Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council, Volume 14, Number 2, Fall/Winter 2013 (complete issue)

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchcjournal

Part of the Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Educational Methods Commons, Higher Education Commons, Higher Education Administration Commons, and the Liberal Studies Commons

"Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council, Volume 14, Number 2, Fall/Winter 2013 (complete issue)" (2013). Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive. 564.
https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchcjournal/564

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.
Forum on Admissions and Retention in Honors

Forum Articles
Jerry Herron
Sean K. Kelly
Michael K. Cundall, Jr.
Scott Carnicom
Annmarie Guzy
Jeffrey A. Portnoy

Research Essays
Patricia Joanne Smith and John Thomas Vitus Zagurski
Robert R. Keller and Michael G. Lacy
Lynne Goodstein and Patricia Szarek
Timothy J. Nichols and Kuo-Liang “Matt” Chang
Emily Stark
The National Collegiate Honors Council is an association of faculty, students, and others interested in honors education. Executive Committee: Rick Scott, President, University of Central Arkansas; Jim Ruebel, President-Elect, Ball State University; Gregory Lanier, Immediate Past-President, University of West Florida; Barry Falk, Vice-President, James Madison University; Kyoko Amano, Secretary, University of Indianapolis; Gary Bell, Treasurer, Texas Tech University. Executive Director: Cynthia M. Hill, headquartered at University of Nebraska–Lincoln. Board of Directors: Suketu Bhavsar, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona; Lisa Coleman, Southeastern Oklahoma State University; Riley Cook, University of Iowa; Emily Jones, Oklahoma State University; Joe King, Radford University; Jon Kotinek, Texas A & M University; Cheryl Dabney Lauersdorf, Lee College–Texas; Franklin McGuire, The Citadel; Soncerey Montgomery, Winston-Salem State University; Mary Kay Mulvaney, Elmhurst College; Barbra Nightingale, Broward College; Marjean Purinton, Texas Tech University; Jeremiah Sammons, Gallaudet University; Zachary Samples, Eastern Illinois University; Laurie Smith-Law, Iowa State University; Art Spisak, University of Iowa; Elaine Torda, State University of New York–Orange; John Zubizarreta, Columbia College–South Carolina.
ED\_ITORIAL POLICY

Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council is a refereed periodical publishing scholarly articles on honors education. The journal uses a double-blind peer review process. Articles may include analyses of trends in teaching methodology, articles on interdisciplinary efforts, discussions of problems common to honors programs, items on the national higher education agenda, and presentations of emergent issues relevant to honors education. Submissions and inquiries should be directed to Ada Long at adalong@uab.edu.

DEADLINES

March 1 (for spring/summer issue); September 1 (for fall/winter issue)

INDEXING STATEMENT

JNCHC is indexed full-text in the EBSCO and Gale library databases and is archived in the University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s Digital Commons repository.

PRODUCTION EDITORS


EDITORIAL BOARD

William A. Ashton (Psychology), Associate Professor, Behavioral Sciences Department, City University of New York at York College; Gary M. Bell (Early Modern British History), Dean of the University Honors College and Professor of History, Texas Tech University; Bernice Braid (Comparative Literature), Professor Emeritus of English, Director of Core Seminar, and Former Honors Director, Long Island University Brooklyn; D. Bruce Carter (Psychology), Associate Professor of Psychology and Child & Family Studies, Syracuse University; Joan Digby (English), Director of the Honors Program and Merit Fellowship, Professor of English, Long Island University-Post; Ted Estess (English), Professor of English and former Dean of the Honors College, University of Houston; Jim Ford (Philosophy/Religious Studies), Director of the Honors Program and Professor of Humanities, Rogers State University; Jay M. Freyman (Ancient Studies) Associate Professor Emeritus and former Director of the Honors College, University of Maryland, Baltimore County; Linda Frost (English), Professor of English and Dean of the Honors College, University of Tennessee, Chattanooga; Jerry Herron (English), Dean of the Irvin D. Reid Honors College and Professor of English, Wayne State University; Nancy Davis Johnson (Psychology), Associate Professor of Psychology, Queens University of Charlotte; John Korstad (Biology), Professor of Biology and Honors Program Director, Oral Roberts University; Dennis Patrick Leyden (R & D Policy, Private- and Public-Sector Entrepreneurship), Associate Professor, Department of Economics, University of North Carolina at Greensboro; George Marz (History), Professor of History and Director of the Honors Program, Western Washington University; David N. Mowry (Philosophy), SUNY Distinguished Teaching Professor, Honors Program Founding Director Emeritus, Plattsburgh State University; Rosalie Otero (English), Professor Emerita and Former Honors Director, University of New Mexico; Anne Ponder (English), Chancellor, University of North Carolina Asheville; Jeffrey A. Portnoy (English), Director of the Honors Program and Professor of English, Georgia Perimeter College; Rae Rosenthal (English), Director of the Honors Program and Professor of English, Community College of Baltimore County Essex Campus; Rusty Rushton (English), Associate Director of the University Honors Program and Adjunct Lecturer in English, University of Alabama at Birmingham; Hallie Savage, Honors Program Director and Professor of Communication Sciences and Disorders, Clarion University of Pennsylvania; Samuel Schuman (English), Chancellor Emeritus, the University of Minnesota, Morris, and Professor of Language and Literature, University of North Carolina Asheville; Ricki J. Shine (American History), Associate Director of the Calhoun Honors College and Director of Major Fellowships, Clemson University; Stephen H. Wainscott (Political Science), Director Emeritus of the Calhoun Honors College, Clemson University; Len Zane (Physics), Emeritus Professor of Physics and former Dean of the Honors College, University of Nevada, Las Vegas
CONTENTS

Call for Papers. .............................................. 5
Submission Guidelines ........................................ 6
Dedication to Deborah Sell Craig ............................... 7

Editor’s Introduction
Ada Long .......................................................... 9

FORUM ON “ADMISSIONS AND RETENTION IN HONORS”

Notes toward an Excellent Marxist-Elitist Honors Admissions Policy
Jerry Herron ....................................................... 17

Assessing Success in Honors: Getting beyond Graduation Rates
Sean K. Kelly .......................................................... 25

Admissions, Retention, and Reframing the Question “Isn’t It Just More Work?”
Michael K. Cundall, Jr. .......................................... 31

Predicting Student Success, Ameliorating Risk, and Guarding against Homogeneity in Honors
Scott Carnicom ......................................................... 35

The Confidence Game in Honors Admissions and Retention
Annmarie Guzy ......................................................... 41

An Honors Koan: Selling Water by the River
Jeffrey A. Portnoy .................................................. 47
Improving Retention and Fit by Honing an Honors Admissions Model
Patricia Joanne Smith and John Thomas Vitus Zagurski ...........55

Propensity Score Analysis of an Honors Program’s Contribution to Students’ Retention and Graduation Outcomes
Robert R. Keller and Michael G. Lacy .............................. 73

They Come But Do They Finish? Program Completion for Honors Students at a Major Public University, 1998-2010
Lynne Goodstein and Patricia Szarek .............................. 85

Factors Influencing Honors College Recruitment, Persistence, and Satisfaction at an Upper-Midwest Land Grant University
Timothy J. Nichols and Kuo-Liang “Matt” Chang .................. 105

Real-Life Solutions to Real-Life Problems: Collaborating with a Non-Profit Foundation to Engage Honors Students in Applied Research
Emily Stark ................................................................. 129

About the Authors .......................................................... 147
NCHC Publication Order Forms ......................................... 158

The cover design is a collaborative effort by Sarah Halverson and Wake Up Graphics.
CALL FOR PAPERS

The next issue of JNCHC (deadline: March 1, 2014) invites research essays on any topic of interest to the honors community.

The issue will also include a Forum focused on the theme “Honors for Sale.” We invite essays of roughly 1000–2000 words that consider this theme in a practical and/or theoretical context.

The lead essay for the Forum, available on the NCHC website <http://nchchonors.org/jnchc-lead-essay-the-profit-motive-in-honors-education>, is by Gary Bell of Texas Tech University. His essay—titled “The Profit Motive in Honors Education”—sounds the alarm about creeping privatization that raises costs and reduces quality in public services, including education. Bell warns against the takeover of honors education by for-profit companies whose primary purpose is making money, not serving and educating students. Contributions to the Forum may—but need not—respond to Bell’s essay or the issues he addresses.

Questions that Forum contributors might consider include: Do for-profit companies like American Honors <http://americanhonors.org> have value to add to honors programs, educators, and students, or are they trying to cheapen the honors experience and enrich their own coffers? Similarly, will MOOCs expand honors opportunities or depersonalize honors education and reduce faculty to teaching assistants for celebrities? Are these new developments in higher education designed to enhance education or increase cost-effectiveness, and are these two goals compatible or mutually exclusive? Is there something special about honors that will be lost if it is put on the auction block? Should honors programs be entrepreneurial to assure their survival and keep pace with the broader culture? Is the pressure for large number of honors students and higher graduation rates coming from a profit motive or from concern for good education? To what extent are profit motives in honors being driven by forces outside of honors and to what extent by inside forces? What are the effects of the professionalization of honors, e.g., the shift from volunteer administrators to high-paid deans and directors, the proliferation of honors administrators, the increased focus on fundraising, the transition of honors directors/deans from scholars/mentors to managers/salesmen? Are similar changes within the NCHC, as it has shifted its focus from students to administrators, making it a more effective advocate for honors education or for self-advancement?

Forum essays should focus on ideas, concepts, and/or opinions related to “Admissions and Retention in Honors.” Examples from one’s own campus can be and usually are relevant, but essays should not simply be descriptions of “what we do at our institution.”

Please send all submissions to Ada Long at adalong@uab.edu.
**SUBMISSION GUIDELINES**

We accept material by email attachment. We do not accept material by fax or hard copy.

The documentation style can be whatever is appropriate to the author’s primary discipline or approach (MLA, APA, etc.), but please avoid footnotes. Internal citation to a list of references (bibliography) is strongly preferred, and the editor will revise all internal citations in accordance with MLA guidelines.

There are no minimum or maximum length requirements; the length should be dictated by the topic and its most effective presentation.

Accepted essays are edited for grammatical and typographical errors and for infelicities of style or presentation. Authors have ample opportunity to review and approve edited manuscripts before publication.

Submissions and inquiries should be directed to Ada Long at adalong@uab.edu or, if necessary, 850.927.3776.
With this issue we honor Deborah Sell Craig, longtime staff member at the Kent State University Honors College, who passed away in July surrounded by her family.

Deborah received her BA in political science from Wittenberg and followed it with two master’s degrees (political science and education) and a PhD in educational evaluation and measurement from Kent State University. Her 1987 dissertation, “Predicting Success in an Honors Program: A Comparative Multiple and Ridge Regression,” was an early example of honors research. Her 1981 annotated bibliography of “The Honors Movement in the United States” in Forum for Honors and her subsequent two-part article in the same journal shed significant light on honors history.

Deb joined the staff of the honors college in 1976 as a graduate assistant, serving as an advisor and soon as a research assistant just in time to help Kent State host the NCHC annual conference in 1978. She attended national NCHC conferences over the next three decades and often gave sessions, Idea Exchange presentations, and advice in the Consultants Center. Later she was elected to the Board of Directors and served as member and co-chair of the Research Committee. She served on the Honors in Practice Editorial Board and briefly on the Portz Fellowship Committee and the Committee on Diversity Issues.
As a beloved staff member of the Kent State University Honors College for thirty-seven years, Deb brought the highest integrity and intelligence to every responsibility she accepted, from advising students, fundraising, and working with six-year accelerated medical students to coordinating recruitment, scholarships, and the university’s Guest of Honor Artist/Lecture Series. She was widely known and universally respected both by the honors students she loved and by all the multitude of staff people she worked with at the university and who honored her with a Total Quality Service Award. She was a donor to the honors college, a volunteer in many service organizations, and an enthusiastic champion of study abroad. She was known around the office not only for her outpouring of creative ideas and her difficulty in suffering fools lightly elsewhere but also for her energy, love of life, infectious giggle, and upbeat courage. She is greatly missed by the local and national honors community.
Editor’s Introduction

Ada Long
University of Alabama at Birmingham

At least as much as the curricular or extracurricular opportunities that an honors program offers to students, its admissions and retention policies determine the teaching and learning that take place within it. In defining which students will be welcome in the community of honors, administrators broadcast their values before students even apply. If grades and test scores are the criteria for admission, then students can anticipate that the program will hold such competitive rankings in high regard. The higher the required grades and scores, the more rigorous the competition that students can expect. Students should also anticipate that retention policies will reflect admissions policies and that strong academic performance as reflected in grades will be a—probably the—necessary requisite to remain in the program.

As much as admissions and retention policies are signals to students of what to expect, they are also assertions, either conscious or unconscious, of how the administrators and faculty of a program define excellence. A mix of different admissions criteria—perhaps essays, recommendations, service projects, and interviews as well as grades and scores—implies a definition of excellence that might be harder to test and so might also imply a less stringent retention policy; it might also imply that students will be part of a diverse community where more will be expected of them than good grades.

While educational philosophies and definitions of excellence matter, other complicating factors come into play: external pressures to limit or, more likely, increase the size of a program; the negative implications of low retention and graduation rates; the presence (or not) of underrepresented minorities on campus or in the region; the institutional mission; legislative mandates about in-state or out-of-state recruitment; limits on class size; and a varying availability of faculty members to teach the requisite number of courses.

Consequently, the Forum on Admissions and Retention addresses a fraught issue for any honors program or college—an issue that should ideally be examined as frequently as possible. The Forum invited this kind of examination in its Call for Papers:

The lead essay for the Forum . . . is by Jerry Herron of Wayne State University. His essay—titled “Notes toward an Excellent Marxist-Elitist Honors Admissions Policy”—argues for
quantifiable measurements of the interconnections between admissions policies and other data such as retention and graduation rates or GPAs as a means to demonstrate the value-added of honors. Contributions to the Forum may—but need not—respond to Herron’s essay or the issues he addresses.

Questions that Forum contributors might consider include: Are data available that show a significant correlation between admissions criteria and retention? Should admissions and retention criteria for honors be absolute or flexible, objective or subjective, impersonal or personal, and why? Should admissions criteria focus on academic excellence or social justice or a mixture of the two? Is the quality of an honors program determined by who gets in or by who stays in and graduates? Does a focus on measurable data in admissions and retention limit a program’s potential for innovation and experimentation? What is the ideal mix of admissions criteria (e.g., SAT/ACT, GPA, extracurricular activities, letters of recommendation, personal interviews)? Should conventional academic criteria necessarily take precedence over non-academic talents in, for instance, the arts, athletics, or community service? What do admissions and retention criteria tell students about the program to which they are applying? Is using the SAT or ACT as an admissions criterion a way of shifting the burden of selection to a testing service? Is using GPA as an admissions criterion a way of shifting the burden of selection to high school teachers? How should admissions and retention criteria in honors relate to those criteria within the larger institution?

Forum essays should focus on ideas, concepts, and/or opinions related to “Admissions and Retention in Honors.” Examples from one’s own campus can be and usually are relevant, but essays should not simply be descriptions of “what we do at our institution.”

The Forum includes five responses to the Call for Papers in addition to Herron’s lead essay. In “Notes toward an Excellent Marxist-Elitist Honors Admissions Policy,” Jerry Herron conjures up ancestral preachers and car salesmen, along with Tom Wolfe and Groucho Marx, in examining how we sell the “elitist entitlement” of honors to a “flock of middle-class aspirants and strivers who wish to make their way up.” Among the dizzying array of options for determining who will be chosen to enter into the honors elect, Herron describes a mathematical
formula that the Wayne State University Honors College has come up with to predict the success of applicants using data about current and past students. Having described how the college chooses students, he then describes the ritual it stages to convince the chosen flock that they have been called to a company of worthies. The task then remains to prove that the college has chosen wisely, using other possible mathematical formulas to sell the institution on the value of honors. Aided by evangelism and salesmanship, Herron argues that statistics on admissions and retention need to underpin the articles of faith in honors.

In “Assessing Success in Honors: Getting beyond Graduation Rates,” Sean K. Kelly of Florida Gulf Coast University argues that graduation rates are not a good measure of a program’s quality: any student who participates in honors, he suggests, gains valuable skills and opportunities whether that student completes the program or not. He writes, “If directors and deans could demonstrate that students who have ‘touched’ honors graduated from the university at a higher rate, accomplished more, were more fully engaged in university life, and demonstrated higher satisfaction rates with the institution than their peers who never joined honors, then honors administrators would have powerful evidence that their work promotes individual and institutional successes regardless of honors’ own graduation rate.” This potential area of assessment would make an interesting topic for future research.

Michael K. Cundall, Jr., of North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University addresses the question that high-achieving students and their parents often put to honors administrators about potential damage that an honors program might do to a student’s undergraduate GPA and quality of life. His essay “Admissions, Retention, and Reframing the Question ‘Isn’t It Just More Work?’” cites research on undergraduate education showing that three factors in particular have a positive influence on student success: meaningful student-teacher relationships, peer interactions, and student expectations. These three factors are all hallmarks of honors education, Cundall argues, and thus constitute a sales pitch that honors administrators can deliver in good faith when inviting students to join their programs.

While admiring Herron’s essay and appreciating his argument, Scott Carnicom of Middle Tennessee State University offers a suggestion and a caveat in “Predicting Student Success, Ameliorating Risk, and Guarding against Homogeneity in Honors.” He suggests that an algorithm predicting success in honors based on retention and graduation rates should be expanded to include other factors such as gender, income, and race, and that such an algorithm should be used to predict the risk of failure as well as success; in this way, honors administrators could intervene to prevent potential problems for high-risk honors students as soon as they are admitted to the program.
His caveat is that measuring success only in terms of program completion reflects the current national obsession with this measurement alone, exclusive of academic integrity, and can lead to competition among institutions and programs to graduate students at any cost while also sacrificing access and diversity.

Annmarie Guzy echoes Carnicom’s caveat in “The Confidence Game in Honors Admissions and Retention,” where she points out that decreasing the requirements for completion of the honors program at the University of South Alabama resulted in a substantial increase in the percentage of students who completed the program. She also argues that students as well as honors administrators are masters of the numbers game and that they use all the admissions formulas to jockey themselves into richer scholarships by, for instance, taking the ACT or SAT tests over and over again. Guzy makes the case that qualitative judgments based on expertise in teaching are at least as trustworthy as data-driven assessments, which are easily manipulated in order to appease and impress higher administrations.

Jeffrey A. Portnoy takes Guzy’s argument one step further and argues that data-driven definitions of success in honors impede rather than advance the cause of recruiting, retaining, and, most importantly, educating students. In “An Honors Koan: Selling Water by the River,” Portnoy uses as an example the multi-campus honors program he directs at Georgia Perimeter College to illustrate the primacy of integrity and institution-wide support, not data, in maintaining a healthy and viable program and in providing the best service to students in the context of a unique institution. Since all institutions and programs are unique, algorithms do not just miss the point but sabotage it, the point being that, in good times and especially hard times, integrity, credibility, trust, and service trump data every time. In Portnoy’s metaphor, drinking from the river of honors should not require a measuring cup but rather an open invitation to drink deeply.

Four of the five research essays in this issue address the theme of the Forum, focusing on recruitment, admissions, retention, and graduation.

We begin with an essay that answers Jerry Herron’s challenge to find a formula for predicting retention and to use this formula as the basis for admissions criteria. In “Improving Retention and Fit by Honing an Honors Admissions Model,” Patricia Joanne Smith and John Thomas Vitus Zagurski describe a statistical analysis they performed at the University of Central Arkansas to determine which admissions criteria are the best predictors of retention and high GPA. Their research showed that at UCA “[n]o single variable meaningfully predicted retention,” but the high school GPA seemed to have a high predictive relationship with freshman GPA while the ACT had no predictive relationship. Their research also affirmed the value of qualitative evaluations.
The UCA Schedler Honors College adjusted its admissions formula to reflect the research findings, resulting in both a higher retention rate and an increase in diversity.

In “Propensity Score Analysis of an Honors Program’s Contribution to Students’ Retention and Graduation Outcomes,” Robert R. Keller and Michael G. Lacy follow up on the earlier research of Charlie Slavin et al., Frank Shushok, and John Cosgrove by employing a type of statistical analysis used most often to study the medical outcomes for treated and untreated patients. Using this Propensity Score Analysis, the authors studied the retention and graduation outcomes for honors and non-honors students at Colorado State University, concluding that “participation in the honors program was associated with meaningful increases in the proportion of these students who returned for their second year at the university and in the proportion of them who graduated within a four-, five-, or six-year period.”

Lynne Goodstein and Patricia Szarek of the University of Connecticut target the issue of retention and graduation rates in “They Come But Do They Finish? Program Completion for Honors Students at a Major Public University, 1998–2010.” In addition to providing academic enrichment, institutions typically expect honors programs to attract and retain high-achieving students, but previous research has generally not yielded encouraging results on completion rates in honors programs and colleges. Goodstein and Szarek present a longitudinal study of honors at their institution to suggest the impact of programmatic changes on improved rates of completion, identifying specific factors such as honors housing, mentorships, micro-communities, and higher admission standards that seem to have boosted retention and graduation rates in honors.

In “Factors Influencing Honors College Recruitment, Persistence, and Satisfaction at an Upper-Midwest Land Grant University,” Timothy J. Nichols and Kuo-Liang “Matt” Chang present the results of a survey they conducted of 138 honors students at South Dakota State University. The survey focused on why students decided to join the honors college, why they stayed in it, what challenges they faced in trying to complete it, how satisfied they were with it, and how demographics affected their responses. The authors present and discuss the data they collected and describe how their honors college has used the results of the study to develop or adjust policies and practices such as recruitment strategies, mentoring opportunities, and curricular and extracurricular offerings.

