alternatively, students can complete special topics courses offered by the honors program. Faculty throughout the university, such as myself, can propose these special topics courses and are encouraged to develop courses that would not typically be offered through one academic department. Courses that use high-impact learning practices and include experiential learning activities are most likely to be selected for inclusion in the honors course schedule.

As a sociology faculty member, I usually teach courses in social inequality and research methods required for sociology majors. In spring 2019, I had the opportunity to teach Program Evaluation Experiences, the course discussed here, which was one of four such special topics available in honors. Students were recruited to the class, which counts as three of the required fifteen hours, with a description stressing that program evaluation is "a specialized form of research that is designed to answer questions" and that it allows practitioners

to evaluate whether "the program you run now, or want to run someday, is really doing what it is supposed to." The description stressed that students would be actively engaged in all components of program evaluation "from interviews with key stakeholders to a final presentation of results" and that students would be "given the opportunity to help the honors program address a wide array of questions posed by the Honors Council, honors office, and of course—students themselves." Students were assured that "the results from evaluation activities [would] also be utilized in a more formal program review targeted for completion next year with the goal of improving our program."

The objectives of the course dovetail well with the CMU Honors Mission Statement (Honors 2019), which commits the program to "providing high academic ability students with unique educational opportunities and experiences" and to challenging "students to aim higher and to achieve more academically, personally, and professionally for the greater good of our disciplines, our society, and our world." No honors course focused on program evaluation had been offered in the past, making this course unique. In addition, no class had afforded students the opportunity to assist the honors program by being actively involved in gathering and analyzing data for program review or assessment, allowing them to work for the betterment of the program itself.

Ten students enrolled in the course. They ranged from sophomores to seniors, with eight of the ten students majoring in sociology, psychology, or political science, one student majoring in personal financial planning, and one in philosophy.

The course met in a seminar room twice a week for the sixteen-week semester, with each class period lasting seventy-five minutes. A computer lab was available for some class periods, making it possible for students to learn appropriate software (SPSS for quantitative analysis and NVivo for qualitative analysis) and to work on their final papers. The only constraint on data gathering established by the honors director and me prior to the beginning of the class was that students would conduct a quantitative survey, qualitative interviews, and one or more focus groups.

COURSE OUTLINE AND ACTIVITIES

Pedagogy and Foundational Readings

The pedagogy for the course included a variety of high-impact practices. Students engaged in "collaborative assignments and projects" designed

to help them learn "to work and solve problems in the company of others." Further, they completed real-world "undergraduate research," with the goal of involving them "with actively contested questions, empirical observation, cutting-edge technologies, and the sense of excitement that comes from working to answer important questions." Finally, their activities can be conceptualized as a kind of community-based learning if one defines the honors program as one of these students' relevant communities: students had the opportunity "to both apply what they [were] learning in real-world settings and reflect in a classroom setting on their service experiences" (Kuh 2008).

Given the diverse backgrounds of enrolled students, all students needed a basic background in social science research and, in particular, in the ways that program evaluation—with its applied, real-work focus—differs from traditional academic research. Students were assigned a short textbook that emphasized "small-scale evaluation" (Robson 2017), a primer on conducting online surveys (Sue and Ritter 2012), and a selection of articles on qualitative interviewing (Esterberg 2002), focus groups (Berg 2009), and the honors program itself.

The course began by laying the groundwork for data collection while students worked concurrently to develop the outline of topics to guide their program evaluation. They then worked collaboratively in teams to develop the specifics of their research designs. The last sections of the course focused on data collection, followed by data analysis and report writing.

Laying the Groundwork for Data Collection

Much, but not all, of the class time during the first eight weeks of the course was consumed with lectures and discussion based on the readings. Course topics included:

- what is program evaluation and why do we do it;
- engaging stakeholders;
- ethics and politics;
- types of program evaluation;
- methods of data collection;
- issues of sampling;
- quantitative and qualitative data preparation;

- quantitative and qualitative data analysis (including instruction in SPSS and NVivo); and

- report writing.

The latter topics of data analysis and report writing occurred in the eleventh and twelfth weeks of the course as students were in the process of gathering their quantitative and qualitative data.

Meanwhile, given the constraints of a sixteen-week semester, students needed to begin to design their honors program evaluation while the substantive background was being laid in class. Hence, a tension existed throughout the course between academic preparation or context and the actual activities of conducting an evaluation project (Mallin 2017; Monahan 2015). Students' first assignment, due at the beginning of the third week of class, required them to complete the nationally recognized, online training offered by the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative, which focuses on protecting human research participants.

