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Lessons from Honors: National Scholarships, High-Impact Practices, and Student Success

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High-impact educational practices (HIPs) have long been central to honors pedagogy. From undergraduate research to service learning, study abroad, internships, and writing-intensive courses, these practices shape the honors educational experience and influence retention successes in honors. These practices also inform the synergy between honors and national scholarships by helping students to develop the skills and experiences necessary to compete for prestigious scholarships.

Across the United States, university and college administrators expend tremendous time and energy worrying about student retention, persistence, and graduation rates. Recently, university communities have focused considerable attention on the potential of HIPs to address these issues and improve student performance. Research indicates that HIPs improve student retention and engagement, but according to the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), “on almost all campuses, utilization of active learning

practices is unsystematic, to the detriment of student learning.” Our experiences at Western Kentucky University (WKU) demonstrate that honors and national scholarship collaborations can provide an authentic and aspirational organizational framework for HIPs and create a multiplier effect for other leading retention strategies. The planning process for developing scholars, integral to our honors/national scholarship partnership, is an ideal way for universities to systematize and integrate HIPs in a campus-wide strategic process to increase retention, persistence, student learning, and graduation rates.

WKU began focusing on honors education in 2005, hiring its first full-time director. The honors/national scholarship collaboration was central to this investment in honors. Later that year, the next approved position was a leader of the Office of Scholar Development (OSD), our national scholarship office. The OSD opened soon after, beginning the intentional process of designing the honors experience to prepare students for nationally competitive scholarships. The honors/national scholarship collaboration, along with efforts to expand the model to the wider university, has produced considerable growth in national scholarships. In 2015–16, WKU students and recent alumni earned recognition seventy times in national scholarship competitions, a record that represents significant growth given a history of limited participation prior to 2005. In February 2017, WKU tied for second in the list of top Fulbright-producing master’s-degree-granting institutions. This announcement marked WKU’s fourth time on the top producing list in the past seven years. Additionally, WKU has had eight Truman Scholarship finalists in the last six years and twenty-five Goldwater Scholars or Honorable Mentions since the OSD opened in 2008.

This success has grown out of using scholar development plans (SDPs) as an organizing principle that both shapes student experiences and guides cross-unit collaboration. SDPs are four-year development plans that engage students in aspirational thinking, encouraging them to develop short-term targets that move them toward long-term achievements. In creating SDPs, students are encouraged to think about their future aims in terms of the issues and problems they find compelling, the activities that draw on their interests and that hone and refine their skills, and their future trajectory. These students are urged to engage in a wide range of HIPs but to do so strategically, with their long-term hopes and dreams as the threads linking their co-curricular and curricular involvement.

National scholarships are central to the SDP process, which provides not only short-term targets for students but also funding for research

opportunities, study abroad, internships, language acquisition, and graduate/professional school. Moreover, the process of applying for national scholarships is in itself a HIP as students engage, often across several years, in a writing-intensive process with frequent feedback. SDPs represent an intensive, iterative, self-reflective experience that connects current coursework and HIP involvement to students' self-articulated aims. Students are encouraged to build relationships with faculty and plan their involvement in research, study abroad, campus and community organizations, and internships. In this process, national scholarships are framed as tools to help students effect change, gain experiences, and acquire knowledge, never as an end in themselves.

As acknowledged by the AAC&U, HIPs have often been implemented in a haphazard fashion, feeling transactional to students who participate. By looking beyond graduation, SDPs and national scholarship planning naturally incorporate leading retention strategies while tying these strategies together around a focused goal or series of goals. SDPs help students understand why these practices matter, and the process of writing about the future, central to national scholarship applications, forces students to clarify and refine their aims. Cultivating national scholarship success is a welcome outcome of the SDP and application process, but more importantly the process teaches students strategic planning and expands their ability to write about their disciplines, goals, and aims—all skills that are crucial in the professional world.

As universities grapple with strategies to address and improve student success, using SDPs as an organizing principle is an ideal way of structuring university-wide academic advising, student affairs, and career services. To better understand the impact of SDPs, consider a hypothetical student. He is a first-generation college student from a lower-income family, so paying for college is a struggle despite the Pell Grant he receives; therefore, he must work fifteen or twenty hours a week. He plans on majoring in management and minoring in Spanish. Our hypothetical student enrolls at a local public university. He is assigned an advisor and participates in a First Year Experience (FYE) program, both of which reinforce the list of what he needs to graduate. He understands the list of "boxes" he needs to check: a major, a minor, general education categories, co-curricular engagement, international experience, and an internship before he graduates. Armed with this knowledge, our student puts together a four-year graduation plan. He takes the classes he is advised to take and maintains a 3.2 GPA. Additionally, he works off campus, serves as historian of his fraternity, and volunteers at the humane society. He takes out additional loans to participate in a ten-day winter program studying

climate change and culture in Belize, and he is a social media intern at a local business. He is ready to graduate, so he visits career services, polishes his résumé, and applies for his first job. By most standards, our hypothetical student represents a success story. He has checked all the requisite boxes, but still he lacks a coherent or compelling narrative and trajectory. As a result, he has trouble articulating his professional goals beyond “getting a job with progressively higher levels of responsibility and opportunities for advancement.” He has done what was asked of him, but his prospects look bleak.