In the final research essay of this issue, “Real-Life Solutions to Real-Life Problems: Collaborating with a Non-Profit Foundation to Engage Honors Students in Applied Research,” Emily Stark argues for the value of applied research projects within an honors curriculum. She suggests that, in addition to the benefits of independent research that are part of virtually all honors
EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION

curricula, applied projects can both provide a service to community organizations and show students the immediate relevance of their efforts. Using as an example the collaboration between the Minnesota State University, Mankato, Honors Program and Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation, Stark demonstrates how such projects can be structured within a traditional honors program to benefit both students and the community.
Forum on Admissions and Retention in Honors
Notes toward an Excellent Marxist-Elitist Honors Admissions Policy

JERRY HERRON
WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY

I beg indulgence for an opening anecdote that will perhaps point the issue at hand in a useful direction. I am descended from an honorable line of traveling preachers and car salesmen. As to the preachers, one forebear in particular would occasionally suffer a certain reluctance among the flock when he made his call inviting potential congregants to come forward and receive the benefits of faith, which—to invoke the other side of my family tree—was not unlike the annual call to view new car models back when model change was real and something people could believe in. In order to instill courage among the reluctant, my clerical forebear would use a plant, his infant daughter, placed at the rear of the crowd. If there were no adults willing to respond when the solicitation came, the toddler would make her way forward, at which point my preacher-ancestor would conjure the weak of heart to heed the courage of even a little child. It never failed, or so I am told, and that is pretty much the business we are in now, enlisting the yet-to-be-converted, students and parents as well as attendant “deciders” (to invoke that disagreeably trendy term) on behalf of a larger community of faith, with the end result being, if not salvation precisely, at least making a sale. To that good end, a little show business never hurts (more about that shortly), which gets to the questions at hand when it comes to admissions standards. What are we offering? Who gets invited? How do we decide? How will we know we have made the right decision? Obviously the third question is the most relevant when it comes to honors admissions standards, but we cannot get there without some notion of the other concerns: our product, our customers, and our after-market results.

Starting with the first question, then, what are we offering? One thing for sure, it is not a chance to be just like everybody else, whether for faculty, staff, or—perhaps most importantly—students; here, egalitarianism would be a falsification of our history, which traces its origins to England’s ancient universities and then to our colonials’ ivy league before making its way to the diversity of institutions where honors thrives happily today, as becomes clear in Annmarie Guzy’s useful history. Along the way, honors has lost its patrician
pedigree, acquiring a more broad-church, populist identity, at least in terms of the kinds of institutions where the call to honors is being issued nowadays, which is a point Norm Weiner made recently in this journal:

By the twenty-first century, many people had come to see honors education as a way to bring “ivy league education to state universities” or to small private (often religious-based) colleges. Tellingly, no ivy-league school has a university-wide honors program today. Honors has moved from its upper-class, elite origins to a decidedly middle-class footing. (21)

As Weiner points out, what we are offering is a way up, “helping our students climb the class ladder” as well as helping them to “realize how smart and talented they are despite their society’s assumption that the more something costs, the better it must be” (23). Consequently, honors education is “both elite and middle-class” (24), as he concludes; it is not for everybody (thus elitist), but, for those we let in, it is a decidedly middle-class affair, based on the great promise of this immigrant society of ours that people deserve a chance.

So, we are agreed that honors is offering a kind of elitist entitlement to a flock of middle-class aspirants and strivers who wish to make their way up in “this wild, bizarre, unpredictable, Hog-stomping Baroque country of ours,” to quote that apt phrase of Tom Wolfe (55). As his characterization suggests, the good work of elitism is no easy calling, set upon as we are by every manner of mountebank and false prophet, all claiming “excellence” as the basis of their evangel. Our present moment, historically, is—if anything—all the more “tabescent” and mendacious than when Wolfe wrote almost a quarter century ago, and this offers both a challenge and an opportunity. “[T]he assumption of excellence has been weakened,” Sam Schuman writes, “if not lost. It seems we have drifted towards a culture of mediocrity. Or, if that is putting it too dramatically, a collegiate culture where, too often, doing OK . . . is OK” (71). Schuman was writing about the future of NCHC and the directions that our organization might reasonably take. In the same issue of *JNCHC*, published in 2001, Joan Digby looked at the culture of mediocrity Sam referred to and offered a call to action: “[I]t is time for NCHC to voice its standards in the larger world of higher education and the popular media” (73), which is precisely what we have been doing for the past decade and more—maybe not so visibly or forcefully as we might, but that has been our cause.

If you were to look at our official statement of honors philosophy—or philosophies—on the NCHC web page, at the top of the list is “academic excellence.” (The list, I should add, is not alphabetically ordered.) Of course, as one of my used-car-selling ancestors might have pointed out, it goes without saying that everything on our lot is excellent since we are the ones doing the
selling. But we need to be sure that every once in a while something actually is excellent, which gets at the crux of both my first and second questions about what we are offering and to whom.

We are thus far agreed. We are offering an elitist entitlement based on academic excellence and the chance to move up. And while the call might go out to the many, it is the few we choose who make real and visible our claim to excellence, or else they turn out to be merely OK and show us up for liars. OK students are kind of like the oatmeal some on the used-car lot would put in a worn-out transmission to assure a certain short-term smoothness of gear shifts; they are phony grist for the tuition mill, likely to expose both themselves and us to criticism and possibly negative funding outcomes in this hog-stomping, assessment-obsessed political culture of ours. In any event, OK is surely not what honors is all about.

So, how do we choose those few who make real the claim for excellence? I am talking about students, but the same goes for faculty and staff. If we are going to bear proudly the standard of elitism and excellence, we will want to be clear about the picking. For those who might be contemplating some romantic, populist objection about now, I would urge the following point. If you have a front door on your house, you have already voted for elitism, not wanting just anybody to come in, and, if your college or university has any admissions requirements at all (from paying tuition to having a minimum ACT or SAT score), then you are working at an elitist institution. The issue, then, is whether we are willing to be up front about the standards we use and then defend them for honors, and this issue gets back to the matter of deciding who gets in, who does not, and how we decide.

I might seek guidance here from my colleague the athletics director, a man who is surely searching for excellence; hardly a week goes by that his admissions standards are not put to the test, visibly, in the gym, in the pool, or on the playing field. Few among us are held up to that kind of ongoing public assessment. So, how does he choose? Are the fencers held to the same standard as left tackles? Are swimmers measured by the same qualifications as the wrestlers? Of course not. Each program has its own types of excellence.

The same goes for honors programs and colleges. Each one is unique, with its own mission and goals relative to the mission and goals of the academic institution where it is housed. Diversity is important not just among but within honors programs, where we should select students according to standards specific to outcomes for, say, STEM students or musicians or historians or, yes, athletes. However, diversity—academic, ethnic, racial, class-related, age-related, or all of the above—is not the only goal. Like the athletics director and the way he builds a program, we need to remember something about a great team: each member is different, from the tight end to the tackle, but all share
a common purpose, or else they fail because they lack one. *E pluribus unum*, as our national motto has it. It is worth recalling the origin of that magisterial phrase in a poem attributed to Virgil, “Moretum,” that, as Adam Gopnik reminds us, “describes a farmer making something rather like pesto: he pestles together cheese and garlic and herbs and oil, and sees that, though the whole is something quite new, each little green or cheesy bit doesn’t completely blend in but keeps its own character” (46). Honors administrators are up to the same challenge, promulgating elitist admissions standards that, if they work, will yield a diversely excellent academic cohort with a coherent institutional identity: “Out of many, one—without betraying the many,” as Gopnik says (46).

Before getting specific about admissions standards, we need to think about the playing field where the many strive to become one. I cannot improve on Joy Pehlke’s characterization of the various ambitions that converge there, so I will quote her at some length here:

The attention to honors represents an intentional effort on behalf of university administrators to advance their universities’ academic reputations. The inherent benefits of honors programs include attracting and retaining more intellectually motivated students to the university, raising the overall intellectual level and reputation of the campus, providing an interdisciplinary honors curriculum that offers special seminars and independent study opportunities, and encouraging an innovative and experimental interaction between faculty and students. (28)

If an honors program works, its students—like athletes—are seen to stand for the whole institution and what it is capable of achieving: one cohort that represents all, *e pluribus unum*. When it comes to issuing the all-important call that will summon the many to one pesto-like unity, admissions standards are the most powerful representation we have of who we are, so they had better be good ones and true.

Admissions standards put me in mind of Groucho Marx and his famous quip about not wanting to belong to any club that would accept people like him as members. All honors administrators are good Marxists by definition, so it is incumbent on us to establish admissions standards that advertise not only who gets in but, by implication, who is kept out—a principle that again should apply not only to students but to faculty and staff as well. Richard Stoller provides a useful classification for admissions policies as either “skimming” or “free standing,” skimming as the application of a given set of standards (usually a combination of ACT/SAT and GPA scores) to distinguish honors students from all students accepted at a given institution, and free standing as a separate honors admissions process that adds essays, interviews, recommendations, and/or other elements to standardized test scores and GPAs (79).
Having been the author of more than one report about student success, I have an idea of the formidable body of research that exists on the question of skimming or free standing, about admissions policies generally, and about the data mining that might seem a necessary first step toward defining proper policies. This research is all well and good, but when it comes to the immediate task at hand, we may not have time for exhaustive longitudinal studies. Students are showing up, and admission decisions have to be made, so it seems as if the only practical alternative might be just relying on blind faith, which is all the more tempting if you happen to be in a situation where you do not have access to sophisticated statistical analysis and institutional research. Say it’s just you and the pile of applications on your desk: how do you decide?

Unless you are starting a new program, you have probably done your longitudinal analysis already, perhaps unaware, no matter what the size of your program or the data-mining resources at your disposal: students have taken honors courses, gotten grades, completed requirements, and graduated (or not). You can look at who has succeeded, by whatever measures you choose to define success, and then admit more students like these. The basic principle is simple; the harder question is what characterizes these successful students at the point of their entering the institution. I have been fortunate enough to have a colleague who is a brilliant statistician and has spent a great deal of time conducting an ongoing longitudinal study of honors value added at our institution. One part of that study is an analysis of potential admissions criteria and the various data points that might go into an admissions matrix. What we have concluded, after a lot of statistics that are dizzying to me as an English professor, is a solution that strikes me as elegant in its simplicity. Out of all the possible permutations and combinations of data, it turns out that in my honors college the most reliable predictors of an entering student’s success are ACT score plus high school GPA. Neither one alone is nearly as accurate as the two in combination, and we have discovered a further, equally elegant way to relate them by multiplying the one by the other. For example, a student with a 3.75 GPA and a 28 ACT score (3.75 x 28 = 105) will perform, on average, about the same as a student with a 3.9 GPA and a 27 ACT score (3.9 x 27 = 105).

Now, I am not proposing to apply one formula across the board. Honors is the home of pesto-ecuminism, after all. The same admission standards will not be sufficient for all constituencies, e.g., first-time freshmen, transfer students, students who join honors after a year or two, returning veterans, and students admitted to special programs within honors. In many cases we will also want to define appropriate measures for achieving diversity, perhaps by building bridge programs to prepare successful candidates while they are still in school. Our bridge program starts as early as eighth grade. In every instance, however,
we need to be up front about what is driving admissions decisions and why our measures are appropriate. We need to demonstrate that we know what we are doing and be able to show that the students admitted to an honors program or college are capable of achieving at the level we expect so that they are retained and graduate successfully. Otherwise, the claim for excellence is an expensive lie that cheats students out of their good faith and tuition dollars.

We can now return to a theological version of Groucho’s insight: faith is about being called to something better. The challenge is enlisting students actively in the process of their own election—to a cohort that is not merely Lake Wobegon OK but one that is demonstrably excellent. Here I would offer my honors college’s annual recruitment program as an example—one among many different possibilities, obviously. We skim our applicant pool for likely invitees, with free standing measures being applied variously to different constituencies within that group. We put on a campus event for an audience of admitted students and guests on a Saturday or Sunday. Our auditorium holds about six hundred people; every seat is filled, with people also sitting on stage and latecomers in an overflow space outside, watching on TV. It is quite a happening, which is just what we intend. We want all these smart, ambitious, excellent students and their guests to see how many others just like them are there, and we want to engage these young scholars knowingly in the process of their becoming honors students. My school is a Carnegie research university (RU/VH as they are called); the state where I live has three, with the two others, in Ann Arbor and East Lansing, being within easy driving distance of our campus. One not-so-disguised goal of our event is to make sure that guests are mindful of the kind of school we are and the opportunities we offer as well as the distinctive strengths that set us apart from other schools, particularly those two just down the road. As Joy Pehlke says, honors represents an intentional effort to advance our university’s academic reputation—among students themselves, their parents, and also faculty, staff, and members of the community, who play a part in this recruitment day.

The whole admissions process—if staged properly, with showmanship and panache—is the most powerful means at our disposal for evangelizing on behalf of our excellent good cause, no matter the size of the institution or the nature of the competition. We should make the most of this opportunity by being honest about what we are doing. Once we have published up front what it takes to be invited, the power of the honors invitation depends on our visibly recognizing achievements—in that room full of guests, regardless of how large or small the room might be—achievements that are worth rewarding because not just anybody can claim them. On this Marxist principle, Groucho and I are agreed.
So now we arrive at the final, after-market question: how we know if we have devised a successful admissions policy. We can measure success by the number of new students coming in the front door, their subsequent retention and graduation rates, and their academic performance along the way. Our institutions as a whole, though, use this same process, raising the question how to evaluate honors over and above such general measures—aside from the notion that we are part of the rising tide that floats the boats of student success and institutional reputation. If this notion is generally accepted, as it typically is, then honors becomes a kind of obligatory add-on, like wi-fi access; without it, your institution seems somehow retrograde, which accounts—at least in part—for the proliferation of honors programs and colleges in recent decades and consequently the return of Sam Schuman’s question about the claim to excellence and whether what we do genuinely deserves the name “honors.”

All of us who work in honors education believe we are adding value; the challenge is to prove the value-added claim and thus to justify our existence and the money spent sustaining it. What I am proposing is a data-based assessment of the equally data-driven admissions policy that you put in place. For example, you might evaluate the performance of comparable cohorts of students—some who are enrolled in honors and some who are not—to look at the number of credit hours students take or the time to graduate or the performance of underrepresented students.

As honors administrators, we need to show that we know what we are doing and have the numbers to support our claims—aside from the claims of qualitative superiority that we can all provide. The goal is to define honors according to certain measures of excellence for students coming into the institution and to show that our choices are right because students who enter with these characteristics perform demonstrably better thanks to the good work we do in nurturing the qualities we have identified. One analytical caution, however, is that the data must be comparable: cohorts of similarly qualified students as they enter, some in honors and some not, so that all the apples really are apples in the comparison. If we have done our homework properly, we can have the experience—like that moment when my forebear’s child would make her toddler’s way forward, summoning the faith of even the skeptics and weak of heart—of seeing non-believers giving an amen. Further, we can put a dollar value on our good works, perhaps showing that honors students on average take more credit hours per semester than comparable non-honors students or that retention is better among the honors population. Then multiplying the difference between honors and non-honors students by the tuition paid per credit hour provides value-added translated into a monetary bottom line. Even an English professor with a calculator is up to that level of mathematical
challenge. Checking the number of academic or financial “holds” among the two groups and calculating the cost of staff time to process each hold might also show that honors students are cheaper to have in the house than non-honors students.

Whatever measures we use, my point is this: a well-conceived admissions policy tells us much more than whom to recruit; it becomes the basis for a quantitative defense of what we do with data and puts a convincing dollar value on the good evangel of excellence. Like my circuit-riding forebears—who would hitch up under a shade tree and hope to gather a flock, knowing that, if their pitch failed, they would have to ride off hungry without any fried chicken provided by a grateful congregant—honors administrators either succeed locally or else not at all. What goes on under your own particular shade tree, in other words, is what matters most.

REFERENCES


*******

The author may be contacted at Jerry.Herron@wayne.edu.
Assessing Success in Honors: Getting beyond Graduation Rates

SEAN K. KELLY
FLORIDA GULF COAST UNIVERSITY

An honors curriculum with realistic graduation requirements should have a respectable graduation rate. This number, when low, can indicate significant problems in the program. But a high graduation rate does not necessarily indicate success. A quality honors program, especially one that remains attentive to students’ ability to thrive, might have better measures available for judging impact and effectiveness. After all, manipulating a graduation rate is easy: make the curriculum excessively convenient and lower standards. While some honors curricula are perhaps unnecessarily rigid or unusually difficult, the faculty and administrators of most quality programs have managed to create a curriculum with standards and requirements that the majority of honors-type students are able to achieve. Even so, honors requirements must represent challenges. Aristotle reminds us in *Nichomachean Ethics*, “it is also hard work to be excellent” (51), and thus it is important that honors achievements remain admirable and its requirements adequately aspirational.

Given these facts, many students who enter honors will lack the desire or ability to graduate from the program, but this is no reason to automatically assume that honors has failed these students. In fact, I contend that one of the best measures of honors’ success and effectiveness can be discovered by assessing this group. If directors and deans could demonstrate that students who have “touched” honors graduated from the university at a higher rate, accomplished more, were more fully engaged in university life, and demonstrated higher satisfaction rates with the institution than their peers who never joined honors, then honors administrators would have powerful evidence that their work promotes individual and institutional successes regardless of honors’ own graduation rate. Moreover, results from such assessment might enhance the positioning of honors within the university as its role in helping the institution achieve excellence could be measured in areas beyond the program. Several basic and tested mechanisms are potentially useful to a program desiring to assess itself based on such metrics.
ADMISSIONS

Student success starts by matching a student with an appropriate program. Since one of the necessary conditions for graduation from honors is generally a minimum G.P.A., a program has the responsibility to make sure that a student’s academic record predicts meeting that standard. This kind of prediction becomes more important if honors has a rich social structure and residential community. Accepting a student at risk of failing means potentially removing a student whose social identity may be constructed around inclusion in this community. Should first-year students make all of their friends and identify future roommates in honors, removal of these students can have significant emotional consequences. The first step of the process, then, is to identify the best predictors of student success in the program and accept students who are clearly capable of meeting these standards.

Using only grades and test scores, however, can be highly problematic. Using only quantitative admissions metrics guarantees eliminating good candidates and perpetuating certain social injustices, but this problem can be remedied via other mechanisms. Peter Sederberg notes several strategies such as “creating a path through which students can transfer into honors after their first semester or year; opening honors courses to non-honors students on a space available basis; or creating programs that are designed from conception to include both honors and non-honors students” (10). Admissions practices such as these allow programs to include outstanding students whom metrics initially exclude. Moreover, these students have a lower risk of failure and the associated emotional distress since they have already demonstrated that they are willing and able to succeed on campus.

Admitting students with outstanding high school records or who demonstrate ability once on campus both mitigate the danger of unnecessary student failures. However, neither guarantees that a student will graduate with honors. No matter how carefully admissions criteria are crafted, even high-achieving students often struggle with the transition to college or encounter unexpected difficulties that adversely affect their performance. Expelling such students from the program can impose real difficulties on them during a trying period of their lives, and it can also sour them on their larger university experience. Since the goal is to help all students, regardless of their ultimate honors graduation status, programs should conscientiously avoid creating such hardships by creating a probationary policy that allows students time for academic recovery or eases transition out of the program. Successful or not, students should remember the honors experience fondly for introducing them to all that the campus provides in the way of clubs, organizations, mentors, friends, and other opportunities that will aid in growth. A harsh and swift removal from honors could prevent students from relating to other areas of campus life and
quickly undoing much of the program’s positive developmental work. Thus, honors has a special responsibility to ensure that transitioning out of honors happens in such a way that students have no regrets and can thrive because of their past involvement with the program.

CURRICULUM

Having identified the best potential matches for the program, honors faculty and administrators need to make sure they have crafted a curriculum that deeply and substantively engages students with the university as a whole, aiding the development of all the students whether they graduate or not. Honors courses are known for their innovative pedagogy and have a long history of embedding practices like study abroad and service learning in the curriculum. George D. Kuh names these and other such experiences “high-impact educational practices” (HIPs). Kuh’s research reaffirms that student immersion in such “deep approaches” to learning has profound impacts on students’ academic performance, campus engagement, and satisfaction with learning. Kuh writes that “students who use these approaches tend to earn higher grades and retain, integrate, and transfer information at higher rates. Students who have these experiences are also more engaged overall in the clusters of effective educational practices represented by the NSSE [National Survey of Student Engagement]” (“High-Impact Practices” 14). Students engaged in such practices, Kuh argues, learn more and are more satisfied with their chosen university.

An honors program that focuses on enhancing student engagement with learning and with the university as a whole should encourage faculty to adopt HIPs at specific points in the curriculum and to heed Kuh’s advice that “to engage students at high levels, these practices must be done well” (“High-Impact Practices” 20). Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa concur: “Engaging activities and peer collaboration do not have to be antithetical to learning, but they are likely conducive only in specifically structured contexts that focus students’ attention appropriately on learning” (132–33). As Arum and Roksa write, HIPs require effort and skill: “It is not only students who may not put active and collaborative learning activities to best use. Faculty are not very skilled in doing so either” (133). Honors thus needs to assume responsibility for training faculty for effective use of the HIPs identified by Kuh: “first-year seminars, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, service learning, undergraduate research, study abroad, and other experiences with diversity, internships, and capstone courses and projects” (Kuh, High-Impact 14). Moreover, honors should specifically link one or more HIPs to each class/touch in the curriculum, guaranteeing that students who enter honors, regardless of their ultimate retention, experience multiple HIPs in their college years.
An appropriately generous probationary period ensures that even students who ultimately leave honors, get exposure to these high-quality opportunities for at least one or two years, experiencing multiple HIPs that generally far exceed Kuh’s suggestion that a college student experience a minimum of two.

Critics argue, justly or not, that HIPs do not provide a rigorous academic experience, describing them as “fun” or “extracurricular.” Given the educational and professional aspirations of honors students, the rigor and outcomes associated with honors education should not be compromised in favor of experiences that are merely socially gratifying even if they help graduation rates. A high-impact curriculum should demand tangible outcomes that both the students themselves and also outsiders can easily identify as significant, the kinds of outcomes that students can place on résumés or can reference in graduate school applications and job interviews.

Fortunately, a curriculum rich in HIPs such as research or service facilitates outcomes. Achievements that are widely acknowledged in academia and the professional world, e.g., publications, presentations, leadership positions, and fundraising, demonstrate that the student has spent the time-on-task necessary for deep, meaningful learning to take place, thus validating the use of HIPs in the curriculum. Moreover, such outcomes give students ownership of their learning, which ideally transfers to the students whether they graduate or not. The outcomes also provide faculty incentive to emphasize the learning aspect of the HIPs they employ. “What is clear is that student-faculty interaction matters most to learning when it encourages students to devote greater effort to other educationally purposeful activities during college. The key is substantive contact. Casual contact with faculty members has little to no effect on learning gains or effort” (Kuh, “What We’re Learning” 29). HIP learning outcomes focus both the professor and the students on fully engaged learning, with student achievement providing a type of peer review of the quality of the HIP. Student ownership of accomplishments and expanded mentorship possibilities mean that students embed themselves in university communities beyond honors. If honors facilitates these engagements carefully, a student should no longer need to stay in honors in order to succeed; the assessment measure I am suggesting captures honors success in student development regardless of graduation rates.