Creating Outlines of Topics to Guide Program Evaluation

Given the open-ended nature of the evaluation, students needed to develop an outline of topics that would govern their efforts. In addition, they needed to remain aware that they were conducting a real-world evaluation for a real client. While the client for this evaluation was the honors program, students needed to think through the issue of who, besides the honors director, the clients were. Through brainstorming in class, they developed a list of clients that included faculty and staff who were members of the Honors Council and the associate directors and staff of the honors program. Students were not viewed as clients at this point in the process because their opinions and experiences would be captured through the surveys, interviews, and focus groups. Senior administrators such as the provost were not seen as clients because they already had substantial input into the organization of program reviews and the necessary components of the required self-study. Non-honors students, faculty, and staff were not included because of time constraints although their absence led to a useful discussion about the limitations of the evaluation.

Then, working in teams of two, students completed two or three interviews of clients, who were asked what they would like to know about the honors program as well as topics, if any, that should not be included because the information was already available or because of political issues within the

institution. I compiled the students' work into a single document and distributed it to them.

By the beginning of the fifth week of the semester, students completed a summary of the "questions/topics that interest many of our clients," the "questions/topics that interest a client but . . . that we really cannot address through this class," and additional topics/questions that they themselves would like to answer. For each general topic, the students were asked whether a student, faculty member, staff member, or administrator was "in a position to answer the question that the client would like answered." They were also asked whether it would "be best to gather this information through a survey that yields quantitative data ('which category fits you best') or through more open-ended qualitative methodologies such as focus groups or qualitative interviews (that yield more extensive text)." Again, the responses from all students were compiled, and class time focused on finalizing the draft topic outline along with the methodology to address each topic. The Honors Council then reviewed the draft outline, and the honors director approved it.

Collaborative Methods Design

Students were then assigned to one of three groups, defined by the quantitative, data-gathering methodology of an online survey of honors students, qualitative interviews with honors students, or focus groups with honors students and honors faculty. Students met with their group to assign the following tasks with due dates:

- to develop a budget;
- to flesh out a specific topic outline for their data gathering;
- to secure the sample necessary for gathering relevant data;
- to write drafts of invitations to respondents to participate in the project; and
- to write a first draft of the questionnaire, focus group guide, or qualitative interview guide.

Their first group project demonstrating that these tasks had been completed was due by the end of the eighth week of the class, just before our week-long spring break. Students chose to create GoogleDocs, making it easy for them to share their work with one another and for me to comment on it. I worked closely with each group, helping to ensure approval of the relevant budget from the honors director and helping to secure the relevant samples from honors

program staff. I commented extensively on their work so that they were in a good position to make changes when they returned from spring break.

The first tasks after spring break were to execute the changes that I had proposed. In particular, they needed to finalize a working draft of their questionnaire, interview guide, or focus group guide; finalize communication (including informed consent documents) with their respondents/participants; and secure relevant materials (e.g., recorders and water bottles). Class time was used to provide updates on the progress of each group and to work through solutions to dilemmas that arose as students finalized their data-collection plans.

Students then pre-tested and reviewed the work of the two groups to which they did not belong. By the beginning of the tenth week of the semester, they completed an assignment that discussed "the strong points of what is being proposed," "what should be changed" or "is problematic," and "what is missing, given our earlier interviews with our clients and the preferences of students" enrolled in the class. I shared the responses with the student groups in short order so that they could complete their second group project by the end of the tenth week of the semester. This second report was largely confirmation that they had made the revisions requested by me and their peers and that they had completed the work necessary actually to implement their surveys, interviews, or focus groups, including informed consent documents and invitations to research participants.

Quantitative and Qualitative Data Collection

Students then had a two-week period to collect their data. The honors director facilitated this process by writing an email to all honors students telling them to expect communications from their peers about how they could help the honors program by completing one or more evaluation activities. The survey group then sent invitations and subsequent reminders to all honors students asking them to complete the online survey developed through the software package Qualtrics. In the end, 380 questionnaires were completed out of a total of 727 for a fine response rate of 52.5 percent. In addition to demographics, the questionnaire consisted of questions on topics such as these:

- knowledge of program requirements;

- confidence in completing the requirements;

- perceptions of the meaningfulness of each of the requirements "to your personal development";

- ease or difficulty in securing faculty support;

- the difficulties and the meaningfulness of the senior (capstone) project and of other honors classes;

- levels of satisfaction with honors resources and advising;

- the extent of belonging to the honors community; and

- issues related to differences, if any, between the experiences of students beginning the honors program in their first year of college and those joining through the Track II admission process.

