

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Journal of the National Collegiate Honors  
Council –Online Archive

National Collegiate Honors Council

---

2013

## They Come But Do They Finish? Program Completion for Honors Students at a Major Public University, 1998–2010

Lynne Goodstein

*The University of Connecticut*

Patricia Szarek

*The University of Connecticut*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nhcjournal>



Part of the [Gifted Education Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

---

Goodstein, Lynne and Szarek, Patricia, "They Come But Do They Finish? Program Completion for Honors Students at a Major Public University, 1998–2010" (2013). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council –Online Archive*. 398.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nhcjournal/398>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the National Collegiate Honors Council at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council –Online Archive by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

# They Come But Do They Finish? Program Completion for Honors Students at a Major Public University, 1998–2010

LYNNE GOODSTEIN AND PATRICIA SZAREK

THE UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT

In recent years the option of enrolling in honors programs and colleges at major public universities has increasingly become an alternative to elite private and public institutions for some of the brightest and most academically talented high school graduates. To attract these high-achieving students, universities may offer applicants incentives such as merit scholarships, smaller classes, honors residential options, research experiences, and enrichment programs. The message to prospective students is that, by enrolling in an honors college or program, they will receive an education that rivals what would be obtained at an elite private school and at a much lower price. A consequence of this message is that, in many cases, honors programs and colleges have increasingly become a separate brand, differentiated from the larger institution as more elite and selective while delivering an enhanced educational product.

Despite controversy within the honors community about elitism as a good or bad thing for honors programs and their students (Herron; Weiner), honors programs and colleges are increasingly becoming an enrollment tool to recruit high-achieving students to public universities. A place in an honors program (a term that will include honors colleges hereafter) may tip the balance for plum college prospects who would not consider attendance at a public university without the "honors" cachet. Surveys of honors freshmen suggest that about half would have matriculated elsewhere if they had not been offered a place in the honors program (Goodstein, "A 40-year-old honors program").

The argument in favor of honors education at public universities is becoming even more persuasive as the volume of public discourse on the cost of college continues upward in the popular media (Lemann). In their recruitment pitches, universities emphasize that for high-achieving students, educational costs are likely to extend beyond the four undergraduate years to include graduate or professional-school tuitions and expenses. Therefore, enrolling in

a public university's honors program enables students to conserve funds for later or share them with other deserving family members.

## **TWO GOALS OF HONORS EDUCATION: ACADEMIC ENRICHMENT AND ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT**

The messages directed at high-achieving prospective students and their families focus on what has been the most broadly discussed goal of honors education: academic enrichment. Anne Rinn (37) quotes a review of the first United States honors program at Swarthmore College, which states that it provided students with “the incentive to excellence, freedom from cramping restrictions, intimate faculty-student relationships, the demand for self-activity in education, emphasis on substance rather than credits, and the correlation of knowledge” (Brewster, 510). As honors programs have proliferated, even though they are typically more costly for universities to provide, they have been defined as a means for high-achieving students to receive enhanced learning experiences matched to their intellectual abilities (Guzy).

The goal of academic enhancement is consistent with the enrollment management goal of increasing the overall quality of the undergraduate student population by seeding it with a higher proportion of excellent students. Lanier, Pehlke, and Goodstein (“A 40-year-old honors program”) have each written about the pressures from higher administrations to improve a university's rankings in, for instance, *U.S. News and World Report* by admitting a larger proportion of high-achieving students to the freshman class. Sederberg describes the trend among public universities to make honors programs more attractive by converting them into what some institutions view as more elite honors colleges.

Honors programs are a logical target for enhancement by universities motivated to improve the academic quality of their undergraduate populations because honors admissions criteria are often the same as the metrics used in national rankings. The input measures of national rankings—such as standardized test scores, high school grade point averages, and class rank—are frequently determining factors for admission to an honors program. Recruiting more students with strong academic backgrounds results in higher average scores on these critical institutional metrics for the entering freshman class.

Beyond their impact on the profile of the entering class, the presence of high-achieving students has a positive impact on the overall level of student success. Rather than focusing on input measures such as standardized test scores, universities are increasingly evaluated for their effectiveness in retaining and graduating their students. College persistence and completion have been the focus of extensive theoretical discussion (Pascarella and Terenzini; Tinto)

and empirical research (Astin) in efforts to identify predictors. Some of the most significant predictors of both persistence and completion are the same measures used to admit students to honors programs (Astin; Beecher and Fisher; Smith Edminster and Sullivan). Therefore, honors programs are likely to provide universities with the ability to retain and graduate students at higher overall rates.

The two goals—improving overall retention/graduation rates and providing academic enrichment—would seem to be in close alignment. After all, if highly sought-after academic achievers enter an honors program, the general assumption is that they will remain at the university through graduation at least in part because of their enriched academic lives in honors. If academically talented students were not retained and did not graduate at higher rates than non-honors students, the first goal would not be achieved. If honors students dropped out prior to completing all honors requirements, thus not taking full advantage of honors enrichment opportunities, the second goal would not be achieved.

Our examination of these two goals and their interconnection first requires exploration of existing knowledge about the impact of honors recruitment on overall university retention and graduation rates. We will next provide a review of what is known about honors program completion, and then we will focus on a study we have been involved in that directs special attention to the question of whether rates of program completion can be altered through efforts to improve program quality.

## **UNIVERSITY RETENTION AND GRADUATION RATES AMONG HONORS AND NON-HONORS STUDENTS**

No published studies have explicitly assessed the impact of honors on overall retention and graduation, but some studies compare honors and non-honors students. As would be expected, when statistical controls are not applied, honors students do persist in college and graduate at higher levels than the general population of undergraduates. Pflaum, Pascarella and Duby, studying one-year retention rates without controlling for academic variables, reported higher rates for students enrolled in an honors program (417). Slavin, Colardaci and Pratt also reported higher one-year retention rates for students who had completed honors requirements than for non-honors students (64–65).