For example, at our university, our honors service labs not only promote meaningful service learning but also structure initiatives in such a way that students, in order to complete the projects, must employ skills that they learn in the process of project implementation. In fall 2012, for instance, one service lab began with the professor challenging students to create a project that raised at least $10,000 for an organization, used at least five forms of social media, and involved runners traversing at least five hundred miles. Eighteen students.
created Trails for Tails, a run for panther habitat conservation. Ten runners ran relay-style from Fort Myers to Key West and back (over 550 miles) in seven days. Through this project, the students learned significant skills in logistics, crowd sourcing, webpage creation, marketing, non-profit accounting, and organizational management. They ultimately raised over $13,000 in three months and nearly reached “viral” status on Facebook. Every student walked out of the class able to demonstrate at least one new skill, and the runners will always remember the personal accomplishment involved in the event.

Honors theses provide another opportunity for HIP outcomes, and a variety of HIPs embedded within the curriculum can help students who plan to produce a thesis while also providing a better undergraduate experience for all students whether they stay in the program or not. An introductory honors biology course might include undergraduate research that results in mastery of certain laboratory techniques or isolation of a virus found in the environment. In such a course, young researchers gain not only research experience but also professional skills that translate learning beyond the home campus. Students who continue with honors can continue to build on this foundation, perhaps leading to a thesis, while students who leave honors acquire skills and opportunities that they can use in their studies outside of honors.

ASSESSMENT

If an honors curriculum ensures that students who are in the program for even one or two years engages in multiple, high-quality HIPs and helps them walk away with ownership of concrete accomplishments and an academic support system, then graduation from honors is far less important than the way that honors has facilitated their successes and interactions with the university. If a first-year course requires service abroad, then students, regardless of their ultimate honors status at graduation, will have visited the office of international service and the office of civic engagement, traveled to a foreign country, and performed service in such a way that they have accomplished deep learning and made concrete achievements with academic mentors; these resources, experiences, achievements, and mentors will be available to them from that point forward.

Provided that honors emphasizes gradual, dignified, and graceful exits for students who will not graduate, the knowledge and experiences that all students carry forth from honors are ones that should enhance their relationship with the university as a whole and show up in assessment. If this hypothesis is correct, then both honors graduates and former honors students would have (1) higher participation in campus activities and university sponsored programs, (2) more individual accomplishments related to their university experience, (3) higher satisfaction with their university experience, and (4)
higher retention rates than their non-honors peers. Comparing former honors to non-honors students would demonstrate the impact of honors on the wider campus, perhaps identifying specific departments and areas receiving significant benefits. The conduct of such assessment on an individual campus as well in a wider context will, I predict, increase appreciation of the role that honors plays in improving the quality of education both within and beyond honors.

REFERENCES


Kuh, George D. “What We’re Learning about Student Engagement from NSSE.” *Change* 35.2 (2003): 24–32.


*******

The author may be contacted at

skelly@fgcu.edu.
Admissions, Retention, and Reframing the Question “Isn’t It Just More Work?”

MICHAEL K. CUNDALL, JR.
NORTH CAROLINA AGRICULTURAL AND TECHNICAL STATE UNIVERSITY

In the lead essay of this Forum, one of the questions Jerry Herron asks in discussing honors admissions is “What are we offering?” This question relates directly to the question often posed by well-meaning parents, well-intentioned students, and inquisitive administrators who want to know if honors is just more and/or harder work and hence not worth the risk. Having gotten a B in honors calculus will do damage to a GPA when the student could have earned an A in a non-honors calculus course. Students and parents might thus perceive the cost of honors work to outweigh the possible benefits, believing that the notation of honors on a transcript or diploma will not look as important as the GPA on a future résumé.

Many of us in honors, when we reply to queries about the difficulty of honors, explain that honors education is different in approach from regular coursework and employs different methods. We typically have retention and graduation rates that support our contention that honors helps rather impedes a student’s college career. While this strategy often allays the worries of students and parents, perhaps we can do more in making the argument convincing to upper-level administrators, especially given the seemingly constant strain on resources in honors. We need also to make the case that the skills students develop in honors will benefit them in future job interviews and graduate applications. As honors apologists, we need to emphasize recent research on co-curricular activities and their effects on retention and graduation, making the case that honors education has a positive impact on retention and graduation for undergraduates. The answer to the question about what honors has to offer is that it provides the kind of co-curricular support for an academically rigorous curriculum that enables students to graduate from college with a rich experiential background and to launch a successful career. If strong and meaningful co-curricular activities have positive effects on graduation and retention and honors is a co-curricular experience writ large, then worries about the risk of honors are misplaced.
The factors that influence student success are myriad. Socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, gender, and immigrant background can all influence student success (Kuh, et al.); these factors are beyond the institution’s control and, in some instances, can militate against success in college. The institution does have control, though, over many important factors that can benefit students, including expectations in the classroom, the structure of curricula, and the availability of extra-curricular activities (see Kuh, et al., footnote 1, for a long list). The evidence also suggests that educational programs and practices that significantly engage students during their first year can and do have a positive influence on student success (Gerken and Volkwein). An institution can deploy these kinds of strategies and programs to increase retention and graduation and honors programs can make three important contributions in the areas of meaningful student-teacher relationships, significant peer relationships, and clear expectations.

Student-professor relationships are an essential feature of honors programs, where the smaller class sizes create opportunities for high-quality relationships with professors. Graunke and Woosley, among others, have shown that meaningful out-of-class contact with professors about either research questions or how to succeed in college is positively related to student success. Students do better if they feel they can approach a professor about more than simply coursework. Mentoring relationships and advising activities also meaningfully contribute to a student’s success, helping them to feel part of the larger community. Any program or set of practices that brings students and faculty closer together is likely to have a salutary effect on success, especially since honors teachers tend to be enthusiastic in their support of students.

The second area of importance for student success is peer interactions (Kuh et al.). Honors students spend the preponderance of their time in close contact with members of their peer group, where they develop a new social identity away from and sometimes radically different from their high school or family identity. As students grow comfortable with their identity on campus, they begin to work through and discuss topics of importance to them in the socio-political realm. They interact with peers and often professors as well to understand currently relevant political and moral issues. Beyond social interactions with their peers, students can create or find support in study and discussion groups, often carrying forward discussions from their classes. As honors puts together students who are geared toward success in a variety of programming areas (living learning communities and service projects as well as classes), the students help one another maintain their drive and achievements.

The third factor important for success is student expectations. Wrong or vague expectations of college can negatively influence students’ satisfaction with their college experience and lead to lower persistence to graduation.
Honors students may come into college with a more nuanced understanding of what to expect from college, but they too need to pay close attention to their curriculum and receive good advising about how to meet requirements and position themselves for entry into graduate school or the job market. Many in honors assume that the students come into a program already motivated and focused on their future, already attuned to the values of honors, so that advisors need only to guide them through the process of achieving their goals through honors. While this assumption may be true in most cases, honors helps students internalize their goals and achieve them in a focused manner.

These three factors comprise a powerful sales pitch for honors, in Jerry Herron’s parlance. I tell students and parents that honors classes are smaller and promote a qualitatively better kind of student/professor interaction. I stress that having a good relationship with professors can help them do better in classes because they get to know how professors think and what they expect. The professors can help them get summer research appointments or internships, and can then write letters of recommendation for graduate schools or jobs. Honors students can also be more successful because they are surrounded by other students who are interested in achieving in the same ways they are. They study and work in an intellectual atmosphere that encourages service projects and other kinds of active participation on campus or in the broader community. Finally, honors is an environment where students are expected to perform at their best. Being told that they are honors students leads them to have higher expectations of themselves. They receive privileges and opportunities that others do not, and they typically strive to deserve them by doing well in their classes, being an example for others on campus, and making the university proud.

Honors thus acts as one large and multi-faceted co-curricular as well as curricular activity that incorporates factors proven to lead to student success and to mitigate possible causes of failure. Hence, the worry that honors is so hard that it might inhibit success is exactly at odds with what the research suggests. Honors education provides the very sorts of activities and supports that we know contribute to success, so it is much more than mere salesmanship when honors administrators claim that honors is a mechanism for student success.

REFERENCES


******

The author may be contacted at

mcundall@ncat.edu.
Jerry Herron’s thought-provoking essay raised three key issues in my mind that I hope to describe in this humble response to his fine work. The overarching theme of his essay was to inquire how honors administrators predict student success and how they use that predictive power wisely and objectively to admit students and maintain quality. I want to expand on this idea and point out that such algorithms ideally could also predict students at risk so that institutional personnel could mobilize support efforts more proactively. Additionally, Herron notes the honors community’s appropriate and unyielding focus on academic quality at a time when many others mistake expedient completion with learning, but I want to warn that honors admissions and financial aid practices could inadvertently over-reward and attract a homogenous group of students.

Herron’s suggestion to use data in the admissions process to better predict student success is excellent. What Herron is suggesting is the use of a statistical technique called regression, which is based on correlation and uses numerous variables to predict a particular outcome or behavior. In this example, an honors college collects data on current students and examines how their level of success in honors is related or linked to numerous factors that they presented as applicants. In other words, administrators build an equation or algorithm of success based on current students and then apply it to future students or applicants.

Herron was predicting success in honors based on the combination of high school GPA and ACT score. However, even more robust algorithms might take into account the predictive power of other variables like number of hours spent volunteering, number of honors courses taken, income, distance of home from campus, gender, or race. Written out mathematically, such an equation could look like this:
Predicting Student Success, Ameliorating Risk, and Guarding

\[ Y = a + bX_1 + cX_2 + dX_4 + eX_5 + fX_6 + gX_7 + hX_8 + iX_9 \]

or

College GPA = a + b(GPAHS) + c(ACT) + d(volunteer) + e(honors) + f(income) + g(distance) + h(gender) + i(race)

In this example, each variable or factor that is related to success in honors (as arbitrarily measured by college GPA in this example) is weighted by a particular constant (b, c, d, etc.). The variable “a” is also a constant (a.k.a. the y intercept). Again, by building such an equation based on the performance of previous students, directors can make some predictions about how future students might perform in the program. As Herron points out, every honors program is different and emphasizes distinct qualities. One program might value service, and so knowing the number of hours a high school student spent volunteering could be a powerful predictor of success. Another program might place greater emphasis on independent scholarship and find that the number of high school honors credits a student earned is correlated with success. Alternatively, a program might find that being male is a risk factor, which is not preposterous given that women are now graduating at higher rates than men in the United States (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson 29).

The point I wish to emphasize is that equations designed to predict the probability of success also can highlight risk factors that are associated with individual students and can be addressed proactively. In other words, the same equation that predicts success can flag students early in their college careers and motivate honors staff to create support systems before problems arise. For example, a program that attracts home-schooled students may find that these students tend to struggle academically at a higher rate. Knowing this risk in advance, program staff can encourage these students to live in the honors residence hall and participate in honors co-curricular activities. Staff can then track the effectiveness of this approach.

As Herron mentions, honors administrators should use data not only to make admissions decisions but also to demonstrate the value-added component of programs. Predicting and ameliorating problems before students hit a bump in the road is ideal and should lead to higher student success and retention. When admitting students, an honors program is implying that it can partner with them and provide the support they need in order to work hard and succeed. The data that equations can yield add value by allowing staff to target particular students and tailor the educational environment in a way that no for-profit or MOOC could ever dream of.

While the use of data or algorithms is not universal, most honors programs strive to create a nurturing, engaging, scholarly community that graduates students in four years. While somewhat crass, this simple metric of graduation
has become a critical issue in the national conversation about higher education. Herron’s essay demonstrates that the honors community is still primarily focused on maintaining the highest levels of academic quality and integrity, but this focus is in sharp contrast to the national dialogue outside academia that more often focuses on mere completion or credentials. The honors community speaks of learning while politicians and pundits speak of earning—either diplomas or high salaries. As Bowen et al. state, “... it would be a serious mistake to treat all college degrees as the same or to put so much emphasis on earning a degree that other educational objectives are lost” (2).

For example, in 2010 the state of Tennessee completely overhauled the way it funds public higher education, implementing a formula that emphasizes completion as measured by number of graduates. Furthermore, the state has created a zero sum game, with institutions directly competing against each other for a limited pool of funds. The institution that shows the greatest gains in completion takes money from other possibly struggling institutions that may strive to assist students from traditionally underrepresented groups. This policy creates a vicious cycle; institutions that admirably provide access to a wide variety of students are penalized if at-risk students do not progress and graduate. While the state says it values access, the funding system tacitly encourages institutions to raise their admissions standards more than it encourages them to devise support programs, and at worst it could encourage a decrease in academic standards if left unchecked.

While the honors community must continue to put academic quality at the forefront and never apologize for excellence, it should be aware of how admissions and financial aid policies intersect with this completion agenda spreading across the United States. Herron rightly advocates addressing academic quality through more sophisticated, evidenced-based admissions policies that predict student success. While I am similarly concerned with maintaining the tradition of excellence upon which honors is predicated, I am worried that our gatekeeping efforts could backfire and negatively influence accessibility, affordability, and diversity, as measured along many spectra.

As Weiner and in turn Herron point out, honors was designed to level the playing field, providing an excellent education to a wider group of students for whom the Ivy League or elite liberal arts colleges might have been out of reach. If the honors community builds admissions algorithms based on the success of previous students, it runs the risk of recruiting more of the same students and further homogenizing programs. Couched within a laudable zeal to preserve quality, honors programs could miss students who might excel in their programs, but who currently appear as long shots based on less than adequate predictive models and resulting admissions and financial aid practices.
Similarly, as S. Georgia Nugent has recently warned, the academy should be careful not to skew the use of merit aid at the expense of need-based aid while simultaneously eroding the definition of “merit” (Gardner). Honors programs obviously should maintain high standards so that they do not become an unintentionally watered-down entitlement, another empty perk on the campus brochure along with a rock wall or water slide. On the other hand, honors leaders should be more aware of how scholarships are distributed to ensure that institutional aid practices aren’t merely discounting or buying a narrow swath of “qualified” students. At the very least, honors administrators should be aware that the bureaucratic financial aid system in place in the United States is difficult to navigate, especially for the students with the greatest need to use it.

Undoubtedly, many honors leaders have been drawn to the community of honors out of a deep, principled desire to preserve good teaching and to maintain academic quality at the highest standards of our culture. Most honors programs are based on these values, which stand in counterpoint to more efficient modes of instructional delivery that prioritize credentials over actual learning (Carnicom). Honors preserves something sacred but at the same time may unintentionally support the completion agenda by catering to a homogenous group of students enticed by merit aid well in excess of need. We all agree that college should be challenging and that the honors community should invest heavily in excellence by recruiting top-notch students and faculty, but we should refrain from defining quality merely by the strength or length of the velvet rope barring entrance. As Herron notes, diversity is an important value-added component to an honors program. Merit scholarships should be reserved for meritorious achievement and not given out like participation medals to every student fortunate enough to have the right zip code. If honors leaders fail to rectify this practice, they may eventually violate the original spirit in which honors was created.

REFERENCES


******

The author may be contacted at scott.carnicom@mtsu.edu.
In “Notes toward an Excellent Marxist-Elitist Honors Admissions Policy,” Jerry Herron argues that “a well-conceived admissions policy tells us much more than whom to recruit; it becomes the basis for a quantitative defense of what we do with data and puts a convincing dollar value on the good evangel of excellence.” As a rhetorician who worked at an advertising agency in a previous life, I can certainly acknowledge the value of promoting a product, whether we are pitching our programs to prospective students or performing feats of statistical prestidigitation for upper administration. I am also, however, skeptical about administration’s increasing overreliance upon quantitative data to the exclusion of all other assessment measures. True, numbers are easy to review and use for longitudinal and latitudinal comparisons, but do they effect authentic, productive change in our institutional and educational practices, or do we merely rotate instruments or revise existing ones until we achieve the desired results?

Even when we put honest effort into designing and adhering to accurate assessment instruments, we can admit that, while we should not doctor or outright falsify the results to meet administration’s expectations, we can cherry-pick numbers to present the product in the best light. Students know how to play these statistical shell games as well, calculating which classes produce the best GPAs and what test scores are needed for prestigious schools and scholarships. Herron relates the ACT x GPA equation as a useful predictor for student success in his program, but I wonder how many times the students took the test to finally achieve the desired score. For example, would a student who finally earned a 30 on his fifth attempt be as successful as the student who earned a 30 on her only attempt? Administration may be satisfied with attractive numbers that they can sell to their constituencies, but those of us with our boots on the ground in the classrooms need something a little more substantial to guide our honors students to successful program completion.
**CON • FI • DENCE, ADJECTIVE:**
OF, RELATING TO, OR ADEPT AT SWINDLING
BY FALSE PROMISES

Honors administrators may still see national test scores as predictors of a student’s academic success in college, but more students and parents now see scores as predictors of a student’s financial success in the scholarship hunt. In my fall 2012 honors composition course, every student had taken the ACT at least twice, and two students had taken it seven times. They reminded me that our honors scholarship amounts increase in correspondence with ACT scores and that involvement in the honors program can reap more financial rewards than the general presidential scholarship, as seen in Figure 1 below.

Applying some visual rhetoric to these figures, I can create a bar chart, adjust the labels, change the horizontal and vertical aspects, and alter the zero point on the y-axis to further highlight the correlation of ACT scores to honors scholarships. As seen in Figure 2 below, I have not changed the data but have created a USA Today-style graphic that emphasizes to students the monetary value of their ACT scores. Contrary to the old saying, the numbers do not speak for themselves. We decide how to present the numbers and thus how to create the desired perceptions for our prospective students and their parents and, in turn, for administration as well.

**CON • FI • DENCE, NOUN:**
THE QUALITY OR STATE OF BEING CERTAIN

In fall 2006, our program was streamlined in an attempt to increase retention rates. The total program requirements were reduced from thirty to twenty-four hours, and specific honors classes in English, math, and computer science were replaced with electives and a sequence of one-credit-hour “honors experience” courses. In addition, the community service requirement was eliminated. Some students and faculty complained that the heart of the program was being gutted, but the graduation rate did increase from approximately 36% to 48% under the new requirements.

When the honors composition course was eliminated as a program requirement for the sake of expedience in retention, I feared that enrollment would suffer. Aside from one semester, however, in which only eight students registered for my section, enrollment has remained near fifteen—or more if demand is high enough. Granted, much of the demand is generated by our university’s freshman composition exemption policy: students are exempt from EH 101 with an ACT English score of 27, SAT verbal of 550 or higher, AP Language and Composition score of 4 or 5, or IB score of 5, but the only exemption from EH 102 is an IB degree with a score of 5.
In recruiting students to my section of honors composition, I could, on one hand, readily describe the qualitative benefits of my course. We develop not only skills in university-level research and argumentation but also familiarity with discipline-specific research topics and resources as students investigate topics related to their prospective majors. Assignments such as an annotated...

---

**Figure 1: Scholarship Amounts at the University of South Alabama**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACT score</th>
<th>Annual</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Scholarship type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>33 or higher</td>
<td>$11,000</td>
<td>$44,000</td>
<td>Honors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
<td>$40,000</td>
<td>Presidential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–31</td>
<td>$9,000</td>
<td>$36,000</td>
<td>Honors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27–29</td>
<td>$8,000</td>
<td>$32,000</td>
<td>Presidential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28–29</td>
<td>$6,500</td>
<td>$26,000</td>
<td>Honors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27–29</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
<td>$20,000</td>
<td>Presidential</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: [http://www.southalabama.edu](http://www.southalabama.edu)

**Figure 2: Bar Chart for Honors Scholarship Amounts at the University of South Alabama**

---

In recruiting students to my section of honors composition, I could, on one hand, readily describe the qualitative benefits of my course. We develop not only skills in university-level research and argumentation but also familiarity with discipline-specific research topics and resources as students investigate topics related to their prospective majors. Assignments such as an annotated...
bibliography also introduce students to components needed for the undergraduate research program, the junior-year honors prospectus seminar, and the required senior honors thesis project.

On the other hand, I could tout some simple frequencies related to program retention. While approximately 43% of incoming honors freshmen have graduated from the program since its inception in fall 1999, 57% of students who took my honors composition course completed the program during the same period. For those who began the program under the new requirements, the figure increases to 62% as compared to the overall rate of 48%. This analysis does not take into account student reflections on the efficacy of the course, other coursework they have taken, professors who taught the courses, experiences with advising and thesis completion, and so on. Of course, these reports are not as easily digestible and marketable as “Hey, you’ll have a 14% better chance of graduating from honors if you take my class!” I have never taken this approach, though, because, truth be told, I find it neither seemly nor collegial.

**CONFIDENCE, NOUN:**
FAITH OR BELIEF THAT ONE WILL ACT IN A RIGHT, PROPER, OR EFFECTIVE WAY

Most prospective honors students are adept at playing the numbers game, savvy about permutations of test scores and opportunities to boost GPA by taking certain classes and avoiding others. When I review applications, I find that applicants’ numbers are relatively equal, so I dutifully check those boxes on the review sheet and then move on to give more attention to recommendation letters and essays. Are the letters rote-form correspondence, or has the teacher taken the time and effort to support a truly special student? Similarly, has the student generated a flavorless, one-size-fits-all, five-paragraph essay filled to the brim with test prep vocabulary words, or does the piece evince creative and critical thinking beyond what the college prep coaches have drilled into their graduating seniors?

I also enjoy participating in the interview stage, when you can pull the student away from the miasma of numbers. Naturally, some interviewees are extremely introverted and occasionally paralyzed with nervousness or, conversely, condescending or overly polished, characteristics that are not easily quantifiable but can nevertheless indicate potential fit with a program. Our honors students are involved in all aspects of campus life from Greek organizations and various honoraries to athletics and student government, so I regularly ask interviewees what types of service activities they would be interested in leading on campus. In the end, I ask myself if I would want this student in my class. After twenty-plus years of teaching honors composition,
I have learned to trust my instincts and look beyond ACT scores and GPA for characteristics of potential success in my class.

Even as data-driven assessment continues to infiltrate every aspect of university life, I have the relative luxury, as a faculty member rather than an administrator, of not having to deal daily with the quantitative analysis of goals and objectives at every level. Despite repeated attempts to measure writing instruction by scoring readability levels, standardized tests, portfolios, common essays, and the like, I am like many faculty members in seeing the results as simply a way to satisfy administration rather than as any true reflection of instructional quality or student performance. Similarly, some faculty sense an increasing distrust coming down from higher administrators, who insist on ever-multiplying and sometimes redundant assessment measures at every turn along with concomitant nagging about mandatory participation, deadlines, and so on.

I am willing to trust all of these data-driven assessments, including Herron’s admissions and retention equations, but please trust that I, as an expert with almost three decades of experience in post-secondary honors education, will be professional in my efforts to recruit, educate, and retain students who will fit well with and reflect well upon our honors program even if what I do is not readily quantifiable.