The qualitative interview group completed fourteen interviews with honors students, half of whom began the program as first-year students and half joining the program later in their college careers. The interviews were recorded and transcribed professionally by the online service Rev. The interview guide asked for a discussion of the ways the honors program had been "meaningful to you"; the ways, if any, that students felt connected to the honors community; and the ways that honors experiences were different "from what you were expecting." Questions also focused on the introductory course, the diversity requirement, and the senior (capstone) project.

The group charged with conducting focus groups completed three group discussions: one with faculty members; one with students admitted to the honors program as first-year students who had either completed their capstone project or had an approved capstone proposal; and one with students who were admitted to the program through the Track II process. I facilitated a fourth focus group during class time of the students enrolled in the course, the purpose of which was both to collect data and to model good focus group practice. In the end, nineteen students (including members of the class) and eleven faculty members participated in the focus group discussions. The focus group guide for students included many of the questions posed in the qualitative interviews; however, the guide for students admitted to the honors program after their first year of college included questions on why they chose to join the honors program, and the guide for advanced students beginning the program in their first year placed more emphasis on experiences with the senior project. The faculty focus group guide focused on the positive and challenging aspects of working with honors students and with the honors program itself. Faculty were also queried about differences, if any, between the students admitted to the program for their first year and those admitted later in their collegiate career.

Data Analysis and Report Writing

The final three weeks of the semester were devoted to data analysis and report writing by each of the three groups. Students worked with their groups during the regularly scheduled class time, and I was available to provide feedback and support. Students used the software package SPSS to analyze the survey data and the software package NVivo to help with analysis of the qualitative interviews and student focus groups. I wrote the report on the faculty focus group discussion since it was too much to expect those students who had fielded focus groups to complete two separate reports.

EVALUTION OF THE COURSE

There are two ways to evaluate the success of this kind of honors course: assessing the work that students produced and analyzing student feedback on the experience. Both the honors director, a client for our work, and I were impressed with the quantity and quality of the students' work. At the final meeting of the class during the week designated for exams, the director thanked the students for their efforts and noted the utility of their work both for assessment and program review and for ongoing efforts to improve the program. I was also pleased with the quality and outcomes of their work. I had not been convinced at the outset of the course that students would be able to complete all components of a small-scale evaluation; I was sure that they would succeed in collecting data, but I was not confident that they would be able to execute final reports summarizing their findings in the time allowed. The students succeeded well beyond my expectations.

Students provided feedback on the course in three ways: the university's standard end-of-course evaluation instrument, the honors program's end-of-course evaluation instrument, and an open-ended discussion with the director and me during the final meeting of the course. While the students were not asked directly to comment on their learning in the university instrument, they were asked to choose one of five Likert scale agree/disagree categories, including the neutral "agree nor disagree" in response to the statement "The instructor's teaching helped me learn." Seven of the ten students reported "strongly agree" and three selected "agree" for this question, providing a mean score of 3.7 (with "strongly agree" coded as 4 and "strongly disagree" as 0).

The honors program's instrument links directly to its mission and asks students "To what degree do you feel this honors course offered unique educational opportunities and experiences compared to a non-honors course?"

Responses were recorded on a 5-point semantic differential scale with 1 equal to "not at all" and 5 equal to "very much." Seven students chose the highest option to record their response while three students chose option 4, resulting in a mean score of 4.7. Students' comments following this question provided useful insight into what students found appealing about the experience. Comments included:

- I like the opportunity to be actively involved in real program evaluation.

- I think the program evaluation opportunity itself is unique, and I really enjoyed that I was able to both learn and practice different research methods.

- Having the ability to evaluate the honors program was a very unique opportunity, and one that I don't feel other programs or institutions would offer.

- How lucky I am to be able to lead a focus group session with honors faculty! An experience most will not get.

The emphasis on active and applied learning experiences in the course was also reflected in the students' final class day discussion. I began the discussion by noting the tension between learning about program review and doing it. I then asked students what they found to be the most valuable component of the course. The comments below are paraphrases, rather than verbatim transcriptions, from their discussion:

- I adore honors. This was my opportunity to help out. Diving in helped more than the textbook.