A stronger argument for the value of honors education requires the use of statistical controls to compare retention and graduation rates among similarly situated honors and non-honors students. One would expect that involvement in an honors program would result in students experiencing greater institutional retention and graduation than similarly situated peers who do not receive

the benefits of an honors education. A few studies address this question, and the results are mixed. Controlling for SAT and high school rank, Slavin et. al report that participation in an honors college increases the likelihood of one-year retention but does not increase the likelihood of graduation (67). Wolgemuth et al., in a large-scale multivariate study of retention and graduation predictors at a public research university, found that participation in honors did not show a difference in one- and two-year retention rates but *reduced* the likelihood of retention in the third and fourth years, possibly because high-achieving students were more likely to transfer (468–69). Like Slavin et al., they found that participation in honors was not related to the likelihood of graduation, controlling for demographic and academic variables.

It is somewhat surprising that existing studies have not found stronger and more consistent impacts of honors programs on retention and graduation. The reasons for these results are unclear and should be studied further, especially since the growth of honors programs has been predicated to some degree on their promise in improving overall undergraduate retention and graduation metrics.

## **RETENTION AND COMPLETION WITHIN HONORS PROGRAMS**

Even if the honors experience has not been empirically associated with retention and graduation likelihood, other more proximate and positive impacts of program membership may occur. An important longitudinal study of eighteen four-year colleges and universities located in fifteen states (Seifert, Pascarella, Colangelo and Assouline 65–66) assessed the impact of honors program membership during the first year of college. Controlling for high school involvement, place of residence during college, type of first-year coursework, work responsibilities, and the institutions attended, Seifert et al. found that honors program participation during the first year in college resulted in positive effects on cognitive development and on constituent mathematics and critical thinking scores. They also reported that, compared with non-honors students, honors program students reported more exposure to six of twenty established good practices in undergraduate education (Chickering and Gamson), including the use of higher-order questioning techniques, the amount of assigned reading, and instructional skill and clarity (66). They found that honors students' relative cognitive gains could not be explained by their exposure to enhanced academic practices but that "honors participation may have a unique quality that is not captured in [their] prediction model" (71). This scientifically robust study is the most comprehensive yet to document that participation in an honors program has measurable, tangible educational benefits for high-achieving students. However, the data used in the

study were dated, having been collected in the early 1990s. Also, the honors “value added” described in the study covered only the first year of college life. Most honors administrators have traditionally focused the honors curriculum on the freshman year, when program elements such as special honors sections of regular courses, honors general education courses, and honors freshman seminars are especially well supported (Braid 31). Honors participation is likely to be greatest during the first year, when students may be automatically enrolled in honors courses during the orientation process. Most university honors programs extend over a four-year period, however. Therefore, a longer time frame is important to understanding the honors experience.

Student involvement in honors is also a crucial consideration. Students can receive benefits of membership only if they actively use the services available to them. Some students may accept a spot in an honors program because of encouragement from parents or as a credential for their résumés but then not take full advantage of the opportunities offered to them. Worse, they may do the minimum so that they can remain freeloaders in the program for as long as possible, enjoying the perquisites of membership while avoiding the responsibilities. Students who are not fully involved in the curriculum or programming of honors programs cannot obtain all the academic, intellectual, social, or cultural benefits available.

Perhaps more important are the university-wide implications of non- or under-participating honors students in the form of empty seats in honors classes or less than full audiences for a program’s offerings. An opportunity cost occurs when other honors-eligible students who would have been fully participating members were not admitted to the program due to a lack of space.

Ultimately, underperforming honors students are most likely to drop out or be dismissed from the program for their failure to fulfill requirements in coursework or thesis completion. This non-completion, as Campbell and Fuqua (2008–09) note,

... carries personal, family, and institutional consequences. An element of pride and self-worth is associated with a new college student’s acceptance into an honors program and the accompanying label of ‘honors student.’ When a student ceases to participate in the program and the label is removed, feelings of academic-related inadequacy and family disappointment often result. (130)

Beyond the impact of dropping out on the individual, a collective student failure to persist in and complete honors programs has broader institutional consequences. Nonparticipation or minimal participation of honors students is the honors equivalent of poor overall university retention and graduation rates.

## THEY COME BUT DO THEY FINISH?

Just as a high rate of persistence through four, five, or six years, leading to graduation from the university, is viewed as an indicator of academic success for the institution, persistence in good standing and a high graduation rate in honors are indicators of a successful program. These metrics are essential tools for assessment. Completion of demanding coursework, exposure to stimulating speakers and other programs, and completion of an honors thesis are evidence of success in honors, constituting good practices in undergraduate education (Chickering and Gamson) and high impact educational practices (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates).

The question of retention and completion rates within honors programs has received even less research attention than the impact of honors on overall university retention and graduation rates. A handful of published studies have focused on predictors of honors student success that include honors program completion. A study of 402 honors student records at Marquette University found that high school grade point average and SAT math scores were the most effective predictors of honors program completion (McDonald & Gawkoski 412). McKay studied 1,017 students entering the University of North Florida honors program from 2002 through 2005 and found that high school grade point average was the strongest predictor of program completion controlling for other variables (82).

Cosgrove focused on whether active involvement in an honors program is associated with overall retention and graduation success. He investigated academic performance and time to degree for three groups: honors program completers, non-completers, and high-ability non-honors students who entered three public comprehensive universities in Pennsylvania. He found that students who completed honors programs had higher academic performance and shorter time to degree than both partial completers and high-ability non-honors students. Hence, students who completed their honors requirements demonstrated greater academic success than students who began but did not complete honors.