******

The author may be contacted at aguzy@southalabama.edu.
An Honors Koan: 
Selling Water by the River

JEFFREY A. PORTNOY 
GEORGIA PERIMETER COLLEGE

“Bring out number weight & measure in a year of dearth.”
—William Blake, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell

Since Jerry Herron begins his forum essay, “Notes toward an Excellent Marxist-Elitist Honors Admissions Policy,” with his anecdotal True Genealogical Confessions, I feel obligated to begin in a similar mode. One side of my family was in the real estate business in St. Louis, and the other operated on the production side of industry—garment manufacturing, in the schmatta business so to speak. Like Herron, I have benefitted from a familial confluence of disparate skill sets in my position as Director of the Georgia Perimeter College Honors Program, which during the recruiting and registration season I would liken to that of the Buddhist monk selling water from a haphazardly constructed lemonadesque stand situated on the bank of a river. Of course, what unwary wayfaring students to GPC’s educational waters do not know is that my suitemate, who has for too many years endured overhearing my recruiting spiels, calls me a silver-tongued devil. No comment.

The recruiting business in honors at GPC is dramatically different from that at Wayne State University, and these differences are compelling me to contribute to this forum precisely because they underscore the oft-repeated honors truism that Herron fervently intones and greatly respects: honors programs are part and parcel of their home institution’s landscape. Indeed, while honors programs and colleges obviously share many features, the differences can be profound; moreover, the differences between institutions matter as well, and the significance of those institutional differences should not be dismissed in the face of what Stanley Fish labels “the culture of measurement [that] is in the ascendancy” and the fervent zealots of cookie-cutter measurements and certifications.

Herron is not one of those “proposing to apply one formula across the board.” Unlike Wayne State, which Herron describes as a “Carnegie research university,” GPC is a multi-campus, two-year, liberal arts transfer college and one of the largest institutions in the University System of Georgia. It is the largest feeder school for the University of Georgia, Georgia State University,
Georgia Southern University, and Georgia Tech as well as an important source of sophomore and junior transfers to Emory University, Agnes Scott College, and Oglethorpe University. As an access school that does not require SAT or ACT scores, GPC, like Atlanta itself, provides a stable location for many people but for others a transitory layover on a journey elsewhere. Like Atlanta residents, many students come and go inexplicably, staying for a course or a semester and then vanishing like Keyser Soze in The Usual Suspects.

The GPC Honors Program reflects its urban and institutional environment. The admissions criteria are well-published: high school GPA, college transfer GPA, GPA at GPC, SAT or ACT score, and faculty recommendations. The five campus honors coordinators and I recognize that we are often in the reclamation business for students who have had way too much fun during their first attempt at college in Athens or Boston or have suffered family travails that returned them to Atlanta or have experienced a midlife career crisis that propelled them slightly scathed to the academy. On the other hand, almost every semester, a student with perfect SAT scores will somehow end up in my office just before the new term begins. I invariably thank these students for brightening my door and ask why they are at GPC. About six years ago, I asked that question of a young woman who immediately burst into tears; the thank you remains, but I have removed the question from my repertoire.

Discerning the students obviously qualified for honors at GPC is easy, but the moral is clear: honors education in practice and in theory should be flexible, and, as deciders about who will enter the program, the campus honors coordinators and I must be as well. Beyond providing opportunities for those needing to rehabilitate their academic résumés, we should provide opportunities for the film major who is not quite eligible but will benefit from an honors film course or the talented psych major who wants to take an upper-level honors psychology course to enhance her portfolio for graduate school. Some students exhibit a spark that needs some honors kindling, and honors recruitment at GPC is an art, not science. Consequently, a faculty member might praise her honors class one term as the best ever and two years later lament the anemic performance of her honors students.

My job is unlike Herron’s at Wayne State, where he has to compete on the recruiting trail with fearsome academic rivals just down the road. Decades ago, when I first ventured into the honors business at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, the honors director, Len Zane, and I would drive hundreds of miles into the desert to recruit students from a remote Nevada high school. In Atlanta, I have rarely made presentations at local high schools in Atlanta, a task left to GPC’s recruiters armed with honors brochures. The GPC Honors Program cannot compete for high school seniors with the University of Georgia Honors
Program or the new Georgia State Honors College, but I do have a network of articulation agreements that give our graduates access to honors programs at four-year institutions like Georgia Southern with guaranteed scholarships. Although some students matriculate at GPC because of its honors program, our struggle is typically not to convince students to come to GPC but to convince GPC students to risk joining honors when, given their class schedules, work, and family obligations, they are apprehensive about increasing their workload and possibly lowering their GPA.

The benefits of small classes and personal attention are not self-evident at GPC. Every semester, we must re-create a significant percentage of the honors student population. The first third of reaching our registration goals is easy, the second third is hard, and scouring the landscape to attract the final third is really hard. We do not have the circumstances, time, or resources to conduct data analysis of students in our program, especially against a cohort group. GPC’s data people have done yeoman service in gathering data to show that students in the program graduate at a much higher rate than the rest of the student body and that the GPA for students in their honors courses is slightly higher than in their non-honors courses. I cannot offer, however, a corollary to Wayne State’s magical number of 105, the predictor of success derived from multiplying high school GPA times ACT score. Even if I could, such a number would be irrelevant here. Our task is encouraging students to accept the challenge of honors education and to do the best work they can. Instead of a litmus test for calibrating potential students, we focus on incentives for students to enroll, such as local and national scholarships and access to excellent four-year schools where our students will be able to go after GPC—and they do go, and they do well.

While I meticulously track enrollment and recruiting figures for all of the campus honors programs, the survival and importance of the GPC Honors Program have never been driven or threatened by data during the more than two decades that I have been involved with honors education at the college, even when two years ago a 25-million-dollar deficit led to major institutional house cleaning. All the budgets were slashed; travel funds for faculty development disappeared; and almost three hundred hardworking employees were fired, or what they call “riffed.”

The honors program, like every other area at the college, took a budget hit, but the funding remained sufficient to maintain the essential features and programs within honors. The cap for honors sections was raised from fifteen to nineteen—not ideal, but manageable. While other units suffered devastation, the honors program stayed in operation with minor adjustments at all of GPC’s six campuses.
Data did not seem to be the driving force behind the decision to continue supporting the honors program at roughly its former status, and, after reading Herron’s essay, I grew curious about the role of data in judgments about honors at GPC, so I scheduled a meeting with Interim President Rob Watts. Watts is quite familiar with honors, and I asked him about the administration’s perspective on the honors program and why support for it did not appear to be data-driven.

Watts’s first observation was that the honors program had the support of the faculty. I was not the only honors advocate: the wide network of faculty members who teach in the program and serve on the Honors Council strongly support the enterprise of honors. He also stated that the honors program and I have earned credibility at the college and in the larger honors community. That credibility mattered even in a hard-nosed business environment where higher administrators were facing a potential financial meltdown. Credibility, while earned through labor, deed, language, and integrity, transcends—like education itself—the quantifiable. Credibility is a judgment call.

Watts also noted that the GPC Honors Program exists at the core of the institution’s mission: education. A kind of corollary to what the college provides through learning support for underprepared students, the honors program offers an opportunity for students who are well prepared for advanced work and the challenges to be found there. Last year, when the budget crisis was most acute, the only small classes offered at the college, Watts observed, were the honors sections because small classes are intrinsic to the nature of honors. That is a given. Data not required.

Given the proliferation of sessions about assessment, measurements, numbers, and rubrics in the conference program for New Orleans 2013, my situation may represent a receding minority, but, if that is the case, I find comfort in another proverb of honors lore: honors education should maintain its integrity and be inventive rather than simply succumbing to the educational fashion of the day. Herron, channeling Tom Wolfe, calls it “this hog-stomping, assessment-obsessed political culture of ours,” an apt image that is complemented by Obama’s insight: “Just weighing a pig doesn’t fatten it.”

In his analysis of Derek Bok’s *Higher Education in America*, Fish notes that Bok, despite being “a member of the data . . . culture,” is “acutely aware of the limits of what can be tested, measured and assessed.” Bok writes:

Some of the essential aspects of academic institutions—in particular the quality of the education they provide—are largely intangible and their results are difficult to measure. . . . [The] result is that much of what is important to the work of colleges and universities may be neglected, undervalued, or laid aside in the pursuit of more visible goals. (qtd. in Fish)
Fish adds, “in other words, we’re probably measuring the wrong things and the right things are not amenable to measurement.” Fish deplores the disparity that exists between “counting things” and “knowing anything deeply about them,” and I share his fear of the rising menace of hollow assessment and certification rubrics.

The waters of River Honors flow onward, but I find no lure in creating data upon data to justify the vainglory of so-called honors professionals or the institutional prominence of the honors edifice to the detriment of educating its residents. I do not want to dam the river with measurements so that my honors program can justify having more and more, including palatial real estate on a newly created lake or fancy new academic trappings. I stand with my prospective honors students and point with a wave of my hand toward the river and what it offers. I will not be handing them a measuring cup: whether they drink and how much and how deeply will be their decision.

REFERENCE


********

The author may be contacted at Jeffrey.Portnoy@gpc.edu.
Research Essays
For over a century, admissions officers and enrollment managers have relied on external validation of merit in selective admission of undergraduates. A main criterion used for selection is standardized testing, i.e., the SAT and ACT. Since these tests have been long-suspected and then shown to contain class and race biases while not accurately predicting retention (Banerji), the Schedler Honors College at the University of Central Arkansas (UCA) shifted to a holistic, multi-criterion selection process, de-emphasizing standardized tests, and then analyzed the outcomes. The statistical analysis served two goals. The first was to test whether variables in the admissions model, developed in 2007, predicted retention; the results led to changes in the weighting of variables for a revised rubric that we have used since 2010. The second goal was to improve enrollment of a more racially diverse population of students. Our findings demonstrated that most variables used in typical higher education admissions protocols did not accurately predict retention in the Schedler Honors College at UCA. Only one variable correlated to retention in honors, namely, high school grade point average (hsGPA). By increasing the value of hsGPA in the revamped selection rubric, UCA was able to increase rates of retention as well as diversity of incoming students.

Although the ACT and the SAT are widely accepted as indicators of college success by enrollment managers, the College Board states that standardized tests predict only 42% of academic success within the first year of college (Chenowith). Colleges nevertheless continue to base admissions and scholarship decisions on a test with this poor level of reliability. Gilroy claims that the ACT and SAT tests are one of the only ways that colleges can compare students from all over the world on a predetermined scale in a cost-effective manner. A key fallacy in this logic, however, is that the SAT and ACT were not meant to be used interchangeably (Syverson). The two tests measure different characteristics in students. The ACT measures mastery of basic high school material while the SAT tests abstract and critical thinking skills (Syverson).
Because of these inconsistencies, as well as concerns about bias in standardized tests, more than 800 institutions (including Texas Tech University, Central Bible College, Cambridge College, Texas Women’s College, University of Arizona, and University of Memphis) have chosen to be test-free institutions, meaning that these colleges do not use the SAT or ACT in their admissions decisions (FairTest). Preliminary research conducted on institutions not using standardized testing has demonstrated that their selection methods have been just as effective (Banerji).

Using grade point average and class rank for selective admissions has its own problems: methodologies used to calculate hsGPA vary from school to school; neither grade point average nor class rank is standardized (Sadler, et al.); and the scale for reporting hsGPA varies, with some high schools refusing to report class rank altogether. If high schools do not rank students, then the university bears the burden to understand hsGPA in context (Sadler et al.).

Honors programs and colleges with selective admissions typically rely on criteria used more generally in higher education, including standardized tests, despite the fact that honors education in the United States started as a reaction to excessive standardization. Frank Aydelotte, while serving as President at Swarthmore College, noticed that the education system was not challenging top students. Having been a Rhodes Scholar, he was familiar with the Oxford methodology, and used it to begin the first American honors program at Swarthmore College in 1922 (Rinn). Honors programs have broadened teaching and learning practices since then, largely because of shared information among participants in the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC). Founded in 1966, NCHC has contributed to the growth of honors education, and, in 2012, had nearly a thousand member institutions nationally and worldwide (NCHC).

Since the mid-1990s, the NCHC’s Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program have called for “a clearly articulated set of admissions criteria (e.g., GPA, SAT score, a written essay, satisfactory progress, etc.) [that] identifies the targeted student population served” (Madden). Furthermore, the NCHC’s Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors College, developed in the early 2000s, maintains that the honors unit should “exercise considerable control . . . over honors admissions,” which may include a “separate application” process (Sederberg). Where honors administrators control their own admissions protocols, selection criteria, arguably, should be free of bias and, when possible, give the program the best measure of applicants’ likelihood of success specifically as honors students.
TRANSITION TO MULTI-CRITERION INDICATORS AT UCA

In 2005, the Schedler Honors College at UCA was using a somewhat typical admissions method to select 150 incoming freshman from approximately 500 applications. Then something unprecedented happened; the honors college suffered its greatest-ever first-semester attrition rate, with twelve students leaving honors by the end of the 2005 fall term (8%). This dropout rate triggered administrators to rethink how they had been admitting students. Exit interviews produced one common theme: students were leaving because they did not feel that the program was right for them. They simply “didn’t fit.”

The administration set out in spring 2006 to design a selection process that better measured “fit.” After convening student focus groups and getting faculty feedback, the administration developed a list of characteristics to better identify a good fit for the honors college: intellectual promise, maturity, motivation, and initiative, all of which recommenders had been asked to discuss in their letters; interest in learning and willingness to “keep the conversation going”; resourcefulness and adventurousness without a constant need for right answers; willingness to talk about unusual topics; and a reaching toward new ways to conceptualize or verbalize thoughts. In light of this consensus, faculty were asked to describe specific traits of ideal honors students, to suggest how these traits would be demonstrated, and to rank the traits’ order of importance. Faculty were far more concerned with writing, conversation skills, curiosity, and critical thinking than they were with the standardized measures of ACT and hsGPA. They were also more interested in knowing about students’ leadership, service, and collaborative work than about their class rank. Once the faculty had identified and ranked these characteristics, the administration designed a process to measure them.

The administration began by examining the purpose of each part of the admissions process. Students applying in 2005 were asked to submit (1) demographic and background information, (2) a high school transcript with ACT scores, (3) a letter of recommendation from a high school counselor or teacher, (4) an essay describing their interest in the honors college, and (5) a paper written for a high school class. Several weaknesses were evident in this application packet. First, the essays expressing interest in honors echoed information advertised in recruiting brochures and the website. They wanted what they were told to want: scholarships, private rooms in an honors residence hall, small classes, and grants for study abroad. They wanted perks instead of scholarship, citizenship and leadership. A second weakness was that papers written for high school classes varied widely and revealed too little about writing strengths. Reviewers of recommendation letters searched for (rare) red flags to deny admissions rather than assessment of admissibility. In addition to
the application materials, interviews with faculty were part of the admissions process, but they served more as an orientation role than a screening. Given that enrollment was capped, demand for admissions relative to supply of openings was so great that, without more consistent data to go on, ACT played too great a role in selection so that students with a 30 or above ACT score were virtually guaranteed admission. This reliance on ACT as a primary selection criterion resulted in limited diversity of the honors student population.

Aiming to redesign the admissions process for the entering class of 2007, the administration addressed all the concerns that had emerged. The first step, focused on student writing, was asking students not for one new essay and a previously written high school paper but for two new essays, each with a specific purpose. One essay question asked students to read an excerpt from Peter Elbow’s 1973 essay “The Doubting Game and the Believing Game,” which contrasts ways of knowing. The responses allowed reviewers to assess writing skill, reading comprehension, and critical thinking. The second essay focused on students’ interest in honors and did not just ask what appealed to them about honors at UCA but instead led them to write about being leaders in the “public square.” Faculty, who had not only been uninterested in perks but had found them disturbing as part of a culture of entitlement, now read essays where students examined the honors website and specifically discussed how an honors education at UCA could affect their leadership, civic service, and collaborative work for a cause important to them. Faculty wanted to cultivate in the admissions process a culture that reflected the values embedded in the program’s mission, specifically the integration of self-reflection, civic engagement, and scholarship. The goal was to admit students who grasped and desired this experience.

Assessment of student writing became part of a larger rubric where, along with hsGPA and class rank, it had greater value than in the past. Students who were screened with the new rubric and received the highest scores were then invited to interview. The interview process also changed. Rather than serving merely to orient, the new structure evaluated students in situ as they participated in a mock small-group discussion similar to a freshman class experience. This evaluation was separated from orientation, which preceded it. Applicants who passed initial screening spent an “Inform and Interview Day,” accompanied by their parents, with honors faculty and administrators. The “inform” part began with a presentation of the vision and the mission of the Schedler Honors College followed by a discussion of the “nuts-and-bolts” of the curriculum, living-learning community, scholarships, and grant opportunities for travel abroad and undergraduate research. Prospects then met with a panel of current students for a “Q & A” about the experience of honors education. After lunch in the cafeteria, parents met with administrators.
of financial aid, registrar services, admissions, student services, housing, and campus police while students moved to the “interview” part of their day. They attended a large-group lecture related to the Elbow Essay and delivered by an honors faculty member, and then they participated in small group discussions with a faculty member and three or four fellow applicants. This large-group/small-group experience presented a model of the freshman year curriculum and allowed each prospect to have a day in the life of an honors student.

Between the large-group lecture and the small-group discussion, students were given a post-lecture writing prompt and a few minutes to elaborate their new understanding of the topic about which they had already written and had also just been lectured. The on-site writing served two purposes: providing the admissions committee a sample of the student’s unpolished writing and giving introverted students time to gather their thoughts before the discussion. The on-site essay and participation in the discussion were then scored as part of the total rubric in the final assessment.

Applicant scores were calculated using quantitative measures of ACT, hsGPA, class rank, transcript evaluation, letter of recommendation, and additional quantitative assessments of the student’s Elbow essay, honors interest essay, on-site essay, and small-group interaction (see Appendices A and B). Applicants were ranked by quantitative measures as well as by a qualitative assessment of their writing and small-group interaction. In order to test the rubric’s general comprehensiveness, the honors administration strategically added an overall qualitative assessment to see if the items being evaluated and their weights matched the general impression faculty were getting of students. If students with lower scores had faculty advocating their admission, then something might be missing from the rubric.

The honors college used this process for three years and then, in fall 2010, examined two research questions: (1) Is there inter-rater reliability between the qualitative impression and the quantitative scores? (2) Do items being evaluated predict retention (the operational definition of “fit”)? Results were then used to adjust the selection items and rubrics to better predict retention.

**PROCEDURES**

The subjects of analysis were students admitted to the UCA Honors College in spring 2007, 2008, and 2009 through the redesigned admissions process, producing a sample size of 352. The prediction (independent) variables were ACT composite score, raw high school grade point average, participation in college preparation curriculum, participation in advanced placement courses, letters of recommendation, writing assessment, small-group interaction during the campus visit, and overall impression. Outcome (dependent) variables were first-semester college GPA, second-semester college GPA, and retention in the
program at the end of the first year and second years. Context variables of race and age were also examined.

Raw ACT scores ranged from 19–35 with a mean of 29 and a standard deviation of approximately 1.0. Raw high school grade point average (HsGPA) was unstandardized, meaning that the grade point average could be either a 4.0 or 5.0 scale. Raw high school rank (HsRank) was collapsed into four categories of importance, ranging from 1(lowest) to 4 (highest). Student participation in college preparatory curriculum (CPC) was coded 1 for no and 2 for yes. Student participation in advanced placement classes (AP) was coded 1 for no and 2 for yes. Student demonstration of a pattern of strong grades over time (SG) was coded 1 for no and 2 for yes. Where the recommendation letter (RL) reported that the student demonstrated intellectual promise, motivation, maturity, independence, initiative, writing skills, or any special talents and/or enthusiasm, it was coded 2 for yes and 1 for no when these features were absent.

The Elbow essay (EE) had four scoring sections: shows understanding of purpose, shows understanding of main parts of argument, delineates the primary strengths of the essay, and raises questions and issues related to the essay. Each section received a score of 1 (unacceptable or below expectations), 2 (acceptable or marginal), 3 (commendable or very good), or 4 (exceptional or outstanding).

The honors interest essay (HCE) also had four parts: shows understanding of honors purpose, distinguishes self creatively, distinguishes self academically, and distinguishes self in leadership/service/collaborative work. Each section received a value of 1 to 4, using the same scoring criteria as the Elbow essay.

Writing mechanics and organization (MEC) of the Elbow essay and the honors interest essay were graded together in four parts: coherent sentences and appropriate word choices, strong paragraphs and sentence variety, sufficient address of the question, and use of specific detail and examples. Each section was scored 1 to 4, using the same criteria as the Elbow and honors interest essays.

The on-site essay (OSE) had three evaluation areas: answers the prompt, shows attention to content of lecture, and shows reflection on content of lecture. Each section received a score of 1 to 4, using the same criteria as the previous essays.

Small-group interaction (SMGR) was graded on eight areas: engagement—student is engaged in the conversation, makes eye contact, and asks questions; interest—student demonstrates interest in ideas; enthusiasm—student shows enthusiasm for thinking; resourcefulness—student conveys a sense of resourcefulness and considers a wide variety of possible resources in answering questions; adventurousness—student is willing to take risks, perhaps accompanied by a lack of obsession with the “right answers”; communication—student
tries to talk about something unusual, reaching for new ways to conceptualize or verbalize his/her thoughts; collaboration—student discusses directly with other students; and professionalism—student demonstrates decorum and shows respect to other students. Each section was scored 1 (unacceptable or below expectations), 2 (acceptable or marginal), 3 (commendable or very good) or 4 (exceptional or outstanding). Points from each section were compiled to create a total rubric score (160 possible points).

The faculty member doing the qualitative evaluation placed the applicant in one of five categories (coding for analysis in parentheses): absolutely, the student is extremely well qualified and an exceptional candidate, put in my small group tomorrow (9); yes, the student is commendable with good potential and could become a great honors student (7); some doubts or reservations, the student shows some potential but something is missing (5); not preferable, the student is marginal and would require a lot of work to be successful in honors (3); and absolutely not, the student is unacceptable and below expectations (1). This score was kept separate from the total rubric score and compared to it for consistency of faculty evaluations.

Exploratory data analysis on each variable revealed completeness and no coding errors. Recursive partitioning, using the first- and second-semester college GPA response outcomes with the remaining variables except retention as explanatory variables, yielded two cross-validated regression trees. Next, a cross-validated classification tree was constructed using retention as the response and the rest of the variables except first- and second-semester college GPA as independent variables.

