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Opportunities in Honors for Underserved Students

BAKER PATTILLO, PRESIDENT

Stephen F. Austin State University

HONORS DIRECTOR: MICHAEL TKACIK

First-generation students sometimes lack a support network that values higher education. Stephen F. Austin State University (SFA)—a regional, comprehensive university of approximately 13,000 students, located in the piney woods of East Texas—serves a diverse body of students who are nearly 50% first-generation. These students often face financial constraints and have been underexposed to the cultural diversity of the twenty-first-century economy. At the same time, our students know that a university education is vital to their success and have an intense desire to conquer new intellectual landscapes. Thus, while some would consider our student body a challenge, we see it as an opportunity. Because of our unique student body, we at SFA are able to help an underserved population whose success is central to meeting the local, national, and international challenges of the future. To meet these challenges, SFA encourages transformative learning experiences, a culture of engagement, undergraduate research, and a focus on lifelong learning, among

other strategies. I value the School of Honors for its high-impact role in helping SFA serve our students and community.

SFA students, even in honors, are in some instances still falling in love with learning or still trying to convince others of the value of higher education, and so foisting a rigid set of requirements on them might be counterproductive. Instead, our philosophy is to offer a wide variety of opportunities to honors students that will allow them to cultivate a love for education. When we achieve this goal successfully, the students graduate not only with exceptional grades, a love for lifelong education, and a deep understanding of their particular subject matter but also with high levels of continuing success, whether measured by employment or acceptance into post-graduate study.

Before working with students, honors brings value to the university in the way it recruits. The SFA School of Honors engages prospective students at every stage of the recruiting process. Provided a list of academically qualified students who have expressed an interest in honors, the honors director contacts each of the students by mail, inviting them to visit the SFA School of Honors and to apply. Other students are flagged by the admissions office or other units across the campus, and the director writes each of them a personal email. All students touring campus (and their parents) are given an opportunity to meet with the director. During these hour-long meetings, the director reviews the three primary opportunities that honors at SFA provides: enhanced educational experiences, practical support for daily learning, and recognition at graduation.

Honors has the most profound impact on students by enhancing their educational experience. SFA honors attempts to provide a small, private-school experience for students paying the tuition of a regional, mid-sized, public university. Honors offers small classes, capped at twenty-five students, and hand-picked professors who are regularly evaluated for their success in the classroom. Honors professors are urged to use innovative methods inside the classroom; in a bioethics course, for example, professors have provided students the opportunity to have their DNA profiles read. Part of the honors philosophy is that, especially for students who are often first-generation and may not have been beyond the borders of Texas, study abroad is a key opportunity. Honors provides an introductory summer study abroad experience in central Europe that is both moderately priced and immersive. Study abroad should not be simply a whirlwind of visits to hotels and tourist sites. SFA honors study abroad means living with local students in their dorms and working on joint research projects with local students, culminating in a presentation

to the resident faculty. Honors also provides scholarships for semester-long study abroad, but many of our students are not yet prepared to make that leap. After a successful month abroad under faculty supervision, however, these students are often motivated and ready for a longer-term experience.

Not every student can afford a study abroad experience, yet our students still benefit from broad cultural exposure. Honors provides a “Cultural City Experience,” a day-long trip to a larger city to see a play, attend a museum, or engage in other cultural activities. Honors buys lunch for the students at a restaurant where they can be exposed to non-American cuisine. The director may lead this trip or may solicit another faculty member who is an expert on the day’s events. While not life-changing, the trip helps to prepare top academic students for a world that is far more diverse than they sometimes realize.

Similarly, few of our students come out of high school with research experience. Honors at SFA makes a point of providing multiple research opportunities for our students. Honors administers the SFA Undergraduate Research Conference (URC), for instance, which is not limited to honors students, but they typically make up a third to a half of the participants. We further encourage research through an honors academic contract system. At SFA, honors contracts are more than just opportunities to earn honors credits; here, honors students use these contracts as opportunities for research and as preparation for graduate school or the workplace.

Though providing an enhanced education is central to the mission of honors at SFA, honors also provides practical support that is especially relevant to our student body. For example, once a student has successfully presented at the URC, honors urges that student to present at a national conference. If the student is accepted, honors helps fund the trip. We have had great success (sometimes too much success) funding research trips for students.

We also try to provide our students some of the benefits that make higher education a little easier. First-generation students might not realize the importance of early registration or might not have budgeted for printing costs or might not own a computer. So, for example, honors students at SFA can register on the same day as graduating seniors and athletes. Honors has a private computer lab that is a “no phone zone,” providing not only computers but also an effective learning environment. Honors also provides laptops that students can borrow for free. We have a dorm that has quiet hours, thus providing not just an environment for success but also an example of how to create such an environment. Through the honors residence hall, we can put together informal study groups, allowing students to trade their academic

strengths, improve academic results, and participate in the collaboration necessary for success in the post-graduate world. Another example of a benefit for honors students is a close working arrangement with the Academic Assistance and Resource Center (AARC); when the AARC needs tutors, they come to honors first, and when honors students need on-campus jobs, they look to the AARC first. Other benefits are the honors student association, which provides a social outlet for students; a newly developing mentor program for incoming students; and the inclusion of administrators, faculty, staff, and other students as part of the honors experience.

Graduating from an honors program would be anticlimactic and probably disappointing if it did not include a culminating experience, which may be most important for first-generation students. At SFA, graduating honors students are called University Scholars. Before graduation, honors hosts a University Scholar dinner to celebrate the students' success. These students are then announced as University Scholars at graduation, they are noted in the program, and they wear honors cords and medallions. These badges of distinction are important not just for the student but for the student's family, who have perhaps changed their minds about the value of higher education. This culminating moment of success can also be life-changing for a younger sibling or cousin, who now has reason to attend university and perhaps greater support from home.

At SFA honors is an individual path for each student, lined with opportunities and choices rather than demands and requirements. In this way, honors best serves our unique student body. Our students generally lack the confidence of students whose parents attended college and face greater financial challenges. Our students may also be more resistant to the culture of higher education and thus need a bit more guidance to become successful in their undergraduate work and then in post-graduate study and the workplace. In the SFA School of Honors, we specialize in polishing hidden gems, and we then have the pleasure of watching them shine.

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