The most comprehensive study of retention and program completion among honors students was conducted by Campbell and Fuqua. The focus of their study was predictors of student completion of an honors program at a major Midwestern research university. Researchers examined the most effective variables in discriminating among three groups: honors program completers, partial completers, and non completers. Campbell and Fuqua found that high school GPA, class rank, first-semester college GPA, gender, and freshman honors housing were the most important predictors of program completion.

## **HONORS PROGRAM COMPLETION: DIRTY LITTLE SECRET?**

While the research we have reviewed has focused primarily on identifying predictors of academic success among honors students, these studies also provide data that address a more fundamental question: once students are recruited into an honors program, do they stay? The answer to this question is a cause for concern because the completion rates reflected in published studies are relatively low. Of the 113 honors students in Cosgrove's study, only 30, or 27%, completed program requirements (47). Much the same picture is seen in Campbell and Fuqua's and in McKay's findings. In Campbell and Fuqua's study, of the 336 freshmen who entered the honors program only 62, or 18.45%, completed all honors degree requirements by the end of five years (139). An additional 73, or 22%, completed the General Honors Award while 201 (60%) earned no honors awards (139). McKay reported that 35% of the 1,017 students he studied completed the program (80). In summary, published findings on honors program completion indicate that a minority of students who begin as honors scholars ultimately graduate as honors scholars.

The limited discussion in the literature of honors program completion may suggest some reluctance to address this delicate topic. Program completion, like overall university retention and graduation, reflects program success in influencing students' lives. High dropout or failure rates suggest that a program may (a) not select the students best-suited for its offerings, (b) not offer sufficiently attractive curricular and co-curricular elements to keep students engaged in honors, (c) require too much from students, or (d) all of the above. Whatever the reasons, low completion rates entail significant costs to the students recruited into honors programs, the faculty who teach in them, and the university that invests resources in creating and sustaining them.

Honors program completion is a frequent topic of conversation among honors directors and deans at professional meetings, where they willingly discuss their school's rate with colleagues, but the paucity of published information suggests a reluctance to go on record. Some schools may claim higher rates than those in published studies, but the published information indicates that completion rates at many United States honors programs and colleges are in the 30% range. To the extent that the majority of students who begin in honors programs do not complete them, this situation could be a "dirty little secret" of honors enrollment management.

## **PROGRAM FACTORS AFFECTING HONORS RETENTION AND COMPLETION**

Improving completion rates requires an understanding of the factors that have a positive influence on completion. The studies above point to indicators used during the admissions process, but these predictors are—or are highly correlated with—the same input variables already used in many honors admission decisions. Therefore, while these studies are important efforts to shed light on an understudied subject, they offer little help in identifying strategies that may result in increased program completion rates. Both Cosgrove and Campbell and Fuqua acknowledge that, theoretically at least, retention and completion in honors should be associated with specific program characteristics; yet the only variable so far found to be related to program completion is availability of freshman housing (Campbell and Fuqua).

Among honors programs nationally, wide variability exists in specific admissions criteria; curricular, program and residential offerings; academic and participation criteria for remaining in good standing; and academic, curricular, and independent research requirements for earning official recognitions. In the absence of an accrediting for honors, the primary means of promoting some degree of standardization are documents published by the National Collegiate Honors Council outlining “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program” and a similar document for honors colleges. At the same time, honors programs pride themselves in their unique offerings, climate, and character, so considerable variation occurs in how or if the NCHC guidelines are followed.

Once an honors program has done its best to recruit the most academically able cohort, it can take positive actions to ensure that students complete the program. Programmatic initiatives such as honors housing and promotion of honors community through student organizations, community service, and effective co-curricular programming may strengthen students’ identification with honors and reinforce awareness of honors requirements. On the curricular side, availability of coursework for fulfilling honors requirements, informed honors advising, and clear communication of roadmaps for fulfilling requirements may foster retention and completion. Merit scholarships can also provide incentive for completion by attracting students who might not otherwise attend the institution; if such scholarships are tied to program participation, the threat of losing them provides strong motivation for students to stay in the program.

Honors requirements also influence rates of honors retention and completion. Most honors programs require students to maintain a minimum grade point average, but that standard ranges widely across schools. Some require enrollment in a specified number of honors credits per year while others simply

assess credit completion when students near graduation. Some programs require the completion of an honors thesis or project while others allow students to participate in a capstone course or other non-thesis option (Sederberg). One could cynically argue that, the less that is required of students academically to remain in and complete the program, the greater the likelihood that they will complete it. On the other hand, by definition, an honors education is expected to be academically rigorous and challenging, and most faculty members and students involved in honors education expect standards to be set high.

The study of program completion, therefore, should include consideration of the demands upon students who persist through the years and seek to complete honors programs. McKay's study of University of North Florida honors students is illustrative: to complete the UNF honors program, students needed to have earned fourteen honors credits in a variety of class types, including a one-credit portfolio class, and to have a 3.0 cumulative GPA (80). Some honors administrators would consider the absence of a thesis requirement and the 3.0 threshold a low bar for honors program completion. Nevertheless, only 35% of incoming honors students from 2002 through 2005 completed the program. One would imagine that more rigorous standards—higher grade point averages, more demanding annual participation requirements, higher numbers of required honors credits, and a mandatory honors thesis—would present significant obstacles to high levels of program completion.

A strategy used by some universities that may be related to program completion rates is the mid-career honors award. This award recognizes students' fulfillment of honors coursework and other requirements during their first two years, generally prior to engaging more deeply in work in the major and independent research. How this mid-career award influences retention or, more importantly, four-year completion is unclear. Some students may view the mid-career award as an appropriate stopping point and be less likely to persist in honors. On the other hand, working toward the mid-career award might result in students becoming more engaged in the honors community and more knowledgeable about the benefits of honors, thus increasing a student's likelihood of full program completion.