RESULTS

A full regression analysis was conducted. The results depicted a regression tree dividing subjects into more homogeneous subgroups (R Development). Next, the cross-validated mean error rate for the sub-trees was run on one hundred partitions of the data. The regression tree was pruned based on the cross validation of means. The key finding was that freshmen with a high school GPA below 3.80 earned on average a 3.40 GPA in their freshman year in college. Freshmen with a high school GPA of 3.80 and higher on average earned a GPA of 3.77. Next, a cross-validated classification tree with an error rate of retention was used to identify predictors of retention in the admissions model. No single variable meaningfully predicted retention. In other words, no variable predicted retention better than random guessing.

Finally, freshman fall-semester college GPA was compared with high school GPA using a scatter plot (Figure 1). Results showed that 19.4% of students with less than a 3.80 GPA in high school scored a 3.80 or better at college in their freshman year whereas 56.1% of students with a 3.80 GPA or
imProving retention and fit by honing an honors admissions model

Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council

better in high school scored a 3.80 or better at college in their freshman year. This finding helped explain the cross-validation result from the full regression analysis.

DISCUSSION

In response to our first research question—“Is there inter-rater reliability between the qualitative impression and the quantitative scores?”—we found that, although there was some difference in faculty ratings (intra-rater reliability), the qualitative impression of each faculty matched the quantitative scores (inter-rater reliability). In other words, the scoring rubric accounted for criteria that honors faculty defined as qualities of ideal honors students or “fit.”

The results of the second research question—“Do items being evaluated predict retention (the operational definition of “fit”)?”—yielded the simple finding that no single predictor of retention existed within this admissions model. The main issue with retention in honors other than “fit,” however, tended to be low college GPA, and the scatterplot allowed us to see if any

Figure 1: High School GPA vs. Freshman Fall GPA
predictive relationship existed between admissions variables and freshman fall and spring GPA. The strongest relationship with freshman year college GPA was high school GPA. Not surprisingly, students with a higher high school GPA have a higher freshman year college GPA. The significance of this relationship could not be accurately measured because the sample was limited in range (with most students earning an above-average GPA), possibly limiting the ability of GPA to serve as a good predictor of outcome. Equally important, however, was that there was no predictive relationship between freshman-year college GPA and ACT score.

**CHANGES TO ADMISSIONS MODEL**

Results from the scatter plot indicated that setting a high GPA floor for applicants would improve their chances of earning a higher college GPA at the end of the freshman year, thereby increasing persistence rates into the sophomore year. Adjustments to the admissions model re-weighted assessment points collected in the application, including assignment of equal value to the two parts of the application, namely, assessment of previous academic achievement (ACT, GPA, class rank, and letter of recommendation) and assessment of data collected to measure fit with the values and practices of the Schedler Honors College (evaluations of Peter Elbow essay response, public service essay, and small group discussion).

Research results supported increasing the importance of hsGPA and decreasing it for ACT. The administration addressed these results in two ways. First, they increased the minimum high school GPA from 3.25 to 3.50. Second, they assigned a greater weight to hsGPA and a lesser weight to ACT in the overall applicant assessment (Figure 2). A standardized recommendation format was also introduced so that specific qualities (scholarship, service, and leadership) could be assessed more consistently, and it was given greater weight.

This new version of the admissions model has yielded greater freshman-to-sophomore and freshman-to-junior retention. Over the last three years, the program has averaged freshman-to-sophomore retention rates greater than 97% (Figure 3). This climb in retention rates appears to be based on adjustments to the holistic, multi-criterion rubric being used to assess applicants for admission as well as on the Inform and Interview day process that allows applicants to better understanding the program before deciding to attend and allows faculty to better identify ideal honors students. Some students who are offered admission decline the offer because it is not the education they want—also a sign of success in the admissions process. Prospects are making better-informed choices about whether their values and goals align with the Schedler Honors College at UCA, and faculty are recommending students that have a
higher likelihood of success as indicated in this figure illustrating the freshman to sophomore and freshman to junior retention rates of entering UCA Honors students.

Racial and ethnic diversity of the student population is important to the Schedler Honors College administration for both inclusive access and enrichment of the living and learning experience. In the first year that the holistic process was revised to place greater emphasis on GPA and less on ACT, the freshman non-white student population increased from a prior average of 12.3% to 16%. Even with this change, continuous and improved outreach efforts are merited to sustain annual admission of diverse entering classes.

The selection process, though labor intensive, has been used to admit entering classes ranging in size from 57 to 150, with applicant pools ranging from two to four times the size of the incoming classes. Using a password-protected, web-accessible admissions technology with user-friendly interfaces for applicants, recommenders, faculty, and administrators has made the process more efficient and accurate than reliance on paper applications and has eased the labor for all participants.
The Schedler Honors College at UCA has accomplished the two main goals of the analysis: (1) to create a process of admission that better predicts student fit and success and therefore retention; and (2) to improve enrollment of a more racially diverse population of students. Having faculty evaluate applicants’ values, reasoning, writing, past civic engagement, and interpersonal skills in the classroom has proven critical to the first goal. Emphasizing high school GPA rather than standardized test scores has proven to be the single most important factor influencing achievement of both goals. This finding reveals an important take-away for honors units that do not have a sufficient number of faculty to carry out intensive applicant screening. Simply shifting from ACT/SAT minimums to high school GPA minimums for selection could lead to greater diversity and better retention rates.

CONCLUSION

Tierney et al. describe the socioeconomic and cultural biases in standardized testing that result from unequal resources among students and their parents, indicating that standardized testing cannot predict success for all groups of applicants. Two other issues are that the predictive power of testing is relatively weak and that the ACT and SAT are not interchangeable. Banerji further suggests that not using standardized tests is just as effective as using them in predicting success. This study presents additional supporting evidence since, for the Schedler Honors College at UCA, no statistical relationship exists between freshman-year college GPA and ACT score.
Honors administrators would benefit from further research, including within their own programs and colleges, on the extent of cultural and socio-economic bias introduced through standardized testing as well as the actual predictive power of standardized testing for higher-achieving students. Logically, the reliability of the relationship of any interval-level variable to another interval-level decreases when its distribution is truncated. Applicants to honors programs and colleges typically exhibit a small upper range of scores if standardized tests are being used. Empirical results and the logic of truncated distributions argue that honors programs and colleges have an obligation to examine their admissions practices and determine whether selection criteria offer accurate measures of success or are standing in the way of greater diversity and retention.

REFERENCES


*******

The authors may be contacted at

psmith@uca.edu.
## APPENDIX A

### ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT WRITING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing Assessment</th>
<th>Elbow Essay</th>
<th>Honors College Essay</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shows understanding of purpose</td>
<td>Shows understanding of Honors purpose</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shows understanding of main parts of argument</td>
<td>Distinguishes self academically</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Delineates the primary strengths of the essay</td>
<td>Distinguishes self in leadership/service/collaborative work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Raises questions and issues related to the essay</td>
<td>Distinguishes self creatively</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exceptional/Outstanding (4)</th>
<th>Unacceptable/Below Expectations (1)</th>
<th>Acceptable/Marginal (2)</th>
<th>Commandable/Very Good (3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanics &amp; Organization of Elbow &amp; HC Essays</td>
<td>Coherent sentences and appropriate word choices</td>
<td>Strong paragraphs and sentence variety</td>
<td>Sufficiently addresses the question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-site Essay</td>
<td>Answers prompt completely</td>
<td>Shows attention to content of lecture</td>
<td>Shows reflection on content of lecture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total**
## APPENDIX B

### ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT SMALL GROUP INTERACTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exceptional/Outstanding (4)</th>
<th>Acceptable/Marginal (2)</th>
<th>Unacceptable/Below Expectations (1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Small Group Interaction</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement: The student is engaged in the conversation, makes eye contact, and asks questions.</td>
<td>Interest: The student demonstrates interest in ideas.</td>
<td>Enthusiasm: The student shows enthusiasm for thinking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resourcefulness: The student conveys a sense of resourcefulness and considers a wide variety of possible resources in answering questions.</td>
<td>Adventurous: The student is willing to take risks, perhaps accompanied by a lack of obsession with the “right answers”.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communication:</strong> The student tries to talk about something unusual, reaching for new ways to conceptualize or verbalize their thoughts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collaboration:</strong> The student discusses directly with other students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Professionalism:</strong> The student demonstrates decorum and shows respect to other students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall Assessment:</strong></td>
<td>25–32 points</td>
<td>17–24 points</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Propensity Score Analysis of an Honors Program’s Contribution to Students’ Retention and Graduation Outcomes

ROBERT R. KELLER AND MICHAEL G. LACY
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION

Honors directors and deans know or presume that retention and graduation rates of honors students substantially exceed those of non-honors students. In our research, we have attempted to better determine what portion of this success is attributable to the academic and other benefits of honors programs as opposed to the background characteristics of the students. Among the former, we would point to innovative and small classes, more individual attention for honors students from faculty and staff, residential learning communities, thesis experiences, and extra-curricular opportunities, all of which might be expected to make the college experience more engaging for honors students and thereby contribute to their success. Among the background characteristics, the superior academic achievement and ability enjoyed by honors students is a primary factor that determines retention and graduation (Cosgrove; Shushok; Slavin et al.), and other influences such as gender, in-state or out-of state residency, and family educational background are linked to both academic success and honors program participation. To better estimate the unique contribution of an honors program to retention and graduation outcomes, we have applied propensity score analysis (Guo and Fraser) to separate the effects of honors students’ academic achievement and other background characteristics from the consequences of program participation.

SUMMARY OF RELATED RESEARCH

Past work on honors students’ persistence published in the Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council by Cosgrove, Shushok, and Slavin et al. has attempted to adjust for the differential academic background of honors students with regression analyses and by constructing pools of non-honors students whose past academic achievements and academic potential resemble those same characteristics in honors students.
Slavin et al. identified a group of high-achieving non-honors students that approximate the academic profile of honors students at the University of Maine, using a constructed group of non-honors students with SAT scores and class rank comparable to honors students. They also used logistic regression to compare non-honors and honors students in order “... to examine the relationship between honors participation and retention/graduation rates, statistically controlling for SAT scores and high school rank” (64). Using logistic regression analysis, they found that one-year retention rates were significantly higher for honors students than for non-honors students. For example, 94% of the 2006 honors class returned as compared to 85% of non-honors students (64). They also reported a corresponding odds ratio of 3.1, meaning that an honors student was 3.1 times more likely to return after one year than a non-honors student (an explanation of the “odds ratio” appears below). They found a four-year graduation rate, adjusted for high school rank, of 64% for honors students and 60% for non-honors students for the entering class of 2002, a difference that is not statistically significant (67). They speculated, however, that, in the context of the institution they studied, a trend toward development of a community identity among honors students might lead over time to higher four-year graduation rates for honors students.

Shushok selected a non-honors student group of the same size as the honors student group and with comparable characteristics at the University of Maryland, College Park. Shushok used “caliper matching” to define the acceptable level of comparability and was able to identify 86 comparable students in each of the non-honors and honors groups. Using this technique, he deemed two groups as comparable if their mean scores (e.g., GPA and SAT) were within 0.15 of a standard deviation of one another (87). With these adjustments, honors and non-honors groups had “identical” mean GPAs, mean SATs, percentages of females, percentages living on campus, and percentages White, Black, Asian, and Hispanic. Shushok determined that honors students had significantly higher cumulative GPAs at the end of the first year (honors 3.41 and non-honors 3.18) and higher one-year retention rates (honors 97% and non-honors 90%). However, both of these differences tended to disappear by the fourth year (93). He did not report four-year graduation rate comparisons for honors and non-honors students, but Shushok made an important contribution by examining some of the benefits of program participation. He also used a survey revealing that honors students, especially males, were more likely than non-honors peers to have met with faculty during office hours (odds ratio 2.5), to have discussed career plans and vocational aspirations with faculty (odds ratio 3.6), and to have participated in activities with an academic component (odds ratio 4.7) (92).
Cosgrove added another important dimension to assess the benefits of honors programs/colleges by “. . . differentiating the honors experiences of students who complete all their honors requirements from those who do not” (46). For example, if entering honors freshmen drop out of the honors program after the first year but nevertheless persist until graduation, the honors graduation rate could be biased upward if the success of these “partial honors” students is not separated out but instead implicitly attributed to honors students who completed the program. To clarify this issue, Cosgrove presented retention and graduation data for three groups: students who completed the honors program, students who partially completed the honors program, and students who did not participate in honors at all. He concluded that, while the five-year graduation rate for program completers was (virtually by definition) 100%, the rate was 82% for partial honors students and 76% for non-honors students (61). The cumulative GPAs for the three groups were 3.71, 3.48, and 3.36. Cosgrove’s study provides a significant comparison of GPAs among the three groups, but the exclusion of students who dropped out of the honors program virtually assured that the graduation rate for honors completers was 100% since a student must have remained in school to complete the honors program.

DATA AND METHODS

In the current study, we report data from students who initially entered Colorado State University (CSU) between fall 2005 and fall 2008, with outcomes tracked through summer 2012. All were recent graduates from high schools, most being freshmen but quite a few having sophomore standing because of college credits earned prior to matriculation. Although previous studies have examined longitudinal outcomes by year, our research pooled student retention and graduation data from 2005–8. As outcomes, we examined whether a student returned to Colorado State for the second fall semester and whether s/he graduated from CSU within a four-, five-, or six-year period from initial entry. In analyzing graduation rates, we included only students for whom the requisite number of years had passed so that, for example, six-year graduation was analyzed using only the 2005 and 2006 cohorts, with more cohorts available for analyzing four-year graduation. Graduation records reflect Colorado State University only and do not include students who transferred and graduated elsewhere. We classified honors program participation as simply present or absent and included as honors students all those who joined the program in their first year at CSU, whether or not they remained in it.

The current study statistically adjusted for a wider range of (confounding) background characteristics than has been typical in previous work. In addition to academic achievement in high school, we included information about ethnic
status, gender, in-state/out-of-state origin, first-generation college attendance, and academic unit at entry. Academic achievement was measured using the State of Colorado’s college admission index, which is a composite encompassing high school grades or class rank and achievement test scores (ACT or SAT). The inclusion of high school performance as well as test scores has the advantage for our analysis of at least partly and implicitly including a measure of students’ motivation and perseverance. Ethnic status was simplified to White-Anglo vs. any other status, with international students excluded from analysis. Academic unit at entry was defined as the college within the university (Agriculture, Engineering, Natural Sciences, Liberal Arts, Undeclared, etc.) listed for the student during the first semester. Each of these variables is related to honors participation (see Table 1) and has in previous institutional research at CSU (not reported here) been related to various graduation and retention outcomes.

To estimate the effect of honors program participation on the various outcomes, we chose “propensity score analysis,” an analytic approach that has become increasingly popular for non-experimental (observational) studies of “treatment programs.” We describe the basic idea of propensity score analysis here and recommend to interested readers a more detailed recent source, Guo and Fraser’s Propensity Score Analysis: Statistical Methods and Applications (Advanced Quantitative Techniques in the Social Sciences). Propensity score analysis rests on a “counterfactual” perspective: namely, that in examining the effects of a treatment such as honors program participation, we would in principle want to compare the outcomes of treated individuals to the outcomes they would have experienced had they counter-to-fact not participated in the honors program. While we can observe their outcomes under their actual “treatment” condition (in the honors program or not), we can only impute what would have happened had they not been “treated,” based on outcomes experienced by similar persons who were not in the program. To impute the counterfactual outcome, the propensity scoring approach involves first applying a regression model to the full sample of participants, i.e., both honors and non-honors students in this case. This analysis is used to estimate, as a function of the various background factors (gender, admission index, etc), the probability that a student would have been in the program (honors). This probability or “propensity score” is the basis on which nonparticipants are judged to be similar to a participant in a given treatment program (honors).

Thus, for each program participant, one or more nonparticipants are chosen who are similar (matched) in propensity score and can therefore serve as comparable controls. The average outcome among these nonparticipant controls are used to impute the outcome that would have been expected for their matched treatment subject, had s/he counterfactually not received
treatment. The mean of the differences between each treatment subject and her/his controls serves as the measure of program effect and is commonly called the “average treatment effect among the treated” as it attempts to estimate only what effect the treatment (honors) had on the treated subjects (Guo and Fraser 46–47). As compared to more traditional statistical approaches (e.g., a regression model for the outcome, with the background variables as covariates), propensity scoring arguably reduces bias in estimating the effect of a treatment program.

In the current application, with a binary outcome, propensity scoring analysis also has the advantage of permitting a single estimate of effect that is expressed as a percentage difference, something often more intuitively understandable than odds ratios associated with logistic regression models for binary outcomes. As an illustration to help readers in translating between percentage comparisons and corresponding odds ratios: If hypothetically 90% of honors students and 75% of non-honors students graduated, the odds for graduating among honors students would be $90/(100 - 90) = 9.0$ while the odds for non-honors students would be found as $75/(100 - 75) = 3.0$, giving an odds ratio of $9/3 = 3.0$. Thus, an honors student would have been three times more likely to graduate than a non-honors student with “likely” judged on the scale of odds. For many readers, odds ratios can seem large in relation to a comparison based on percentages.

We applied propensity scoring to our data as follows: For all persons with data available on a given outcome, we used the background variables described above to estimate a logistic regression model for whether or not a student would have been in the honors program, yielding for each person a propensity score (between 0 and 1) describing the similarity of her/his background profile to an honors program participant. For each honors program participant, the five non-honors students closest in propensity score were chosen as controls. Eligible controls were restricted to non-honors students having a propensity score falling within a so-called “caliper” distance of 0.25 standard deviations of the propensity score of the matched honors program participant; this is a commonly suggested criterion of sufficient closeness of propensity scores of controls to treatment subjects (Guo and Fraser, 147), and the use of five controls is a common compromise between statistical precision and ease of finding matching controls. We used the Stata (Stata Corp) add-on program “psmatch2” (Leuven and Sianesi) to conduct all aspects of this analysis.

HONORS AT COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

Colorado State University is a land-grant institution and Carnegie Research University with approximately 26,000 resident students, of whom approximately 22,500 are undergraduates. The University Honors Program began in
1957 with several honors seminars and approximately fifteen students. Today the program has nearly 1,600 honors students, including 70% women, 10% ethnic minorities, and 65% from within Colorado. The university-wide honors option consists of four interdisciplinary honors seminars that fulfill four general education requirements, two honors courses in the major, and a senior honors thesis; departmental honors programs require honors courses in the major and a senior honors thesis. Other features include an honors learning-community residence for freshman students that includes the honors office and space for honors faculty, a first-semester honors seminar with an orientation component, and rigorous supplemental advising. Other honors opportunities include an Honors Undergraduate Research Scholars program, ample opportunities for extracurricular activities through the Honors Student Association, and a special honors scholarship of $1,000 per year; student surveys and anecdotal evidence suggest that honors program students highly value these features of the program.

RESULTS

Table 1 displays summary information on program participation and background variables for the combined sample of all cohorts used in the analysis. While these figures differed slightly in absolute terms across cohorts, in the interest of brevity we present only this summary.

As might be anticipated, given program admission restrictions, honors participants had substantially higher admission index scores than others, with honors program participants having a mean about 20 points (2 standard deviations) higher than other students. The mean admission index of 132 for honors students corresponds to a 3.9 GPA or 8th percentile class rank and a combined critical reading and mathematics score of 1340 on the SAT or 30 on the ACT. The mean admission index of 111 among non-honors students corresponds to a 3.5 GPA or 25th percentile class rank and an 1120 SAT or 25 ACT.

Considering demographic factors, we found that women were more than twice as likely as men to participate in honors and that students from outside Colorado were similarly much more likely to participate. From a different perspective, these numbers indicate that the proportion of women in honors is much higher than the proportion of women in the university (70% versus 54%) and that non-residents are a significantly higher proportion of honors students than the student body as a whole. Substantial differences across academic units also prevailed. For example, persons entering the College of Veterinary Medicine/Biomedical Sciences participated at more than three times the rate of students in general while undeclared students were represented at only about one-fourth the average percentage.
Clearly, these and the other background factors show sharp differences between honors and non-honors students that would be expected to significantly affect honor students’ retention and graduation rates regardless of any program effects. Considering those differences, the results in Table 2 are not surprising.

Table 2 displays naive (unadjusted) comparison of retention and graduation rates, which show that 93% of honors students returned for the second fall as compared to 82 percent of all other students. Four-, five-, and six-year graduation percentages were respectively about 29, 24, and 27 points higher among honor students than others, translating to odds ratios in the range of about 3 to 5. These differences reflect both the effects of the background characteristics typical of honors students and whatever effects participation in the program might have had.
The first step of our analysis was to obtain the propensity scores used to adjust for these background variables. Table 3 displays the results of the logistic regression analysis used to obtain propensity scores for the cohort of students available for analysis of four-year graduation. (We include this table for illustration but, in the interest of brevity, omit it for other outcome periods/cohorts.)

As might be expected from the bivariate results of Table 1, the results in Table 3 show that admission index, first-generation status, residency, and initial college major had strong relationships with honors participation. When adjustment was made for these variables, however, ethnicity was not strongly connected to honors participation. For the reader unfamiliar with logistic regression results, we should note that, in Table 3, positive coefficients indicate that increases in variables are associated with being more likely to be an honors student while negative ones indicate the reverse.

Table 4 displays the final results, after using the propensity scores to find matched controls. It shows that, as compared to what would have been expected had honors students not participated in the program, there was a gain of 5 percentage points in second-year returnees and increases in four-, five-, and six-year graduation estimated at 8.4 percentage points, 12.3 percentage points, and 14 percentage points respectively. (For comparability to previous work using logistic regression, note that these translate to odds ratios of 1.8, 1.4, 2.0, and 2.7.)

Table 2: Unadjusted Outcome Comparisons, Honors Participants vs. Others

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Returned for Second Fall</th>
<th>Graduated in Four Years</th>
<th>Graduated in Five Years</th>
<th>Graduated in Six Years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Honors participants</td>
<td>92.9%</td>
<td>64.2%</td>
<td>81.9%</td>
<td>88.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All other students</td>
<td>81.8%</td>
<td>35.2%</td>
<td>57.6%</td>
<td>61.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>29.0%</td>
<td>24.3%</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Odds Ratio for Outcome, Honors vs. Others</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N for honors/all others</td>
<td>2,071/26,115</td>
<td>1,081/14,740</td>
<td>796/10,946</td>
<td>466/7,229</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first step of our analysis was to obtain the propensity scores used to adjust for these background variables. Table 3 displays the results of the logistic regression analysis used to obtain propensity scores for the cohort of students available for analysis of four-year graduation. (We include this table for illustration but, in the interest of brevity, omit it for other outcome periods/cohorts.)

As might be expected from the bivariate results of Table 1, the results in Table 3 show that admission index, first-generation status, residency, and initial college major had strong relationships with honors participation. When adjustment was made for these variables, however, ethnicity was not strongly connected to honors participation. For the reader unfamiliar with logistic regression results, we should note that, in Table 3, positive coefficients indicate that increases in variables are associated with being more likely to be an honors student while negative ones indicate the reverse.