Now, imagine how our student might have fared using an SDP as his organizing principle. During his FYE program, he is encouraged to write about his big dreams, not about getting a job. He learns about how the Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship could help him to study abroad for a full semester in a Spanish-speaking country. He also meets alumni who have earned Gilman, Fulbright, and other awards that allowed them to pursue their goals. Our student puts together a four-year plan that prepares him to graduate on time and to apply for a Fulbright Grant and other similar prestigious post-baccalaureate opportunities. Through the SDP model, advisors encourage our student to take major courses and participate in a management internship while he is abroad. The experience also allows him to earn a second major in Spanish and still graduate on time. Because of the Gilman Scholarship and other awards, the net cost for his fifteen weeks abroad is less than if he had stayed on campus.

He begins to understand each class and co-curricular activity as another brick in the road toward his ever-clarifying goal of using his studies and language skills to run his own business. He increasingly sees his courses as stepping stones to developing problem-solving skills and ways of thinking that move him toward a Fulbright and his ultimate aims. He talks with his academic advisor about how his courses support his academic goals and his big dreams. The advisor shows him that his required course on business statistics and methods provides the opportunity to do undergraduate research. His professor, knowing his SDP, helps him develop a project that combines his interests and connects to his plans for the future.

During his FYE, our student learned about student and community organizations where he might expand his Spanish language and management skills. His advisor also helped him to find a job on campus where he both earned the funds he needed to pay for school and gained meaningful experience. He planned how he would spend his summers, weighing how he might best support his financial needs and invest his time toward his overall goals.

After that first national scholarship application, he wrote a range of applications and completed numerous practice interviews, thus gaining additional professional skills. Ultimately, our student may not earn a Fulbright Grant, but he will graduate with a clear sense of what he wants to do and a practiced ability to articulate that vision of his future.

At WKU, the honors/national scholarship collaboration follows the model used to guide our hypothetical student. Every student who attends the honors pre-FYE retreat hears from national scholarship awardees, interacts with numerous peer counselors who are following their own SDPs, and begins an SDP journey. At the honors retreat, students are encouraged to seek out the OSD during the university-wide orientation programming and attend a series of events focused on national scholarships, with the goal of developing SDPs by the end of their first semester and applying for national scholarships as early as their second semester. Honors reinforces this model: honors advisors encourage SDPs, national scholarships, and HIPs that connect with students' big dreams; honors scholarships and grants require students to work with the OSD to develop SDPs; and the one required honors seminar (Citizen and Self) is explicitly designed to help students practice being agents of change in their discipline and future careers. The conscious strategy of aligning resources, mission, and academic and co-curricular advising to prepare students for success in nationally competitive opportunities has been transformational. Not all honors students end up applying for national scholarships, but all are advised and mentored as if they will. The goal is not winning or even applying; the goal is students who have developed the skills necessary to think strategically about their future and position themselves for success well beyond graduation. Put another way, whether they pursue national scholarships or not, students are well prepared for the next stage of their professional life.

Honors has a long tradition of being a place for pedagogical and co-curricular experimentation. Many of today's HIPs got their start in honors programs and were later made available to students across the university, e.g., learning communities, capstone/thesis projects, and service learning. We have posited that the model of the honors/national scholarship partnership should be integrated university-wide to provide a framework for student success and create a multiplier effect for other leading retention strategies. While all students can benefit from participation in HIPs, the intentional layering of these practices over four years leads to truly transformational outcomes. Additionally, at-risk students have the most to gain from this SDP framework

as we see daily among a diverse range of students, especially because we have consciously worked to expand our model beyond honors.

As universities integrate SDPs, the goal is to orient the campus community's energy and efforts in a shared direction, to change how we discuss the goals of higher education, and to inspire students to be lifelong agents of change. In essence, the goal is to use individual SDPs to systematically integrate HIPs across students' four-year experience in order to more effectively layer and scaffold the benefits. By systematizing and integrating SDPs into the fabric of the university, WKU has made the benefits of intentional HIP participation accessible to a larger and more diverse range of students. Based on a growing body of research, the appropriate integration of HIPs throughout a student's college education has dramatic positive effects on retention, persistence, graduation rates, and, most importantly, post-graduation success. By integrating SDPs campus-wide, honors education once again teaches a lesson that can be expanded to benefit all students.

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