## **A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF HONORS RETENTION AND PROGRAM COMPLETION**

A 2013 study by Goodstein, Szarek, and Wunschel focused on rates of retention and completion—for both mid-career and end-of-career awards—among multiple cohorts of entrants to an honors program at a mid-sized, public, research-extensive, land-grant, residential university in the north-eastern United States. Given the few published studies on this topic, none with as extensive a study population, this work is valuable in providing baseline

## THEY COME BUT DO THEY FINISH?

data to other institutions pondering their own retention and completion rates. The study followed multiple cohorts of entrants throughout their college careers, thus enabling researchers to track changes in retention and graduation rates over time.

The 3,810 participants in this study consisted of thirteen cohorts of freshmen entering the university's honors program during the fall terms from 1998 through 2010. The incoming classes ranged in size from 205 in 1998 to 443 in 2010. The research design was longitudinal: within each cohort, students were tracked from entry for up to six years or until graduation, whichever came first.

Requirements for continuation in the program were moderately rigorous. To remain in good standing and to be eligible for honors awards, students were required to earn at least a 3.2 grade point average until 2007 and a 3.4 for students entering in subsequent years. (A sliding scale allowed students early in their careers time to be placed on probation rather than being dismissed.) Students were also required to enroll in at least one honors course per year to meet the participation requirement.

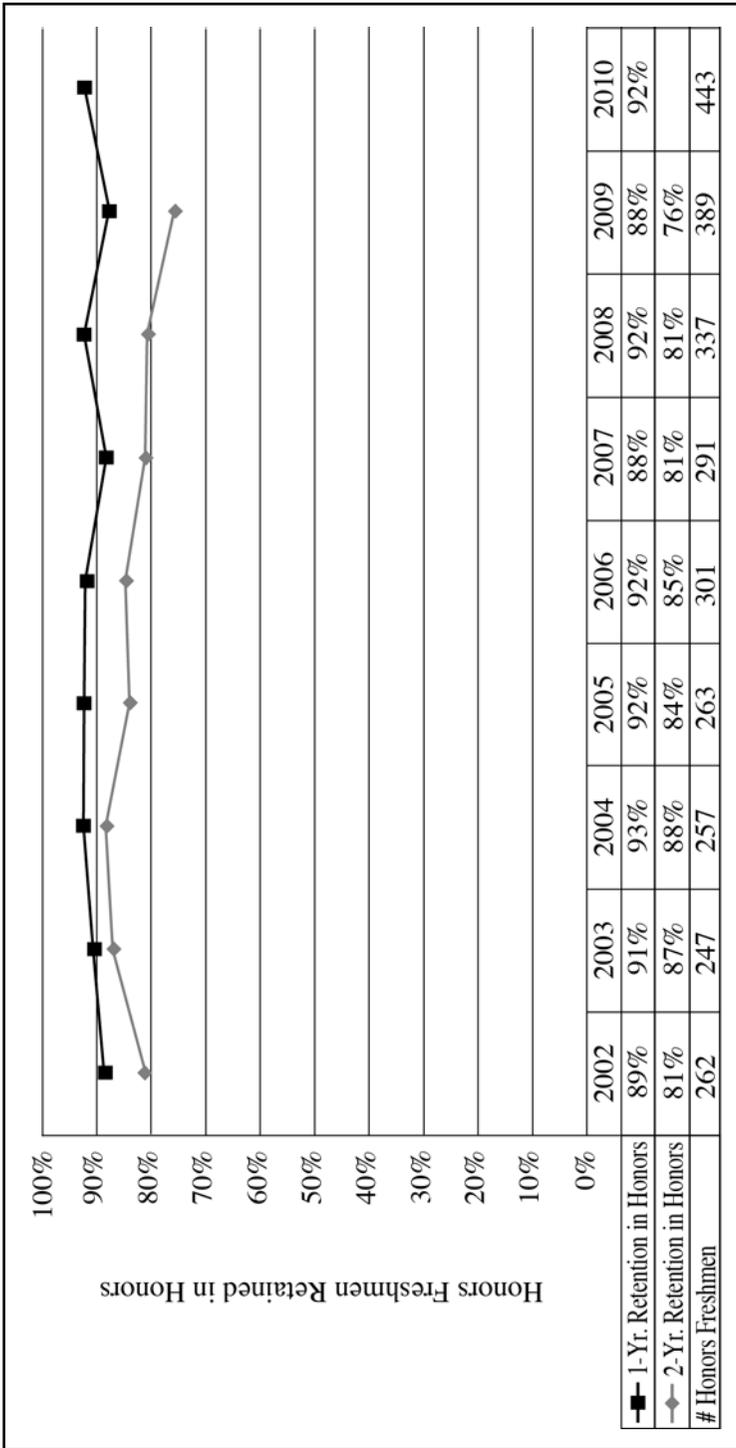
The university offered a mid-career award (sophomore honors) and an end-of-career award (graduation as an honors scholar). To earn sophomore honors, students needed to have the requisite GPA, complete 16–18 honors course credits, and participate in a specified number of honors co-curricular events. To graduate as an honors scholar, students needed to be in good standing in the honors program, earn at least twelve honors credits related to the major, fulfill any additional departmental requirements, and complete an honors thesis.

Beginning in 2003, year six of the study period, the honors program implemented a strategic plan for improving the quality of the honors experience for students. These efforts took many forms, including the development of interdisciplinary core courses, significant revision and expansion of a freshman seminar program, mandatory honors housing for first-year students, expanded upper-class housing, enhanced honors advising, honors study abroad programs, and expansion of co-curricular cultural, intellectual, and social programs as well as increased student involvement in honors student organizations. These interventions and the availability of comparable data across all cohorts created a natural experiment enabling researchers to compare rates of program completion before and after implementation of the interventions.