Table 4 displays the final results, after using the propensity scores to find matched controls. It shows that, as compared to what would have been expected had honors students not participated in the program, there was a gain of 5 percentage points in second-year returnees and increases in four-, five-, and six-year graduation estimated at 8.4 percentage points, 12.3 percentage points, and 14 percentage points respectively. (For comparability to previous work using logistic regression, note that these translate to odds ratios of 1.8, 1.4, 2.0, and 2.7.)
Table 3: Logistic Regression Coefficients for Honors Program Participation as a Function of Background Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>b(se)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College major at entry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>0.855 (0.237)**2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applied Human Sciences</td>
<td>0.596 (0.220)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>0.423 (0.217)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>0.078 (0.205)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Arts</td>
<td>0.734 (0.193)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Sciences</td>
<td>0.960 (0.185)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vet. Medicine/Biomedical Sciences</td>
<td>1.289 (0.207)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Resources</td>
<td>1.070 (0.297)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female gender</td>
<td>0.509 (0.105)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado resident</td>
<td>-0.377 (0.105)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White-Anglo ethnicity</td>
<td>-0.112 (0.143)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admission index</td>
<td>0.347 (0.0099)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First generation status</td>
<td>-0.231 (0.114)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-46.359 (1.296)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>15,821</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood Ratio Chi-Squared, df = 13</td>
<td>4615**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McKelvey-Zavoina $R^2$</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1Reference category is Undeclared (intra-university) college major.
2 * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01

All of the effect estimates in Table 4 were statistically significant at conventional levels. Comparing them to the unadjusted figures of Table 2, one sees that, of the total (unadjusted) difference of 11.1% in second-year return of honors students versus others, about half can be attributed to the program itself. This interpretation observation rests on presuming that the unadjusted difference of 11.1% reflects the combined effects of participation in the program and any gains reflecting the background variables (gender, academic ability, etc.)
that characterized honors students. The matched comparison serves to remove the latter effect so that the 5.0 percentage point difference would estimate the gain attributable to the program alone out of the total 11.1% difference. Similarly, the portion of the difference attributable to the CSU honors program itself is one-fourth the size of the raw four-year graduation percentage difference and about half of that for five-year and six-year graduation.

Presuming that these adjusted differences are valid, we can apply them to the total number of honors students in each cohort to estimate what they imply regarding actual numbers of additional students retained or graduated. We find that the 5.0 percentage point increase in second-year retention resulted in 104 more honors students out of 2,071 returning for their second year at CSU while the corresponding figures for graduation were an additional 91 graduates for an honors cohort of 1,081 (four-year graduation), 98 out of a cohort of 796 (five-year), and 64 out of a cohort of 459 (six-year).

Table 4: Propensity Score Adjusted Comparison of Outcomes among Program Participants vs. Controls

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Returned Second Fall</th>
<th>Four Year Graduation</th>
<th>Five Year Graduation</th>
<th>Six Year Graduation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Honors</td>
<td>92.9%</td>
<td>64.2%</td>
<td>81.9%</td>
<td>88.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controls</td>
<td>87.9%</td>
<td>55.8%</td>
<td>69.6%</td>
<td>74.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference (se)¹</td>
<td>5.0% (1.7)**</td>
<td>8.4% (3.1)**</td>
<td>12.3% (3.1%)*</td>
<td>14.0% (3.1)**²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total N in cohort</td>
<td>28,186</td>
<td>15,821</td>
<td>11,742</td>
<td>7,588³</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of Honors Students Analyzed/ Expected Increase in Numbers with Outcome</td>
<td>2,071/104</td>
<td>1,081/91</td>
<td>796/98</td>
<td>459/64³</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Odds Ratio, Honors vs. Non-Honors</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>2.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ Average treatment effect among the treated, with standard error in parentheses.
² * p<0.05, ** p<0.01
³ Of 466 honors participants, 7 were excluded because suitable matched controls could not be found.
CONCLUDING REMARKS

The preceding study conducted at Colorado State University has shown that participation in the honors program was associated with meaningful increases in the proportion of these students who returned for their second year at the university and in the proportion of them who graduated within a four-, five-, or six-year period. These estimates come from a comparison of outcomes among honors students to outcomes among individually matched controls, students who were similar but did not participate in the CSU honors program. Measured in percentage-point gains, these increases in success among honors participants were larger for outcomes of longer duration, even when considered relative to the base rate of success among their matched peers.

The particular method for this matched comparison is known as propensity score analysis and offers relatively rigorous adjustment for achievement factors (admission index) and non-academic characteristics such as gender and non-residency in analyzing the contribution of an honors program to the retention and graduation rates of its students. Adjusting for the influence of such background factors gave results indicating that the effects of the program itself were much more modest than indicated by the raw comparison, but those effects were still found to be relatively large and statistically significant. For example, Table 4 indicates that the rate of five-year graduation for honors students was 81.9% versus the 69.6% that would have been expected among these students had they not participated in the program; this shows a much smaller gain for honors participation difference than would be implied by a comparison to the unadjusted honors graduation percentage of 57.6% (Table 2) and demonstrates the potential importance of an adjusted comparison in describing retention and graduation outcomes among honors participants. The adjusted comparisons of effects on five and six-year graduation, however, show much larger differences than on four-year graduation. Presuming that other universities’ experiences would resemble those of CSU, honors administrators who want to demonstrate a positive effect of program participation will find comparison of longer-term outcomes more useful.

The adjusted differences in retention and graduation rates between honors students and comparable non-honors students may be ascribed to benefits offered by the honors program such as innovative and small classes, residential learning communities, and extracurricular activities that engage these bright students. However, our work does not indicate which parts of an honors program produce these improved outcomes, and future researchers might address this issue by combining a focus on our outcomes with more processual factors along the lines initiated by Shushok.
REFERENCES


StataCorp. 2013. *Stata Statistical Software: Release 13*. College Station, TX: StataCorp LP.

******

The authors may be contacted at

Michael.Lacy@colostate.edu.
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, Coladarci 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,

\[\ldots\] 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.
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.
They Come But Do They Finish?

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 consider-
atation 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?

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1-Yr. Retention in Honors</strong></td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2-Yr. Retention in Honors</strong></td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong># Honors Freshmen</strong></td>
<td>262</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>337</td>
<td>389</td>
<td>443</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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

- % Entering Honors Freshmen Earning “Sophomore Honors”
  - 1998: 28%
  - 1999: 31%
  - 2000: 21%
  - 2001: 20%
  - 2002: 23%
  - 2003: 55%
  - 2004: 56%
  - 2005: 48%
  - 2006*: 52%
  - 2007*: 51%

- % 6-Yr Hon Grad *
  - 1998: 30%
  - 1999: 29%
  - 2000: 28%
  - 2001: 22%
  - 2002: 29%
  - 2003: 43%
  - 2004: 50%
  - 2005: 41%
  - 2006*: 43%
  - 2007*: 42%
  - 2008: N/A

* 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.
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
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


********

The authors may be contacted at

lynne.goodstein@uconn.edu
Factors Influencing Honors College Recruitment, Persistence, and Satisfaction at an Upper-Midwest Land Grant University

TIMOTHY J. NICHOLS AND KUO-LIANG “MATT” CHANG
SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION

Student success and the “completion agenda” are important issues in higher education today (Complete College America). For honors programs and colleges, understanding and advancing these issues requires data-driven approaches tailored to the unique honors student population and broader institutional contexts. Honors faculty and administrators hoping to succeed in their recruitment, retention, and graduation efforts need an accurate understanding of why students decide to enroll and persist as well as their satisfaction with honors experiences. Our research data provide particular insight into the student experience at South Dakota State University (SDSU) but may also be instructive to a broader audience of honors professionals seeking to enhance their programs’ impact and their students’ success.

METHODS AND DATA

In the spring of 2012, as a part of our honors college’s strategic planning process, we invited students at SDSU to complete an online survey about their honors experiences. Herron’s lead essay for the Forum on Admissions and Retention in this issue of JNCHC calls on honors administrators to leverage “data-based assessments” for program improvement and to “have the numbers to support our claims” about the impact of honors. Our study seeks, in part, to answer Herron’s call and, more broadly, to guide and inform the future development of honors at our university.

We developed an online survey to collect the following information: 1) the key factors that affected students’ initial decision to enroll in the honors college; 2) the main factors affecting current honors students’ decision to
Factors Influencing Honors College Recruitment

continue their enrollment; 3) the challenges students faced in graduating with Honors College Distinction; 4) students’ satisfaction in their honors experience; and 5) student characteristics such as demographic background, involvement with the honors college, academic performance since high school, and future career plans. We also included open-ended questions to solicit students’ comments and suggestions that we could use in future recruitment efforts, curriculum development, and strategic planning.

The researchers invited a small group of current honors students who serve on the Dean’s Student Advisory Council to review an early draft of the questionnaire and suggest modifications of its structure and content. Based on their input, we shortened the length of the original questionnaire and selected the thirty-five most important questions for the final draft. The formal survey study was conducted between April and May of 2013. Students were encouraged to use the link sent through their emails to finish the questionnaire online. Alternatively, they could scan the barcode through their cell phones or other electronic devices to access the questionnaire. At the end of the survey period, researchers collected the answers and transferred them into SAS format data for analysis. After deleting unusable responses, we had data from 138 students who completed the survey (a 65.09% completion rate). Log records showed that the average time to complete the survey was twenty minutes. The 138 participants represent approximately 28% of the total number of students pursuing graduation with Honors College Distinction at SDSU, a public land-grant university with a total enrollment of approximately 12,500 students, 40% of whom are first-generation.

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics of the 138 sample students. The data indicate that about 66% were female; the average age was 20.14. 20% were seniors, 17% juniors, 27% sophomores 27%; and 34% freshmen; 84.62% intended to graduate with Honors College Distinction, 1.4% did not, and 13% were undecided; 96% identified themselves as white; the average high school GPA was 3.90; the average current college GPA was 3.74; and only 7% were transfer students.

To determine their career plans, we asked respondents to use Likert scale (i.e., 1: strongly disagree; 5: strongly agree) to rank statements about their plans to pursue a PhD, master’s, bachelor’s, or professional degree. Table 1 indicates that most students were very determined to earn a bachelor’s degree (4.19) and also to pursue a master’s (3.30) and professional degree (3.28). On the other hand, the score for a PhD (2.65) suggests a smaller level of determination, possibly because the majority of sample students were freshmen and sophomores, who were perhaps less aware of opportunities associated with graduate education.
Table 1 also provides descriptive statistics of sub-groups divided by gender, STEM or non-STEM major or minor, and year in college. The females were approximately one year younger than the males, with a higher percentage of freshmen, and had higher ACT and GPA scores. A higher percentage of female students planned to pursue a professional degree (3.28 vs. 2.71), but male students showed a stronger interest than females in pursuing a PhD (2.95 vs. 2.65). Table 1 suggests that more female students planned to graduate with Honors College Distinction. Moreover, the majority of the sample students (116) either had a STEM major or minor. Compared to non-STEM students, STEM students were younger and more likely to pursue a professional degrees.

We defined as STEM majors or minors students in engineering, agriculture, biological sciences, nursing, pharmacy, and selected disciplines in the College of Arts and Sciences (e.g., chemistry, biochemistry, physics, and geographic information sciences) and the College of Education and Human Sciences (e.g., health and nutritional sciences or exercise science). These colleges also include a significant number of students pursuing pre-health professional pathways such as pre-medicine, pre-dentistry, pre-optometry, or pre-physical therapy. The STEM/non-STEM breakdown reported in the study generally reflects the current honors college enrollment at SDSU. We explored these differences to develop a better understanding of student experiences across a range of academic disciplines.

Table 1 shows we had more lower-level than upper-level students, potentially skewing the results since students in their early college career often have different perspectives than juniors and seniors. We also found that a higher percentage of freshmen respondents were female or transfer students than more advanced students and that sophomore respondents had a smaller percentage of STEM students. In addition, sophomore respondents were less likely to graduate with Honors College Distinction or to pursue a master’s or higher-level degrees.
Table 1: Data Descriptive Statics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Full Sample (N=138)</th>
<th>Male Students Only (N=47)</th>
<th>Female Students Only (N=91)</th>
<th>STEM (N=116)</th>
<th>Non-STEM (N=22)</th>
<th>Fresh. (N=47)</th>
<th>Soph. (N=37)</th>
<th>Junior (N=24)</th>
<th>Senior and above (N=27)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female (Yes=1)</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>age</td>
<td>20.14</td>
<td>20.30</td>
<td>19.57</td>
<td>20.24</td>
<td>19.57</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>20.00</td>
<td>20.70</td>
<td>22.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stem (yes=1)</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshman (Yes=1)</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore (Yes=1)</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior (Yes=1)</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior (yes=1)</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school GPA</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>3.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer Student</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College GPA</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>3.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT</td>
<td>29.16</td>
<td>29.89</td>
<td>28.80</td>
<td>29.16</td>
<td>29.19</td>
<td>29.17</td>
<td>29.14</td>
<td>29.00</td>
<td>29.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan to pursue PhD degree</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>2.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan to pursue Master’s Degree</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan to pursue bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>4.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan to pursue Professional degree</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>3.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan to graduate with Honors degree (yes=1)</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RESULTS

We now present and discuss the students’ responses to the following questions:

- their initial reasons for enrolling in the honors college;
- their reasons for continuing to pursue graduation with Honors Distinction;
- their view of the most challenging aspects of graduating with Honors Distinction; and
- the factors that determined their satisfaction with their honors experience.

All the questions were developed under a five-level Likert scale system, which we chose to ensure the symmetry of categories, with the midpoint presenting a clearly defined linguistic qualifier for the respondents. After transferring the original information to the SAS format data, we used the SAS “PROC MEANS” procedure to generate mean values and standard deviations of the answers. We also used the “PROC NPAR1WAY” procedure to conduct nonparametric tests (i.e., Kruskal-Wallis Tests) to compare the answers between sub-groups. The null hypothesis of these nonparametric tests was that answers given by respondents in different sub-groups shared the same distribution. The main reasons we chose nonparametric tests over other conventional ANOVA tests were to avoid the normality assumption and to generate more stable results given uneven sample sizes of sub-groups. We also added the comparison and discussion of answers from the sub-groups to reflect the potentially various perspectives. In the presentation of data in tables below, p values at the significance level of .05 are represented with an asterisk (*); p values at the significance level of .01 are represented with two asterisks (**); and p values at the significance level of .001 are represented with three asterisks (***).

Results of the survey provide insight into SDSU Honors College students’ perspectives and may be applicable to other honors college administrators hoping to maximize student satisfaction and success.

FACTORS INFLUENCING STUDENTS’ INITIAL DECISION TO ENROLL IN THE HONORS COLLEGE

One series of survey questions asked students to rate the relative strength of various factors influencing their initial decision to enroll in the honors college. We listed nine factors and asked respondents to rate the influence of these factors, with “1” as “not influential” and “5” as “extremely influential.” Table 2 summarizes the average scores for these factors, and Figure 1 (the radial chart) provides an illustration of the relative importance for each factor.
The highest-scoring responses were competitive advantage associated with honors college enrollment (4.29) and smaller classes (4.26). Connection with faculty (4.05), prestige associated with honors college enrollment (4.07), and opportunities for deeper learning (3.90) were also highly rated by students. On the other hand, “supplemental opportunities” had a score of 3.44, indicating that our students were less motivated by the desire to do research, travel, and assume leadership positions when they made their initial decision to enroll in the honors college. Moreover, Table 2 suggests that the influence of parents (3.24), teachers (2.95), and peers (3.04) was relatively neutral. The SDSU Honors College, unlike many honors programs across the country, does not provide financial incentives such as scholarships or textbook stipends to incentivize student enrollment, but other honors programs might include such factors in a similar survey.

Table 3 demonstrates the average score of each factor given by each subgroup. Although male students tended to give lower scores for most of the factors, the results of Kruskal-Wallis tests indicated no significant gender differences. Moreover, the scores given by STEM respondents were generally higher than those given by non-STEM students. Compared to non-STEM students, the Kruskal-Wallis Test results showed that STEM students gave

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Average Score*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competitive advantage</td>
<td>4.292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small class size</td>
<td>4.262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prestige associated with Honors College enrollment</td>
<td>4.069</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections with faculty</td>
<td>4.048</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for deeper learning</td>
<td>3.896</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplemental opportunities (e.g. research, travel, leadership, service)</td>
<td>3.441</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>3.241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers</td>
<td>3.042</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>2.952</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>3.694</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Score refers to average responses to the Likert-type scale questions; 1 = not influential, 3 = neutral, 5 = extremely influential.
significantly higher scores to influence of peers, competitive advantage, and connections with faculty.

While the overall scores were similar to those shown in Table 2, Table 3 suggests that prestige was the only statistically significant factor when comparing scores by students in different academic years. We found sophomore students generally gave lower scores for all factors than students in other years, especially compared to freshmen and seniors. As shown in Table 1, our sample sophomores had a smaller percentage of STEM students and lower ACT and GPA scores. They were also less willing to consider pursuing further education after the baccalaureate degree; the differences in characteristics may provide some insight into the lower scores. Table 3 also shows that the scores of prestige, connection to faculty, and supplemental opportunities became smaller as students moved to later phases of their college career while the scores for opportunities for deeper learning increased.
Table 3: Comparison of Initial Honors Enrollment Factors, by Gender, STEM/Non-STEM, Year in School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Kruskal-Wallis Gender</th>
<th>STEM</th>
<th>Not STEM</th>
<th>Kruskal-Wallis Major</th>
<th>Fr</th>
<th>So</th>
<th>Jr</th>
<th>Sr</th>
<th>Kruskal-Wallis Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>3.127</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>2.934</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prestige</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive Advantage</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Class Size</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections with Faculty</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplemental Opportunities</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for Deeper Learning</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Factors Influencing Honors College Recruitment

Reasons to Continue Pursuit of Graduation with Honors College Distinction

The survey contained a set of questions asking respondents to rate the factors affecting their decision to graduate with Honors College Distinction. As indicated in Table 4 and Figure 2, the quality of the honors learning environment was the top-cited factor influencing students’ continuing pursuit of graduation with Honors College Distinction, followed closely by connections with honors college faculty and access to priority registration. Parents were least influential.

Table 4 shows students gave higher scores to prestige (4.11), connection to faculty (4.21), and supplement opportunities (3.67). These factors also had high scores in Table 2 for questions about students’ initial decision to enroll in honors. In addition, although students gave a lower score for small class size (3.84), Table 4 suggests that the quality of classes offered/honors learning environment had the highest score (4.24) of all the factors.

Overall, the high scores for quality-related factors shown in Table 4 indicated that our students had surpassed their initial expectations and continued to consider having high-quality education/services as the key factor in deciding to graduate with Honors College Distinction whereas parental influence was notably smaller than it had been on initial enrollment (3.24 vs. 2.63).

Table 5 shows the scores given by sub-groups for the same factors included in Table 4. We found the quality of classes, prestige, and the connections to faculty were consistently ranked as the most important factors by all sub-groups.

Females and males gave very similar rank-orders to the factors included in Table 5, but male students gave lower scores to all of the factors. The Kruskal-Wallis Test results indicated that females gave higher scores than males to the connections to other honors students in their decision to continue their honors experience. Moreover, Kruskal-Wallis Test results showed that females also gave significantly higher scores to the importance of prestige. Otherwise, females and males gave similar scores the scores for quality of classes, parents, and small class size.

The comparison between STEM and non-STEM students showed a similar pattern. Although STEM and non-STEM students gave similar rank-orders to most factors, the STEM students gave higher scores to all the factors. The Kruskal-Wallis Test results showed STEM students gave significantly higher scores to small class size, community with other honors students, supplemental opportunities, and access to priority registration. However, we could not find obvious differences in how STEM and non-STEM students rated the most important three factors (quality of classes, prestige, and connection to faculty) as the Kruskal-Wallis Tests failed to reject the null hypothesis of no difference.
Table 4: Reasons for Continued Pursuit of Graduation with Honors College Distinction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Score*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peers’ influence</td>
<td>3.014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ influence</td>
<td>2.625</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prestige</td>
<td>4.111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection to Honors College faculty</td>
<td>4.208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small class size</td>
<td>3.854</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of classes offered/Honors learning environment</td>
<td>4.243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community with other Honors College students</td>
<td>3.819</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplemental opportunities (e.g. research, travel, leadership, service)</td>
<td>3.669</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to priority registration</td>
<td>4.014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>3.732</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Score refers to average responses to the Likert-type scale questions; 1 = not influential, 3 = neutral, 5 = extremely influential.

Figure 2: Factors Influencing Continued Honors Enrollment
Table 5: Comparison of Continuing Honors Enrollment Factors, by Gender, STEM/Non-STEM, Year in School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Kruskal-Wallis Gender</th>
<th>STEM</th>
<th>Not STEM</th>
<th>Kruskal-Wallis Major</th>
<th>Fr</th>
<th>So</th>
<th>Jr</th>
<th>Sr</th>
<th>Kruskal-Wallis Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peers</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prestige</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection to faculty</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>4.54</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small class size</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of classes</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community with other Honors students</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplemental Opportunities</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to priority registration</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Students’ class levels did influence how they rated the factors of prestige, small class size, and quality of classes. Table 5 suggests that, as students advanced through their college years, the influence of prestige gradually decreased. The influences of small class size and quality of classes also fell when students entered their sophomore and junior years. However, these influences rose significantly once students became seniors although the administration of the survey in the spring may have influenced responses. Additionally, the Kruskal-Wallis Test showed no significant difference between students’ academic years in the ratings of some factors: connection to faculty, access to priority registration, supplemental opportunities, and community with other honors students. Finally, the influence of peers and parents was rated consistently low among all students.

**Most Challenging Aspects of Graduating with Honors College Distinction**

Requirements for graduating with Honors College Distinction at SDSU are as follows: 3.5 cumulative grade point average; 12 credits of honors general education; 3–6 credits of upper division contracted credits in a major/minor field of study; 3–6 credits of Honors Colloquium (multi-disciplinary examination of a contemporary topic of interest); 3 credits of Honors Independent Study (an original piece of scholarly work, executed under the direction of a faculty member and published or presented at a conference).

The survey questionnaire listed six potential challenges to graduating with Honors College Distinction. Respondents were requested to use Likert scale to rate these challenges. Table 6 and Figure 3 present the results of students’ ratings.

As shown in Table 6, students rated most challenges lower than the neutral point of 3 and thus not significant obstacles, but they perceived Honors Independent Study as the most challenging requirement (3.72). Moreover, the scores for completing the contracted courses (2.92) and fitting honors requirements with their major (2.98) suggested some students may have trouble tailoring course plans with their home departments in order to graduate with Honors College Distinction.