- The bigger component was the act of doing; it was very beneficial to me.

- Walking through an entire project—actually executing the project was valuable.

- The course was very valuable for me; it was practical for me.

- I'm interested to see where this goes—there was beneficial hands-on learning. I could see my skills improving.

- This was an interesting class to take—the background and doing and analyzing.

Some students also directly noted the benefits of learning more about social science research methodology:

- I gained insight into the methods and paradigms in social science. It was cool to learn new things.

- I learned more about honors. This changed my ideas about research.

DISCUSSION

Two points are clear: within a single semester, honors students can have valuable learning experiences while engaging in meaningful data collection and analysis; and such data can prove useful to honors programs as they seek to assess their programs and make improvements. Involving students directly in some kinds of assessment-related data collection can also have methodological advantages. Honors students whose experiences are being assessed might be more willing fully to share their views (the negative as well as the positive) with fellow honors students than with honors faculty or staff. Similarly, honors students might be especially aware of the ways that experiences outside of the classroom, for example in the residence halls, impact the honors learning experience and, therefore, might be able to craft even quantitative survey questions to address such issues.

Meanwhile, some cautionary notes are appropriate as well. First, class size and the composition of the class matter. It would be difficult to execute a multi-modal data collection plan with fewer than ten students and logistically challenging with more than eighteen. Teamwork and feedback to the teams were essential. Too few students would make multiple successful teams impossible, and too many students would hinder the instructor from providing timely and useful feedback. It also would be beneficial if all students in the course had completed some kind of statistics or research methodology course prior to enrolling although the diversity of student backgrounds and fields of study was advantageous when assigning students to take the lead on specific tasks, e.g., statistical analysis as opposed to report writing.

Second, this kind of course requires a substantial time commitment from the instructor to accomplish essential tasks: ensuring the necessary on-time feedback to students; trouble-shooting and assisting students with navigating the university bureaucracy, e.g., securing the sample; processing the gift cards used as incentives/thanks to the interview participants; and organizing the class so that both content instruction and application can occur within the confines of a single semester. Students recognized the importance of these tasks, with all strongly agreeing that "the instructor was accessible to students" (mean score = 4.0 of a possible 4.0) and nine of ten strongly agreeing that "the instructor seemed well prepared" (mean score = 3.9).

Third, given the press of completing data collection, analysis, and report writing, I had to abandon my initial plan to administer a content exam based on the readings and first weeks' class discussion. Consequently, I cannot be certain that all students mastered some basic methodological content and skills; such skills might include calculating the margin of error from a probability sample of a specific size or articulating the conditions when "matching" the characteristics of an interviewer and research participant is or is not desirable when collecting qualitative data. Another issue is the tension between "covering" content and applying it although requiring a statistics prerequisite, for instance, might alleviate this tension. Although a full content exam completed by students during a class period or at home would be ideal, instructors with time limitations might consider administering a short pretest on the first day of class followed by a short post-test later in the semester to gauge content learning.

More generally, the data collection activities in which students were engaged provided more indirect than direct measures of student learning. Honors student survey respondents and the participants in qualitative interviews and focus groups self-reported on ways the honors program provided meaningful learning experiences. They reflected on the extent to which the honors program was meeting its goals and on the ways the program could be improved. Other data collection efforts are necessary and underway to evaluate the quality of, for example, senior projects. Nevertheless, the research reports students provided to their client could be independently evaluated by faculty for direct assessment purposes.

The constraints outlined above are not insurmountable, and other honors programs and their students might benefit from designing a similar honors course. We hope to offer the course again although we will work with a client other than the honors program. Using this model, other programs in which honors students participate, e.g., study abroad, can gain assistance with their evaluation and assessment efforts while enhancing the learning of honors students.

CONCLUSIONS

Honors programs are under pressure from numerous stakeholders to collect data on student learning. Honors faculty and staff are committed to improving the honors experience. Both of these goals can be accomplished by undergraduate honors students, who can successfully collect and analyze quantitative and qualitative data from their peers within the context of

a semester-long course. This type of hands-on learning and the execution of a real, applied program evaluation project provided honors students at CMU with a range of experiences that they could not receive in non-honors courses. While not eliminating the criticism of assessment that exists in the literature and that is voiced on many campuses, an assessment project that enhances students' experiences and saves valuable faculty and staff time is worthwhile on its own terms. Many features of the course outlined here could be replicated on other campuses, benefiting both the honors program and, most importantly, its students.

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