### **DID THEY STAY?: RATES OF RETENTION IN THE HONORS PROGRAM**

Figure 1 illustrates the proportion of students in the 2002 to 2010 cohorts who were enrolled in the honors program by their second and third years, respectively. To qualify as retained, a student must have maintained the

Figure 1: 1- & 2-Year Retention in Honors for Students Entering as Honors Freshmen, 2002–2010



## THEY COME BUT DO THEY FINISH?

requisite GPA and level of participation and not have voluntarily withdrawn. The one-year honors retention rate ranged from 88% and 92%; the two-year retention rate ranged from 76% and 88%. These rates of retention are quite high, suggesting that the large majority of each entering cohort were both academically able and motivated to remain as members in the honors program into their junior years.

The fact that such high numbers of students remained in the honors program into their junior years and were thus retained at the university for those periods counters the arguments made by Wolgemuth et al. that high-achieving students may not receive the level of academic challenge and engagement at a public research university that they expect or that is consistent with their academic and leadership abilities. Others have speculated that honors students may enroll in a public university because they were not admitted to or could not afford an elite school, then transfer to a more prestigious institution for their junior and senior years. We found that, in some cases, the decision to transfer is a strategic one that does not necessarily reflect poorly on the quality of education at the sending university. A handful of students in the study cohorts made strategic decisions to leave; for example, one student transferred to a nearby ivy-league institution to concentrate on international relations, a major that the public institution did not offer.

### **DID THEY FINISH?: RATES OF PROGRAM COMPLETION**

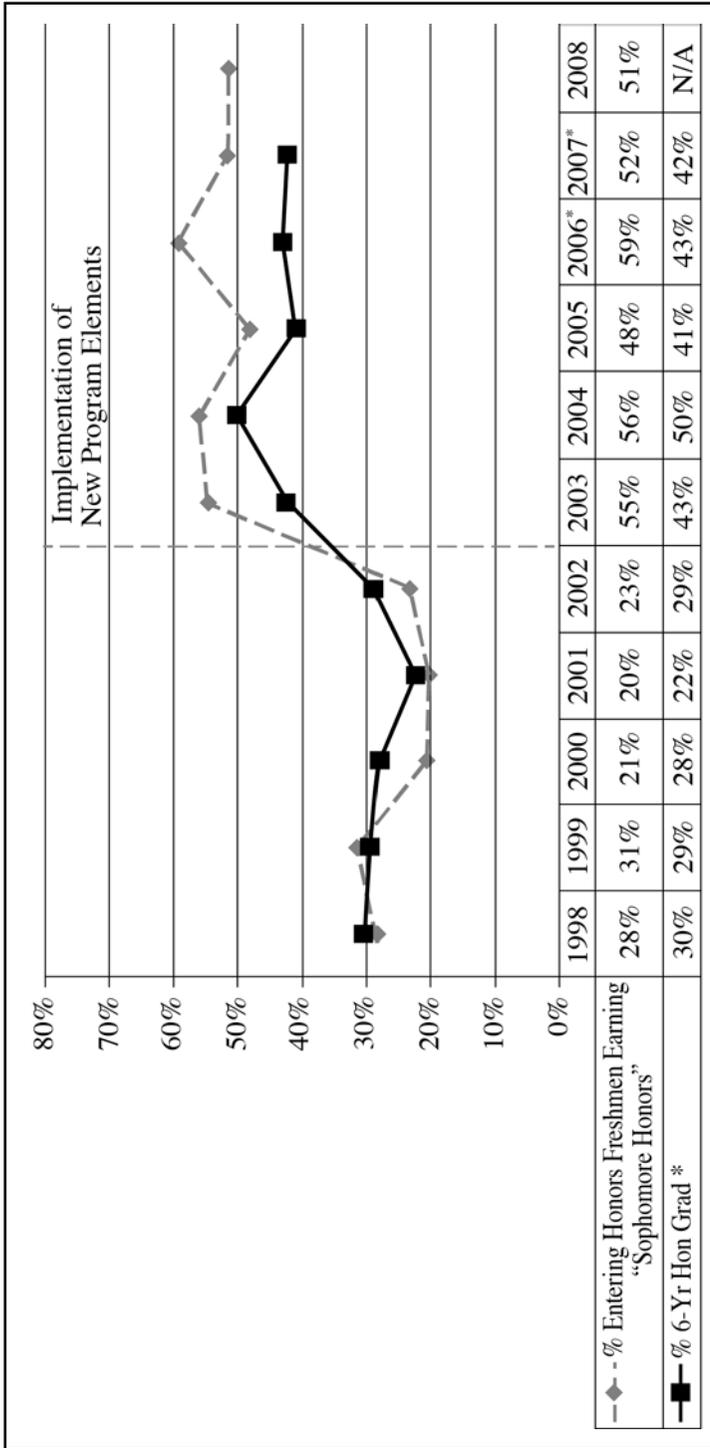
Figure 2 presents data on both mid-career and end-of-career program completion for students in the 1998 through the 2008 cohorts.

The solid line reflects the proportion of each honors freshman cohort that completed all sophomore honors requirements; the dotted line reflects the proportion of each entering cohort that graduated as honors scholars. The trend lines are quite similar for both mid-career and end-of-career program completion. From 1998 to 2002, the proportion of each cohort earning sophomore honors and graduating as honors scholars hovered in the 20–30% range. Beginning with the 2003 cohort, the proportions shifted to the 40–50% range. For cohorts entering after 2002, a somewhat higher proportion earned sophomore honors than graduated as honors scholars.