Table 6 shows that students saw completing the honors general education requirements, completing honors colloquium courses, and maintaining the required grade point average as the program’s least challenging components. The low score for honors general education requirements (2.08) suggests that fulfilling the twelve-credit requirement as part of their regular four- or five-year program did not seem challenging to most students (the question did not ask students to rate the academic rigor of these courses). Given the strong academic credentials and dedication of honors students, we were not surprised
Table 6: Most Challenging Aspects of Graduating with Honors College Distinction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Score*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maintaining required grade point average</td>
<td>2.444</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completing Honors College general education requirement</td>
<td>2.078</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completing Honors College contracted courses</td>
<td>2.915</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completing Honors Colloquium requirement</td>
<td>2.476</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completing the Honors Independent Study</td>
<td>3.716</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making Honors College requirements fit with my major</td>
<td>2.979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>2.768</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Likert-type scale: 1 = not at all challenging, 5 = extremely challenging**

Figure 3: Student Perceptions of Honors Challenge
that they did not find the required 3.5 grade especially challenging. This study did not include issues relating to general education requirements such as AP courses.

Table 7 offers comparison of students’ responses from different subgroups. Except for fitting honors requirements with their major, male students rated all aspects as being more challenging although the results of Kruskal-Wallis Tests indicated that the differences by gender were not significant. Table 7 also shows that non-STEM students gave higher scores to most of the challenges except maintaining required GPA (2.27 vs. 2.46) and completing general education required courses (2.00 vs. 2.10). The results from Kruskal-Wallis tests suggest no significant differences between STEM and non-STEM students’ responses. Moreover, we found that most of the scores decreased as students moved toward later phases of their college career except for the challenge of finishing independent study, and sophomores and juniors found making honors requirements fit with their major requirements significantly more difficult than freshmen or seniors did.

**Student Satisfaction with Honors College Experience**

Another set of questions in the survey solicited students’ input on their satisfaction with different components of their honors college experience. Responses from students are reported in Table 8 and Figure 4. With the exception of the facilities item (score = 3.860), average student satisfaction scores were between very satisfied (score = 4) and extremely satisfied (score = 5).

Students reported their highest levels of satisfaction with the following components: the faculty (4.62), the Honors College Dean’s office (4.51), the honors college living and learning community (4.36), and their overall honors experience (4.37). This result suggests the primary importance of leadership and faculty in student satisfaction and also the value of an excellent living and learning environment. Other components such as honors courses (4.32), peers (4.25), advising and support (4.22), and honors college activities (4.08) also received scores higher than 4.00. In keeping with these positive responses, 94% of respondents indicated that they would recommend the honors college to others; 5% responded ‘it depends’ or ‘not sure’; and only 1% indicated that they would not recommend the honors college.

Table 9 summarizes the response of each sub-group about their satisfaction with the honors college experience. Female respondents reported higher satisfaction than males with their overall honors college experience. However, we found male students were more satisfied with honors faculty, advising and support, and the dean’s office even though the results of Kruskal-Wallis Tests indicated that the differences by gender were not significant. On the other hand, The Kruskal-Wallis Test results showed female students were significantly
### Table 7: Comparison of Most Challenging Aspects of Honors by Gender, STEM/Non-STEM, Year in School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Kruskal-Wallis Gender</th>
<th>STEM</th>
<th>Not STEM</th>
<th>Kruskal-Wallis Major</th>
<th>Fr</th>
<th>So</th>
<th>Jr</th>
<th>Sr</th>
<th>Kruskal-Wallis Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade Point Average</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Education</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honors Contracts</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honors Colloquium</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Study</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fit with Major Requirements</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 8: Student Satisfaction with Their Honors College Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component of Honors Experience</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Honors College courses</td>
<td>4.319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honors College faculty</td>
<td>4.616</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advising and support for Honors College students</td>
<td>4.215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honors College Dean’s Office</td>
<td>4.514</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honors College activities and opportunities</td>
<td>4.077</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honors College facilities</td>
<td>3.860</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fellow Honors College students</td>
<td>4.246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honors College living and learning community***</td>
<td>4.360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Honors College experience</td>
<td>4.368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average</strong></td>
<td>4.268</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***Respondents who had not lived on the Honors floor were instructed to leave this question blank.

Figure 4: Student Satisfaction with Honors Experience
**Table 9: Student Satisfaction in Honors by Gender, STEM/Not STEM, Year in School**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Kruskal-Wallis Gender</th>
<th>STEM</th>
<th>Not STEM</th>
<th>Kruskal-Wallis Major</th>
<th>Fr</th>
<th>So</th>
<th>Jr</th>
<th>Sr</th>
<th>Kruskal-Wallis Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Honors Courses</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honors Faculty</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advising and Support</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dean’s Office</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>4.66</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>4.54</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities and Opportunities</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilities</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fellow Honors students</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living Learning Community (if applicable)</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Experience</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.44</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
more satisfied with facilities and fellow students than male students, and they also gave higher scores for honors courses, the living and learning community, and honors activities.

STEM students reported greater satisfaction than non-STEM students with almost all components of their honors experience. The Kruskal-Wallis Test results indicated STEM students were significantly more satisfied with honors courses, faculty, and activities and opportunities than their non-STEM counterparts. STEM students also reported significantly higher levels of satisfaction with their overall honors experience.

Data presented in Table 9 suggest that fellow honors students and the honors living learning community were the two factors that showed significant differences in satisfaction related to class level. Seniors ranked satisfaction with their fellow honors students highest; for freshman, satisfaction with the honors living and learning community was highest; and juniors gave slightly lower scores than other students to most of the components except honors courses and faculty. However, the Kruskal-Wallis Test results suggested that these differences were mostly not significant.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Several trends emerged from the data. One was the reported weakness of influence from parents and high school teachers, ranked the lowest of any of the factors influencing students’ initial decision to enroll, but, since all data here is self-reported, it could be that teenagers—particularly high-achieving recent high school graduates—aspire to independence and are not eager to acknowledge the influence of others in their decision-making process. The data suggest that the top-ranked factors—competitive advantage, small class size, prestige, and faculty connections—may resonate primarily with new honors students and thus should be emphasized in recruitment and orientation materials. These data on influences affirm Herron’s call for numbers to support our claims about the honors experience. For example, data that quantify the average class size in honors, student/faculty ratio, and the competitive advantage earned through an honors education would strengthen the program’s ability to attract prospective students.

The data indicate a difference between the factors that influenced initial enrollment and those that influenced persistence in the program. The primary persistence influences included the quality of the honors learning environment and connections to honors faculty followed by prestige and priority registration. A key implication of this work is the challenge to deliver on the promise of honors. While students may have been attracted to different factors initially, the overall program quality and connections with honors faculty were the most powerful influences on students’ decisions to persist in honors. Parents’
influence was even less important than in initial enrollment, perhaps a sign of students’ continued personal development and independence.

Most students did not rank maintaining the required grade point average or completing honors curriculum requirements as “challenging, very challenging, or extremely challenging,” but they saw the Honors Independent Study requirement as the most challenging honors requirements. This result speaks to our need to demystify the independent study process and provide adequate guidance and support in this capstone experience. One such intervention currently underway at SDSU is Introduction to Independent Study,” a course designed to walk students step-by-step through the process of preparing for their scholarly work. This new course represents one of the ways we are trying to follow McKay’s suggestion that honors programs must evaluate the effects of program policies and develop ways to encourage retention and graduation.

Our research was gratifying in the reported high levels of student satisfaction with their honors college experience. They were most satisfied with honors faculty and the dean’s office, underscoring the importance of the human dimensions of the honors experience. At the time of this survey, the SDSU Honors College had fairly modest facilities that were ranked lowest in student satisfaction in the survey; these included a classroom, the dean’s office and conference room housed in the university library, and a living-learning community on one floor of an older residence hall. Beginning in fall 2013, partly because of student feedback, program growth, and momentum, the living learning community has expanded four-fold into a brand new honors residence hall, which also houses the college’s classroom, administrative office, and collaborative learning and community building spaces. Thus, we are hopeful that student satisfaction with honors college facilities will improve in future years.

In examining influencing factors, STEM students reported competitive advantage as more important than non-STEM students did, perhaps because of the large number of STEM students aspiring to competitive professional programs. STEM majors may also be more pragmatic in nature and more interested in the tangible benefits an honors education may provide. STEM students also tended to be more satisfied than non-STEM students with honors courses, faculty, activities, opportunities, and their overall honors experience, reflecting the commitment and effort of STEM faculty at SDSU to expand their course offerings and level of participation in honors college activities. While these indicators are positive, they are also a reminder to college administration and faculty to continue their commitment to liberal arts students and programs, long the foundation of honors at SDSU and across the country.
In the comparison between male and female students, females tended to rank relationships as more important, including the influence of peers and the community of honors students and they were more satisfied with their fellow honors students and college facilities. As McKay and also Campbell and Fuqua found in their studies, females were significantly more likely to complete honors requirements than males. Given enrollment trends and the responses of males and females in this study, continued exploration of programmatic strategies to recruit, retain and provide meaningful experiences for male as well as female students will be critically important to the college’s future.

In survey responses by class level, sophomores and juniors reported significantly greater challenges in fitting their honors requirements within those of their academic major, perhaps an inevitable consequence of finishing up their general education requirements and beginning to enroll in a larger number of major-specific courses. Further, while SDSU aims many activities and curricular experiences at new freshmen and graduating seniors, we do not work as hard to make second- and third-year students feel connected to the honors college. Recently, SDSU has introduced one-credit sophomore- and junior-level seminars to address program retention and this potential midstream drift.

Senior students reported being most satisfied with their honors college experience and saw their honors requirements as less challenging than freshmen, sophomores or juniors did; This likely reflects student maturity and also the timing of the survey when seniors had successfully completed most of their program requirements. These data point to the value of the honors seniors serving as peer mentors to provide encouragement and support to younger students. As discussed by Campbell and Fuqua, such approaches and supports enhance overall program retention and satisfaction.

Among the several limitations of this research was that respondents skewed young and female. While SDSU’s rapidly growing honors college is majority-female, and freshman and sophomore classes are significantly larger than junior and senior classes, the sample is disproportionately so. Also, the online survey took respondents on average twenty minutes to complete, and thus only 138 students, of the 212 who started the survey, completed it (65.09%), possibly influencing responses. We will streamline future assessment efforts to enhance participation and survey completion rates. Finally, the sample was not random; all students were invited to complete the survey, and those who responded chose to do so, their only incentive being a coupon for a free ice cream cone, so results cannot be generalized to a broader honors college student population at SDSU or beyond.
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As Achterberg argues, stereotyping honors students is inappropriate and misleading. Administrators should avoid sweeping conclusions and work to gather empirical data to inform their decisions. This study is one attempt to gather some of that “more empirical data.”

These data have prompted and informed a variety of programmatic initiatives at SDSU, some of which may be appropriate for comparable honors colleges and programs seeking to strengthen student success:

1. designing recruitment materials and messages that emphasize competitive advantage, prestige, and small class sizes;
2. supporting opportunities for deep learning and engagement between honors college faculty and students;
3. investing in honors college facilities, with special attention to living and learning environments;
4. providing targeted mid-program support to honors students that assists them in integrating honors requirements with those in their major fields of study;
5. distributing more information and enhancing guidance and support for students as they prepare for Honors Independent Study;
6. investing in the development of a systemic peer-mentoring program and developing enhanced opportunities for meaningful, positive interactions and relationship-building among honors college students;
7. engaging honors college faculty and students in a conversation on academic rigor in honors;
8. conducting a more focused examination of the honors college student experience in different academic majors;
9. convening faculty, students, and appropriate administrators to discuss strengthening the honors college student experience in the liberal arts; and
10. examining curricular and extracurricular opportunities to ensure appeal and relevance to both male and female students.

Future research may probe our survey responses and produce further data to enhance understanding of factors that influence honors student enrollment, persistence, and satisfaction. Such data will ground administrators in their students’ perspectives and help them to target recruitment materials, programming, and services more effectively. Qualitative analyses will shed further light and deeper insight into the experiences of honors college students.
and help achieve maximum benefits. Given the enormous range and diversity of honors programs, other institutions are cautioned against interpreting any institution-specific data as having particular relevance for their programs. However, engaging in a similar attempt to study, analyze, and better understand their own students’ experiences may produce the insights and consequent adjustments that we have made at SDSU.

REFERENCES


*******

The authors may be contacted at

Timothy.Nichols@sdstate.edu.
Real-Life Solutions to Real-Life Problems: Collaborating with a Non-Profit Foundation to Engage Honors Students in Applied Research

Emily Stark
Minnesota State University, Mankato

Colleges and universities have long emphasized undergraduate research experiences as valuable activities for students. The National Science Foundation (NSF) echoed this focus in 2003, recommending that all students get involved in undergraduate research as early as possible in their college careers (NSF). Collegiate honors programs in particular have embraced the role of student research as an integral experience for high-ability students, leading the way in developing the thesis-based model of undergraduate research that is increasingly common in institutions of higher learning.

However, one difficulty in getting honors students involved in research, particularly early in their years at college, is that they misunderstand what research entails or see it only as the province of laboratory-based science majors. Even in social science programs such as psychology or sociology or in applied programs such as nursing or communication studies, where empirical research is central to the discipline, students may not understand the value of research in these contexts or may think that they do not have the skills or ideas to participate in the research process. When asked to define “research,” many students think only of laboratories, test tubes, and technical equipment, or they think of the ubiquitous research papers that they have already encountered in their classes and that they often see as summarizing the ideas of other people rather than contributing new knowledge.

Since the spring of 2012, the Minnesota State University, Mankato Honors Program has partnered with the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation (SMIF) to implement two separate approaches to developing honors students’ research skills and broadening their understanding of the research process. We incorporated applied research opportunities for honors students in two different settings: a course on research methods and an independent study
research experience. Each approach was successful at building students’ confidence in their research skills, giving them experience with applied research practices, and broadening their understanding of what constitutes research. Each approach had various pros and cons that might be useful to other programs with plans to develop similar opportunities, and I include recommendations for how to form connections with community groups. The reflections completed by students who participated in these opportunities provide important perspectives that supplement my own as the instructor and faculty mentor for these experiences. Finally, in Appendix A I provide a letter from the president of the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation presenting his perception of their partnership with our Honors program.

INTRODUCING HONORS STUDENTS TO THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The first thing that came to my mind when someone talked about research was a picture of a mad scientist wearing a white coat with goggles over their glasses in an isolated room mixing colorful chemicals.

—First-year honors student in the pre-nursing program, reflecting on research

This comment sums up the thoughts and impressions of many students entering honors programs with the knowledge that they are required to complete an original research project. The honors program at Minnesota State University, Mankato is similar to most other college and university honors programs in that students are required to engage in an independent, original research project and to disseminate their results, generally through presenting their research at a conference. Most first-year students in our program and probably others seem to hold this narrow, mad-scientist definition of research and fail to see how non-science majors can get involved. Even science majors are often nervous about finding the time or having the skills to engage in complex experimentation outside of their class work. Many students believe that they will have to think of ideas to research all on their own without support or mentorship, and they view the research requirement as the most formidable obstacle in their path to graduating with honors.

However, a significant number of studies have detailed the benefits to students of participating in undergraduate research experiences across many different majors and disciplines. For example, Ishiyama demonstrated that students who participated in collaborative research experiences with faculty in their freshman or sophomore years showed gains in their abilities to think analytically and to learn on their own, emphasizing the importance of having
research experience in the first years of college. Landrum and Nelson as well as Hartmann, Widner, and Carrick emphasize the benefit of developing a one-on-one relationship with a faculty mentor as a result of working on a research project. Researchers have also noted career benefits: Landrum and Nelson report that faculty perceive student research experiences as needed preparation for graduate school, and Lopatto notes that these research experiences have “instrumental value in continuing the student’s career trajectory” (28) through enhancing their credentials for graduate school.

Scholars have found these positive outcomes when studying students from many different disciplines, describing the potential for both cognitive and interpersonal growth among all students who participate in undergraduate research. In addition, numerous and varied opportunities for independent research strengthen honors programs by helping them to serve students with a wide range of interests and career goals. Given that many honors programs require students to engage in research, they have a responsibility to show students the value of developing their research skills early in their careers while providing opportunities for all honors students to participate in the research process. However, providing these opportunities can be costly in time, materials, and personnel, creating challenges for honors directors and faculty. The Minnesota State University, Mankato Honors Program worked to address some of these challenges through collaboration with an outside organization, providing opportunities for students to conduct meaningful research without costly or complicated laboratory supplies or extensive training.

ENGAGING STUDENTS IN RESEARCH VIA A SERVICE LEARNING MODEL

We were able to make a difference in practice. . . . Our research had a definite purpose.

—Sophomore psychology major reflecting on her experience conducting applied research for a community organization

Although requiring independent research for honors students is designed to provide them with the benefits described above, many honors students find this requirement daunting and do not view research as an opportunity they wish to embrace. Providing students with applied research projects, where the data they collect is needed by an outside organization, is one way to help them see the value of the skills they are developing and the potential for research to make a significant difference in their own lives and in their communities.

Focusing on applied projects where students collaborate with an outside organization places this approach in the tradition of service learning, which has been shown to provide students with meaningful learning opportunities in
a number of contexts (Strage; Peters). Service learning balances equally the concepts of serving an outside constituent with enhancing student learning (Furco), and this was the model we felt would be beneficial to our students while also ensuring a continuing and useful partnership with external organizations. In addition, the focus on partnering with a community group connects to another of our honors program’s major competencies: developing knowledge and skills in global citizenship. Service learning is a form of civic engagement and has been successful at building citizenship, community engagement skills, and responsible attitudes in students (Levine; Deeley).

Although the use of service learning as an experiential educational tool in all disciplines has grown rapidly in recent decades (Harkavy & Hartley), using service learning specifically to build students’ research skills is rare at the undergraduate level even though, at the graduate level, it has been built into programs like occupational therapy (Schindler). Research and service learning are nevertheless a natural fit given their shared experiential focus, especially since community groups are continually pressed for time and resources that student researchers can provide. Contributing a needed resource to local community partners while at the same time providing an opportunity for students to develop their research skills makes a research-based service learning experience a valuable addition to honors programs.

Most honors programs do provide courses that cover topics related to information literacy, the ethical conduct of research, writing, and critical thinking, all of which serve to build skills that students need to engage in research. However, the service learning paradigm builds in a practical component as well: Students can experience first-hand various methods of collecting data, summarizing results for a non-academic audience, and recommending future practices or continued research, all while providing meaningful help to their community. Also, college and university students can bring another resource to community partners: The students’ access to library databases gives them the ability to provide useful literature reviews or contrasting viewpoints to the outside organization, an exercise that simultaneously builds students’ information analysis and writing skills. Finally, as a result of research-based service learning, students not only develop their research skills but see clearly the purpose of their work in furthering the goals of a community organization, making the research process more concrete and rewarding and potentially increasing their interest in continuing to do research.
COLLABORATING WITH A COMMUNITY PARTNER TO PROVIDE STUDENT RESEARCH EXPERIENCES

Our work was productive and beneficial for others, which made this process so much more rewarding.

—Sophomore psychology major reflecting on completing research for the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation

To connect our students with research opportunities while serving a community partner, we approached a local non-profit, the Southern Minnesota Research Foundation (SMIF). SMIF is one of six regional groups throughout the state of Minnesota that were created in 1986 by the McKnight Foundation (see <http://smifoundation.org> for more information). Currently, they receive funding from the McKnight Foundation as well as from federal grants and local donations. SMIF focuses their grant and loan programs on supporting entrepreneurs and early childhood development programs. For example, SMIF has worked with local communities to support pre-school programs in providing educational resources to students. SMIF also manages loan funds targeted to small business development and awards grants to businesses working to build collaborations within their communities. The diverse interests of SMIF make them a good partner with our program as they have been able to suggest a wide range of research needs for their various programs and activities that connect with students’ majors or interests.

The first contact with SMIF came at a committee meeting at our university where local business leaders connect with faculty and administrators to develop new partnerships that might benefit students. The president of SMIF expressed interest in working with our honors program, suggesting that students could help provide hands-on research support. We followed up with several meetings with SMIF personnel, culminating in a list of specific research needs that would help SMIF advance their programming and ensure that they were providing the most useful opportunities for local communities. SMIF was a good partner because they were already familiar with the university as well as the honors program and were committed to establishing new opportunities for students.

As honors directors consider the potential benefits of collaborating with a community partner in order to provide opportunities for students, they need to weigh many factors: for example, the availability of courses through which to offer these projects or experiences; the availability of faculty to teach courses or mentor students independently; the extent to which students can earn credit for their work; the types of skills that students need to develop; and the needs of the community partner. Because our students need to develop general research

EMILY STARK

FALL/WINTER 2013
skills and SMIF has diverse research needs, our partnership has allowed for a broad flexibility in student research and in ways that faculty can structure the experience, contributing to the overall success of our initiatives. Even though SMIF identified particular areas where they needed research support, students have had considerable freedom to develop specific research questions within those areas. Honors directors who have a high level of flexibility in their requirements of students and who seek out a community organization with a high level of flexibility in their needs and projects may be best poised to make the most of a potential partnership as they will be able to manage expectations fluidly and develop applied projects to serve everyone’s needs and interests.

**INCORPORATING APPLIED RESEARCH PROJECTS INTO A RESEARCH METHODS COURSE**

When looking at the big picture, research proposals are not just written papers, but rather a real life solution to a real life problem.

—Sophomore business student completing an honors course on research methods that incorporated SMIF projects

To teach honors students the basics of research using a hands-on approach, we developed a semester-long research methods course that included small research projects provided by SMIF related to their early childhood funding initiatives. The first half of the course covered topics such as operationalizing variables, ethical considerations involved in research with human participants, development of survey and interview questions, and observational research designs, after which the students completed a literature review on a topic of their choice related to early childhood development. In the second half of the course, small groups of students worked on the research projects identified by SMIF to provide them with feedback and data on grant programs related to their early childhood education funding initiatives. Students developed materials, collected data, and presented their final products to representatives from SMIF at the end of the course. (See Appendix B for a week-by-week course schedule with topics and major course projects that can be readily adapted to a wide range of course types and instructional goals.)