The study explored whether the likelihood of end-of-career program completion was associated with mid-career program completion. Because some students who were part of each cohort were not eligible for the mid-career awards due to dismissal, transfer, or opting out, they were dropped from the analysis for each cohort. The reduced cohort sizes can be found in Figure 3.

The researchers divided the 1998 through 2007 cohorts into two subgroups, those who completed and those who did not complete sophomore honors, and

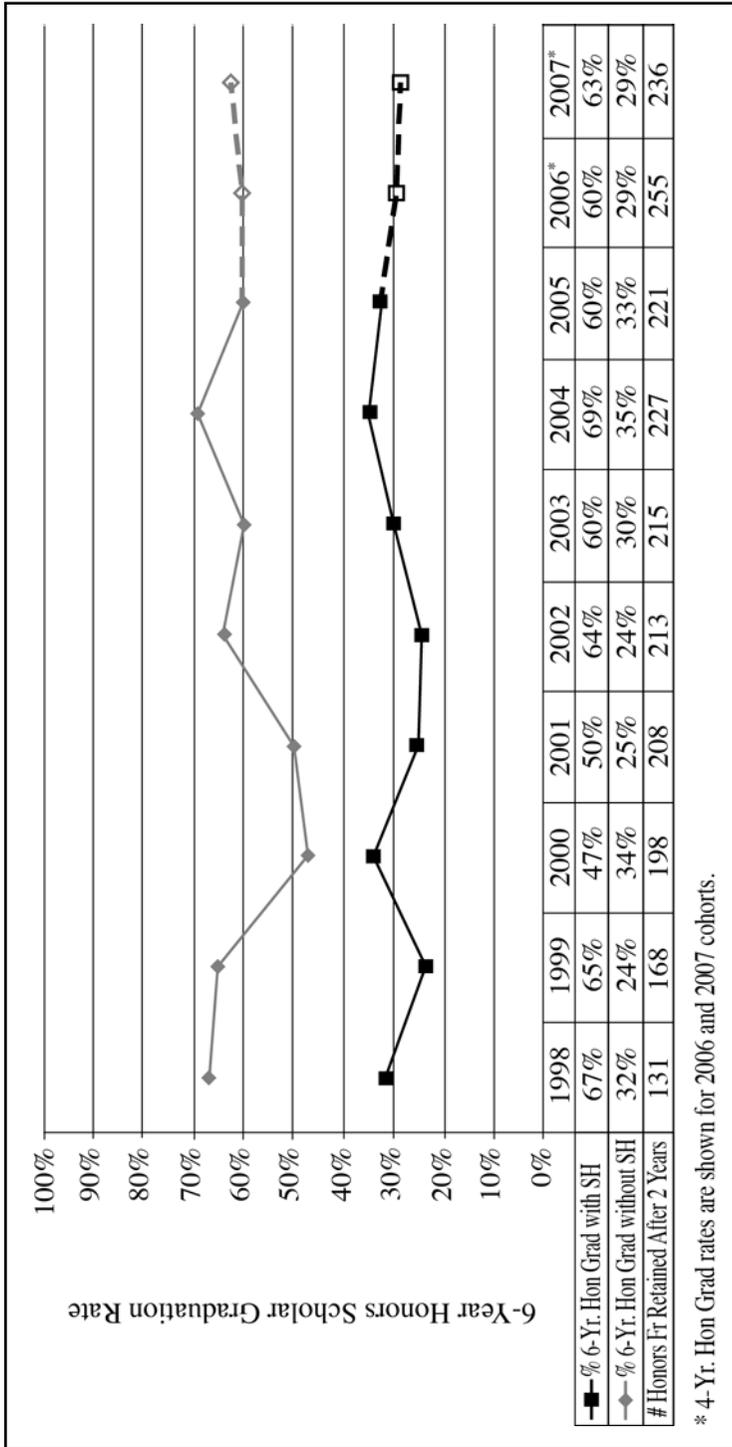
**Figure 2: Mid-Career and End-of-Career Honors Program Completion for Students Entering as Honors Freshmen, 1998–2008**



\* 4-Yr Hon Grad rates are shown for 2006 and 2007 cohorts.

(Goodstein, Szarek and Wunschel state that "The 6-year end-career program completion rates for the 2006 and 2007 cohorts will increase although we do not know by how much. This is because some of the students in these cohorts have remained for a 5th and 6th year due to double majors, change of majors, etc., and do not complete their theses until their fifth or sixth years.")

**Figure 3: End-of-Career Honors Scholar Completion (“Graduation as an Honors Scholar”) after 6 Years for Students Retained in Honors after 2 Years, Who Did and Did Not Earn Sophomore Honors, 1998–2007\***



presented the likelihood that students in each subgroup earned the end-of-career award. The data show that among the eight cohorts studied, between 47% and 69% of the students who earned sophomore honors went on to graduate as honors scholars. In contrast, for students who did not earn sophomore honors the rates of end-career program completion ranged between 24% and 35%. The trend lines for both groups were relatively flat across the entire time frame of the study.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING HONORS PROGRAM COMPLETION**

If Goodstein, Szarek and Wunschel's study had been completed a few years earlier with cohorts entering the university prior to 2003, their results would closely mirror the findings of other published work on program completion (Cosgrove; Campbell and Fuqua; McKay). Their findings that the 1998 through 2002 cohorts received mid-career and end-career awards at rates between 20% and 30% are slightly lower than the 35% for McKay's students in a program with no thesis requirement, correspond closely to the 27% reported by Cosgrove for the three comprehensive Pennsylvania state institutions, and are only a little higher than the 18% reported by Campbell and Fuqua for honors students at a similar public state university.

There was a consistent increase in program completion rates, however, with the cohorts entering the university in 2003 and beyond. This increase is best seen in the mid-career award data series because the time to completion is only two years. Beginning in 2003, a new plateau for program completion was set, with between 48% and 59% of each entering cohort from 2003 through 2008 earning the mid-career award compared with rates in the 20% range for prior cohorts. End-of-career program completion rates demonstrate a similar pattern. For cohorts entering the university in 2003 through 2005, 43%, 50%, and 41%, respectively, completed the program by the end of six years; and for those entering in 2006 and 2007, 43% and 42% completed the program by the end of four years.

This study demonstrated measurable changes in the rate of mid- and end-of-career program completion over a relatively short time in one honors program at a major public university. The upwards shift in rates mirrored the implementation of quality improvements to the program. However, since the study was essentially descriptive, we can only speculate the reasons for these changes. Moreover, since a number of innovations were implemented during the same time frame, we cannot parse out which of the quality improvements, if any, was most influential in affecting program completion rates. Causal analyses will require different research designs in future studies.

## THEY COME BUT DO THEY FINISH?

Nevertheless, the study does demonstrate that improving program completion rates is possible within a short time frame. While the researchers could not definitively identify the reasons for the change, they cite three possibilities, two programmatic and the third an “input measure.”

The first two factors relate to building student identification with the honors community. Beginning in 2003, the honors program began implementation of a massive honors residential project. Prior to 2002, little effort was made to house honors students together, and no honors-only residential facilities were available for freshmen. By 2004, 94% of freshmen lived in honors housing, and the figure remained at or above this level in subsequent years. Additional housing for upper class-students was soon added such that, by 2010, 49% of all honors students lived in honors housing. Also, in 2003 a major overhaul of the honors freshman seminar took place, enabling 90–95% of honors cohorts to experience micro-communities of classmates, participate immediately in active and engaged learning, obtain mentorship from older student facilitators, and focus on successful transitions to college (Goodstein, “The honors first-year experience”; Lease and Goodstein). Both of these initiatives led to a much greater sense of community among honors students and significantly increased student identification as part of that community (Holland). A recent qualitative study conducted as an honors thesis underscored the value of co-curricular activities and programming in supporting this program persistence and completion (Holland).

The third factor was a change in the level of pre-college academic achievement. Study researchers reported that, from 2005 on, incoming honors students had average SATs (verbal and critical reasoning) in the 1390+ range, a 50+ point jump from the period of 1998 through 2003. As other researchers have shown, positive outcomes in student retention and graduation are linked to the input measure of high school academic achievement (Astin; Beecher and Fisher; Smith Edminster and Sullivan). Our study suggests that this finding may apply to persistence not only at the university but also within an honors program, a finding that concurs with McDonald & Gawkoski and McKay.

## THE VALUE OF THE MID-CAREER AWARD

While mid-career awards are not common among honors programs, the university studied by Goodstein, Szarek and Wunschel had awarded sophomore honors since the program’s early years. The award had never been terribly popular with students, and, until the 2003 cohort, relatively few students in each entering cohort had earned the award. Even in recent years students questioned the value of sophomore honors (Holland). Aware that the award had no bearing on earning the end-of-career award, many did not see the benefit. Nevertheless, staff and faculty encouraged students to seek it, arguing that full

participation in years one and two promoted greater engagement in honors as well as academic and personal rewards. They also assumed that this commitment would keep students focused on the goal of graduation as an honors scholar.

Goodstein, Szarek and Wunschel's results provide evidence of a connection between earning mid-career and end-of-career honors awards. This finding was equally applicable for students entering the program in 1998, years before the implementation of innovations in honors program curriculum and services, as it was for the later cohorts. The trend line for end-of-career program completion rates is essentially flat throughout the study period, indicating that students who earned sophomore honors earlier in the program's history were as likely to graduate as honors scholars as students earning sophomore honors in more recent years. What is different is that a much smaller proportion of entering honors freshmen earned sophomore honors in the earlier years.

So something happened around 2003 that led a higher proportion of entering students to earn sophomore honors and then remain active through program completion. The researchers propose that strengthening the program quality and encouraging students to engage fully in the program's curriculum and activities motivated them to fulfill the requirements—starting with sophomore honors. The mid-career award then helped to reinforce their involvement and build resolve to continue to completion. However, Goodstein, Szarek and Wunschel also note the potential impact of changes in the demographics of the cohorts. An alternative explanation is that students motivated to do well on standardized tests may also be more motivated to earn formal credentials or certificates such as sophomore honors and graduation as an honors scholars, thus making students with higher SATs more likely to comply with program requirements regardless of how strong the program is.

## CONCLUSIONS

Active membership in honors programs and the earning of program awards are, in a sense, the ROI—return on investment—for students, faculty, and university administrations. The recruitment of students to honors programs might boost universities' national rankings, but, if the same students fail to take full advantage of the honors opportunities offered, one might conclude that the investments of the various stakeholders in honors programs have not panned out or at least have been only partially successful.

The research discussed in this paper underscores the simple but often overlooked fact that many students do not take full advantage of their membership in honors programs, leading to low rates of program completion that are troubling. Students do not persist in honors programs for many reasons, and we can never expect that a hundred percent of those who begin a program

## THEY COME BUT DO THEY FINISH?

will complete it. Students offer a number of legitimate reasons for opting out that include graduating early, electing additional coursework or more than one major, not finding a thesis topic of sufficient interest, and needing the extra time to study for professional entrance exams (Holland). Other reasons for not completing the thesis may reflect structural inadequacies such as a dearth of willing thesis advisors, inadequate preparation of students to conduct independent scholarship, or failure to explain the value of the thesis to, for instance, students in professional schools who do not see its relevance to their careers.

At the same time, the research reviewed in this paper illustrates a simple fact: program completion rates can be improved quickly, most likely through attention to program quality, changes in admissions criteria, or both. More work needs to be done on the reasons for high or low rates of program completion, and we hope that this paper might spark others to engage in studies similar to those reported here. In our view, program completion is a topic that begs for more empirical research and thoughtful essays as well as more public discourse about what level of completion is reasonable and desirable.

## REFERENCES

- Astin, A. W. (1975). *Preventing students from dropping out*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Beecher, M. and Fischer, L. (1999). High school courses and scores as predictors of college success. *Journal of College Admission*, 163: 4–9.
- Braid, B. (2008) Engagement in learning, liberal education, and honors. In L. Clark and J. Zubizarreta, *Inspiring exemplary teaching and learning: Perspectives on teaching academically talented college students*. Lincoln, NE: National Collegiate Honors Council: 31–36. NCHC Monograph Series.
- Brewster, E. H. (1930). Reading for honors. *Journal of Higher Education*, 1, 507–513.
- Campbell, K. C. and Fuqua, D. R.(2008–09). Factors predictive of student completion in a college honors program. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 10 (2): 129–153.
- Chickering, A., & Gamson, Z. (1987). Seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. *AAHE Bulletin*, 39 (7), 3–7.
- Cosgrove, J. R. (2004). The impact of honors programs on undergraduate academic performance, retention, and graduation. *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, 5(2), 45–53.
- Goodstein, L. (2004). The honors first-year experience. Paper presented at the National Collegiate Honors Council annual conference, New Orleans, LA.

- Goodstein, L. (2012). A 40-year-old honors program as a start-up: Planning for significant growth. Paper presented at the Evoking Excellence in Higher Education and Beyond 2012 Conference, Hanze University, Groningen, the Netherlands, October 5–6, 2012.
- Guzy, A. (2003). *Honors composition: Historical perspectives and contemporary practices*. Ames, Iowa: National Collegiate Honors Council.
- Herron, J. (2013). Notes toward an excellent Marxist-elitist honors admissions policy. *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, 14(2): 17–24.
- Holland, A. A., (2012). Honors retention: The persistence of juniors and seniors in the honors program through examination of commitment to completion of honors thesis. *Honors Scholar Theses*. Paper 247. <[http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/srhonors\\_theses/247](http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/srhonors_theses/247)>.
- Kuh, G., Schuh, J., Whitt, E., & Associates. (1991). *Involving colleges: Successful approaches to fostering student learning and development outside the classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lanier, Gregory W. (2007). Growth = Bucks (?). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, 8 (1): 33–41.
- Lease, J. and Goodstein, L. (2004). Developing honors students as teachers. Paper presented at the National Collegiate Honors Council annual conference, New Orleans, LA.
- Lemann, N. (2012). The Cost of College. *New Yorker*, 23–24.
- National Collegiate Honors Council. (2010). *Basic characteristics of a fully developed honors college*. (Approved by NCHC Board of Directors on February 19, 2010). <[http://www.nchchonors.org/basic\\_honorscollegecharacteristics.shtml](http://www.nchchonors.org/basic_honorscollegecharacteristics.shtml)>.
- National Collegiate Honors Council. Basic characteristics of a fully developed honors program. (2010a). (Approved by the NCHC Executive Committee on March 4, 1994; amended by the NCHC Board of Directors on November 23, 2007; further amended by the NCHC Board of Directors on February 19, 2010). <[http://www.nchchonors.org/basic\\_honorsprogramcharacteristics.shtml](http://www.nchchonors.org/basic_honorsprogramcharacteristics.shtml)>.
- Office of Institutional Research. (2010). *Most recent retention rates and graduation rates for entering freshmen classes by campus as of fall 2009*. University of Connecticut Office of Institutional Research.
- Pascarella, E.T., and Terenzini, P. T. (1980). Predicting freshman persistence and voluntary dropout decisions from a theoretical model. *Journal of Higher Education*, 51 (1): 60–75.
- Pflaum, S. W., Pascarella, E. T., and Duby, P. (1985). The effects of honors college participation on academic performance during the freshman year. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 26 (5): 414–419.

## THEY COME BUT DO THEY FINISH?

- Pehlke, J. (2003). The myth of an honors education. *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, 4 (2): 27–33.
- Rinn, A. N. (2003). Rhodes scholarships, Frank Aydelotte, and collegiate honors education. *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, 4 (1): 27–39.
- Sederberg, P. C. (2005). Characteristics of the contemporary honors college: A descriptive analysis of a survey of NCHC member colleges. *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, 6 (2): 121–136.
- Sederberg, P. C. (2007). Nothing fails like success: Managing growth in a highly developed honors program. *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, 8 (1): 17–32.
- Seifert, T.A.; Pascarella, E. T.; Colangelo, N.; and Assouline, S. G. (2007). The effects of honors program participation on experiences of good practices and learning outcomes. *Journal of College Student Development*, 48 (1): 57–74.
- Slavin, C., Coldaraci, T. and Pratt, P. A. (2008). Is student participation in an honors program related to retention and graduation rates? *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, 9 (2): 59–69.
- Smith, W. R., Edminster, J. H. and Sullivan, K. M. (2001). Factors influencing graduation rates at Mississippi's public universities. *College and University*, 76 (3): 11–16.
- Tinto, V. 1993. *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Weiner, Norm. (2009 ). Honors is elitist, and what's wrong with that? *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, 10 (1): 19–24.
- Wolgemuth, A., Whalen, D., Sullivan, J., Nading, C. Shelley, M. and Wang, Y. (2006–07). Financial, academic and environmental influences on the retention and graduation of students. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 8 (4): 457–475.

\*\*\*\*\*

The authors may be contacted at

[lynne.goodstein@uconn.edu](mailto:lynne.goodstein@uconn.edu).