One group of students, for example, examined ways for local pre-school teachers to improve their assessment of the cognitive and motor abilities of the children in their classes. The students developed a parent questionnaire to complete at the beginning of the school year so that teachers could combine their own observations of the children with the parents’ ratings of children’s skills and abilities. Students met with local representatives from pre-school
classes, learned about their assessment needs, and then designed the questionnaire. They gained feedback on the questionnaire from pre-school teachers to assess its usefulness for their needs and how well it mapped onto their own assessments, revising it accordingly. The students provided the questionnaire to SMIF to distribute to local pre-schools for their use and developed suggestions for future research to continue revising this form of assessment by, for example, tracking the extent to which parents’ ratings correlate with teachers’ observations.

In addition to these applied projects, students were led through the process of conducting and writing a literature review as well as a research proposal. The students engaged in the project described above wrote literature reviews that examined research on early childhood education and development, and they wrote research proposals that suggested ways to extend work on the measure they had developed. Students’ reports of the knowledge that they gained from the course focused mostly on the writing skills they had developed. One student commented that “whether I will be writing a letter to my manager or writing a thesis for a doctorate program, writing skills I have developed will be of great importance in my future.” This student not only saw the potential transfer of skills to her future work both in and beyond college, but she also grasped the centrality of writing skills to the research process, whether synthesizing the work of others in a literature review or proposing empirical data collection to answer a research question.

One drawback to focusing on writing literature reviews and research proposals, however, was that students had less time to develop their applied research projects; many students were able only to collect preliminary data or develop measures for future use rather than complete extensive data collection and analysis. The applied projects thus became a secondary aspect of the course and the writing pieces primary. However, most of the students had not had prior experience with applied research, and as a whole they were engaged by their brief experiences in this area. One student noted,

In most of my other classes much of the critical thinking and analysis has already been completed, so doing new research or thinking above and beyond is not really necessary. However, in this course, we were able to use the information we learned in class and our own creative ideas to ‘go further’ than the normal class.

In general, even though the time spent on the projects was limited, students were able to see the value of the work that they put in for community organizations. Honors directors who work to develop applied research experiences in their own programs can present these as opportunities for students to work
with real-world issues or problems, which will engage student interest in seeing the tangible results of their work.

DEVELOPING INDEPENDENT RESEARCH TEAMS TO WORK ON APPLIED RESEARCH PROJECTS

This project has given me confidence to pursue research as an undergraduate, especially as part of a research team.

— Sophomore education student reflecting on her experience working on an independent research team

Although the research methods class was an effective way to provide students with exposure to core concepts of empirical research in an applied setting and succeeded at enriching their understanding of the value of applied research, we also wanted to explore options for giving students more time to work on the empirical data collection potential in these projects. To the extent that student teams could collect, analyze, and summarize meaningful data related to SMIF initiatives, their findings could also be more useful to SMIF and fulfill a need for the non-profit as well as a learning experience for the students. We decided to use a model of independent research teams in the following academic year to collaborate with SMIF on new research needs. These teams were open to any interested student regardless of their prior coursework or experience with research. Students could still have the option of registering for credit, but independent research teams led to more flexibility for both the students and the faculty mentor and also opened up new opportunities for presenting the completed projects at local academic conferences as the students had more time to collect and analyze data and to develop presentations.

To guide the students through this process, a faculty mentor volunteered her time to work with the students and serve as a liaison to SMIF. Although working with these research groups was an addition to the workload of the faculty mentor, our university values facilitating undergraduate research, and the student production of research presentations can help faculty achieve some of their own goals toward tenure and promotion. Ideally, faculty members who work with students on independent research projects should be compensated in some way for their time through workload reduction or additional monetary compensation. Issues of compensation are not unique to our university; Guzy, for instance, examines faculty compensation for teaching honors courses or participating in other honors program activities. In our case, the rewards for the faculty mentor were the several undergraduate research presentations presented under her supervision and the development of her own research and mentoring skills through working on these applied projects.
Prior to the academic year, the faculty mentor connected with SMIF, which had identified two projects for students to work on: one on the experiences of local businesses that had participated in a SMIF-funded workshop on succession planning and the other on a survey of local school-based preschool programs about their needs and experiences in implementing a new standards-based rating system. In both cases, the projects had the potential to provide SMIF with valuable feedback about the success of their grant programs and workshops as well as information on where to concentrate funding resources in the future. In addition, the projects gave students the opportunity to develop specific research questions, construct surveys to test the research questions, collect data, and summarize findings. The research teams were formed over the first month of the fall semester, and then the students began finding background information and developing survey questions to provide the feedback that SMIF wanted.

Eight students expressed interest in working on these independent research teams, resulting in two teams of four students, one working on each focus identified by SMIF. In each case, the teams developed a survey to send to respondent lists provided by SMIF, obtained IRB approval of the survey, conducted background literature reviews on the topic of their project, summarized results, and created a professional report for SMIF detailing their work and their recommendations based on the findings of the survey. In addition, the students were asked to submit a reflection once a month detailing what they had accomplished and learned about research during that time. The faculty mentor convened research team meetings as needed (generally every other week) in which she reviewed the students’ work, discussed the next steps in the project, and talked about any issues that had arisen. The faculty mentor offered suggestions when needed and helped the students set goals of what needed to be accomplished to advance the projects. Also, the faculty mentor served as the primary liaison with SMIF, keeping the non-profit updated about the progress of the research and passing on questions from students as they arose.

The students’ reflections from the fall semester, which detailed their initial involvement and steps to design their surveys, showed that they were hesitant at the outset, expressing some of the concerns and stereotypes about research that we have commonly found in our students. One wrote, “I was really nervous to start this project because I felt like I didn’t know what I was doing, or if I was even smart [or] qualified enough to start on a research project.” Another said, “I had always thought of research as boring and un-enjoyable.” Responses like these show the importance of overcoming students’ negative expectations about research and building their self-confidence that they can successfully complete such a project. By showing students how the research process is broken down into steps, setting clear tasks and expectations throughout the
course of the project, and reviewing student work with constructive criticism and positive comments, the faculty mentor worked to ensure that students were confident in their work and to build their understanding of the research process.

The students worked on their research projects over the course of an academic year, spending the fall semester in developing the surveys, researching background information, and obtaining IRB approval while in the spring semester they focused on data collection, analysis, and preparing their reports. In addition, both teams of students submitted their projects for presentation at on-campus and off-campus conferences and sought on-campus grant funding to offset research costs, giving them experience in writing abstracts and grant proposals and in developing and presenting research posters. Having an entire academic year allowed students more time to see the research process through from conception to dissemination, leading to a richer experience for the students. One student stated, “[Presenting at a conference] was one of the best experiences I have had thus far in research because I was able to share it with a lot of people,” and another noted, “Other people’s questions and comments made me see our data in a new way and increased my understanding of our research.” In developing conference poster presentations for the general public, students thought deeply about how to explain the value of their projects in ways that were easily understandable. All of the students on the research teams found their presentations to be positive capstone experiences for their projects.

In addition, the students gained experience working effectively in teams. They had to work together to design the surveys, summarize the results, and prepare their presentations. Team work was a challenging experience for many of the students, one of whom stated, “Before joining this research team, I never relied on others to do quality work and I would always undertake every responsibility.” Many of our honors students report negative experiences with group and team work in their courses; they are frequently the ones to take on more work to cover for lack of effort by others, and therefore they often approach these types of projects with an assumption that they will have to do everything. However, with this project, the students were teamed with other honors students, helping them trust in the work of others. Also, the faculty mentor took care to provide clear goals and a timeline as well as to prompt the teams to consider how they would split up work, thus helping students avoid issues of miscommunication or uncertainty about how to participate.

All students reported a positive experience with teamwork in their reflections, and for many this part of the project was the most surprising or useful. Halfway through the project, one student stated, “The most important thing I have taken from this project so far is the ability to trust others.” and another
said, “Being part of such a highly motivated group of people has shown me the huge benefit of working on a team, and has raised my opinion of collaborative projects.” This positive experience seems to have made a powerful impression on their attitudes toward working together on large projects.

Honors programs that incorporate any kind of research experiences for students as requirements should consider as primary learning goals not just completing the research itself but also formally presenting it to others. Another important goal is positive team experiences that will be necessary for students’ success in graduate school and/or their future careers. In addition, in collaboration with outside groups, students learn to understand organizational needs while designing the research and communicating their findings to the group, aspects of research that can be lost in more traditional research experiences. The letter in Appendix A presents the benefits of this experience as perceived by SMIF and shows the success of the students’ work.

Their applied projects allowed students to see both how their research was contributing to an existing knowledge base and how their findings could help directly improve their communities. One student stated, “As I began to explain to others why our research was relevant and important to society, it really began to sink in for me. I realized that we were doing a service to not only SMIF, but to parents in the community.” She saw that their survey of local preschool programs would be used to improve these programs and would make a real difference in the lives of local families. Seeing first-hand the relevance of their work is another benefit of applied research that is rarely available in more traditional research experiences.

**DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This project allowed me to see how important research is as an undergraduate and the wonderful effects it can have on real-world experiences . . .

—*Sophomore psychology student’s reflection after spending a year completing an applied research project*

Through working with the local non-profit SMIF, students in the honors program at Minnesota State University, Mankato have had opportunities to develop their research skills through both coursework and independent experiences that included designing surveys, collecting data from community respondents, analyzing and summarizing results, and preparing professional reports and posters to communicate the project outcomes to SMIF and to the general public. Overall, their experiences suggest that students developed a better understanding of the research process, improved their writing and communication skills, and gained experience working effectively with teams. In addition, working with an outside organization helped to reduce some of
the workload for the faculty instructor and mentor as SMIF provided general topics, participant groups to study, some background resources, and opportunities for students to present their findings. These experiences benefitted both students and SMIF, and this collaboration will provide a source of meaningful research opportunities for students in our honors program in the years to come.

Applied research experiences where students collaborate with an outside organization like the ones described in this paper are particularly effective at providing opportunities for students to collect data and connect their findings to community issues or the particular needs of the outside group. However, engagement with a community of scholars through theoretical research got less attention; in both the course and the projects, students’ research questions and data collection were driven more by the specific needs of the outside organization than by sustained literature analysis of the overarching concepts and issues connected to the project. One concern about applied research, therefore, might be that students will miss the ongoing conversation between scholars and experience research as isolated instances of data collection that do not speak to a broader picture.

In future research collaborations with SMIF, however, we hope to build a more in-depth literature review into the project and push students to connect their particular measures and findings to other research done on their topics. Former students or teams involved in the projects could, for instance, present their findings to new groups of research students; the new teams could be prompted to consider how they can build on the work of previous students. Even though students are exposed to different models of research in their other coursework, applied research experiences that focus on data collection should still provide opportunities for students to connect their work to prior literature and findings in order to develop a deeper understanding of the research process.

With such adjustments, applied research is a valuable strategy for honors programs, which may be particularly situated to work well with community, non-profit, and business groups as they often have students from many different majors and disciplines who need to complete a research project. For example, an applied research experience may be particularly well-suited to students majoring in areas such as business, economics, or marketing, where they can develop skills learned in other classes. In addition, many honors programs emphasize community engagement and citizenship, which result from connecting students with community organizations. Applied research is a powerful way to engage talented students in their community while building their research, writing, and communication skills.

140
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The experiences described here have been possible only through the support of the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation—in particular the commitment of Tim Penny, RaeJean Hansen, and Pam Bishop—and the Minnesota State University, Mankato Honors Program as well as the talented and dedicated honors students who participated in both the research methods course and the independent study. This manuscript has been significantly improved through the insightful comments of Christopher Corley, Kristen Cvancara, and Mélanie Frappier.

REFERENCES


REAL-LIFE SOLUTIONS TO REAL-LIFE PROBLEMS


*******

The author may be contacted at

Emily.stark@mnsu.edu.
SMIF President Tim Penny Discusses Their Perspective on the Partnership with the Honors Program

For the past two academic years, our Foundation, the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation (SMIF), has partnered with the Minnesota State University-Mankato (MSU-M) Honors Program. In many respects this partnership has been highly beneficial to our Foundation and to the Honors students.

As a regional economic development foundation, SMIF has concentrated its work in two key areas which we believe will determine the future vibrancy of our twenty-county service area. We invest in early childhood programming—as we believe it to be a long-term bet on a quality workforce. We also invest in entrepreneurship through small business lending, technical assistance and economic development grants in order to grow and sustain new businesses within our region. In both categories of our work, we establish benchmarks to measure the success of our investments.

The ability to access the research skills of MSU’s Honors students has allowed us to more thoroughly examine the effectiveness of some of our programs. Each year, we identify research needs that would offer students a practical, “real world” research experience—on a project that would be relevant to our Foundation’s needs. For example, the research conducted on our business succession planning work helped us to understand the best aspects of that work and make adjustments in our strategy. Similarly, the research project on availability and quality of pre-school programs helped to inform our Foundation’s ongoing early childhood efforts.

Going forward, we intend to identify additional research projects—and to coordinate more closely with the directors of the Honors program to enhance the research process and strengthen the results and recommendations growing out of the process. We believe the team approach has improved the quality of the research work. We also believe that allowing the students additional time—throughout the academic year (as was done this past year)—to conduct their research provides for a better opportunity to review background material, conduct surveys, and collect data. We are also hoping that our relationship with the MSU-M Honors program may lead to the creation of internship opportunities here at SMIF.
In all, I strongly feel that this MSU-M Honors program partnership has been, and will continue to be, a “win-win” for both the university and the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation.

Respectfully submitted,
Timothy J. Penny
President, Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation
### APPENDIX B

**WEEK BY WEEK SCHEDULE FOR THE RESEARCH METHODS COURSE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Topic and Major Projects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 1</td>
<td>Course overview, description of scientific method</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 2</td>
<td>Comparison of science with pseudoscience, aspects of empirical research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 3</td>
<td>Types of research strategies, types of variables, ethical considerations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 4</td>
<td>Use of library databases and search tools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 5</td>
<td>Conducting survey research, overview of first course project—literature review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 6</td>
<td>Workshop of literature review drafts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 7</td>
<td>Conducting experimental research, comparing laboratory to field research, drafts of literature review due</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 8</td>
<td>Course presentations of literature review project, final literature review papers due</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 9</td>
<td>Overview of applied research projects, formation of project teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 10</td>
<td>Conducting observational research, developing data collection strategies for applied research projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 11</td>
<td>Conducting program evaluation research—using research findings to improve practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 12</td>
<td>Writing a research proposal—connected to applied research projects to suggest next steps for projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 13</td>
<td>Working on applied research projects—finalizing data collection, interpretation, and recommendations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 14</td>
<td>Workshop of drafts of applied research papers, with future research proposal included</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 15</td>
<td>Presentations of applied research projects to classmates and representatives of SMIF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finals</td>
<td>Final drafts of applied research papers due</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
About the Authors

Scott Carnicom is a professor of psychology and an associate dean of the honors college at Middle Tennessee State University. Since 2012, he has also served as a special assistant in the provost’s office helping with a variety of initiatives. In 2011–12, he served as an ACE Fellow at Kenyon College.

Kuo-Liang “Matt” Chang is Assistant Professor of Economics at South Dakota State University. Chang regularly teaches honors sections of Principles of Macroeconomics and mentors honors student research and independent study projects. In 2013 he was named SDSU’s Honors College Teacher of the Year.

Michael K. Cundall, Jr., is Director of the University Honors Program at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University. Entering into his tenth year in honors, he teaches philosophy and promotes student success. He is committed to creating a strong core program of texts that include underrepresented groups in the source materials. When not playing soccer-sherpa to his three sons, he is an avid woodworker and practices the martial art of Aikido.

Lynne Goodstein is Professor of Sociology at the University of Connecticut. Until 2012 she was also Associate Vice-Provost and Director of the Honors Program. Goodstein was previously a tenured professor in the Crime, Law and Justice Program of the Department of Sociology and Associate Dean of the Graduate School at Penn State. Her recent research deals with higher education and high-achieving college students. Currently she is also working on a book on women and crime. She has co-authored or co-edited four books, including The American Prison and Rethinking Gender, Crime and Justice: Feminist Readings, and a number of book chapters and journal articles on higher education, women and crime, corrections, and sentencing.

Annmarie Guzy is Associate Professor of English at the University of South Alabama, and she holds a PhD in rhetoric and professional communication from New Mexico State University. She currently serves on the NCHC Teaching and Learning Committee and the editorial boards for Honors in Practice and First-Year Honors Composition.
**About the Authors**

**Jerry Herron** is Professor of English and Dean of the Irvin D. Reid Honors College at Wayne State University. He is a past member of the NCHC Board of Directors and is currently a member of the Publications Board. His publications include books, articles, and essays on universities, cities, and contemporary American culture.

**Robert R. Keller** is Professor of Economics at Colorado State University. He was Director of the University Honors Program at CSU from 1999 to 2012 and taught interdisciplinary honors seminars and the pre-thesis honors course. His research and teaching interests are primarily in U.S. economic history, the history of economic ideas, and honors macroeconomics.

**Sean K. Kelly** is Director of the Florida Gulf Coast University Honors Program. An associate professor of philosophy and literature, his current research focuses on animals in the works of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. He also works with the Humane Society of the United States to promote humane education at the college level.

**Michael G. Lacy** is Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in sociology at Colorado State University. His areas of specialization include research design and applied social statistics.

**Timothy J. Nichols** is Dean of the Van D. and Barbara B. Fishback Honors College at South Dakota State University. Nichols provides administrative leadership for the college and teaches honors orientation, freshman seminar, colloquium, and senior seminar courses.

**Jeffrey A. Portnoy** is Director of the Honors Program at Georgia Perimeter College in Atlanta and is a professor of English. He has served on the Executive Committee of the Southern Regional Honors Council and was President of the Georgia Collegiate Honors Council in 2000–2001 and 2008–2009. He is a member of the *JNCHC* Editorial Board and General Editor of NCHC’s Monograph Series. During his tenure as co-chair of NCHC’s Publications Board, that group initiated *JNCHC* and *HIP* and increased its commitment to publishing monographs.

**Patricia Joanne Smith** has served for nine years as Director of Student Engagement for the University of Central Arkansas Schedler Honors College. She earned her EdD from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. Her dissertation was titled “Priorities for Quality Honors Education: A Delphi Study on Honors Program and College Certification.”
Emily Stark is Associate Professor of Psychology at Minnesota State University, Mankato, and served as interim director of the honors program in fall 2012. She received her PhD in social psychology from the University of Minnesota, and her research interests include assessment of teaching and learning, particularly critical thinking.

Patricia Szarek is Associate Director of the Honors Program at the University of Connecticut where she has worked in a variety of capacities in the position since 1987. Her responsibilities have included admissions, advising and orientation, curriculum and event planning, and oversight of honors records. Currently focusing on enrollment management, she is interested in the retention and graduation of honors students.

John Thomas Vitus Zagurski graduated from the Schedler Honors College at the University of Central Arkansas in 2011 with a BS in sociology. He went on to complete a Masters of Public Administration in 2013 from the University of North Texas and is currently working at the Town of Westlake, Texas, in local government and education administration.
NCHC Monographs & Journals

Assessing and Evaluating Honors Programs and Honors Colleges: A Practical Handbook by Rosalie Otero and Robert Spurrier (2005, 98pp). This monograph includes an overview of assessment and evaluation practices and strategies. It explores the process for conducting self-studies and discusses the differences between using consultants and external reviewers. It provides a guide to conducting external reviews along with information about how to become an NCHC-Recommended Site Visitor. A dozen appendices provide examples of “best practices.”


A Handbook for Honors Programs at Two-Year Colleges by Theresa James (2006, 136pp). A useful handbook for two-year schools contemplating beginning or redesigning their honors program and for four-year schools doing likewise or wanting to increase awareness about two-year programs and articulation agreements. Contains extensive appendices about honors contracts and a comprehensive bibliography on honors education.

The Honors College Phenomenon edited by Peter C. Sederberg (2008, 172pp). This monograph examines the growth of honors colleges since 1990: historical and descriptive characterizations of the trend, alternative models that include determining whether becoming a college is appropriate, and stories of creation and recreation. Leaders whose institutions are contemplating or taking this step as well as those directing established colleges should find these essays valuable.

Honors Composition: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Practices by Annmarie Guzy (2003, 182pp). Parallel historical developments in honors and composition studies; contemporary honors writing projects ranging from admission essays to theses as reported by over 300 NCHC members.

Honors Programs at Smaller Colleges by Samuel Schuman (Third Edition, 2011, 80pp). Practical and comprehensive advice on creating and managing honors programs with particular emphasis on colleges with fewer than 4,000 students.

If Honors Students Were People: Holistic Honors Higher Education by Samuel Schuman (2013, 256pp). What if Honors students were people? What if they were not disembodied intellects but whole persons with physical bodies and questing spirits. Of course...they are. This monograph examines the spiritual yearnings of college students and the relationship between exercise and learning.

Inspiring Exemplary Teaching and Learning: Perspectives on Teaching Academically Talented College Students edited by Larry Clark and John Zubizarreta (2008, 216pp). This rich collection of essays offers valuable insights into innovative teaching and significant learning in the context of academically challenging classrooms and programs. The volume provides theoretical, descriptive, and practical resources, including models of effective instructional practices, examples of successful courses designed for enhanced learning, and a list of online links to teaching and learning centers and educational databases worldwide.
NCHC Monographs & Journals

The Other Culture: Science and Mathematics Education in Honors edited by Ellen B. Buckner and Keith Garbutt (2012, 296pp). A collection of essays about teaching science and math in an honors context: topics include science in society, strategies for science and non-science majors, the threat of pseudoscience, chemistry, interdisciplinary science, scientific literacy, philosophy of science, thesis development, calculus, and statistics.

Partners in the Parks: Field Guide to an Experiential Program in the National Parks by Joan Digby with reflective essays on theory and practice by student and faculty participants and National Park Service personnel (2010, 272pp). This monograph explores an experiential-learning program that fosters immersion in and stewardship of the national parks. The topics include program designs, group dynamics, philosophical and political issues, photography, wilderness exploration, and assessment.

Place as Text: Approaches to Active Learning edited by Bernice Braid and Ada Long (Second Edition, 2010, 128pp). Updated theory, information, and advice on experiential pedagogies developed within NCHC during the past 35 years, including Honors Semesters and City as Text™, along with suggested adaptations to multiple educational contexts.

Preparing Tomorrow’s Global Leaders: Honors International Education edited by Mary Kay Mulvaney and Kim Klein (2013, 400pp). A valuable resource for initiating or expanding honors study abroad programs, these essays examine theoretical issues, curricular and faculty development, assessment, funding, and security. The monograph also provides models of successful programs that incorporate high-impact educational practices, including City as Text™ pedagogy, service learning, and undergraduate research.

Setting the Table for Diversity edited by Lisa L. Coleman and Jonathan D. Kotinek (2010, 288pp). This collection of essays provides definitions of diversity in honors, explores the challenges and opportunities diversity brings to honors education, and depicts the transformative nature of diversity when coupled with equity and inclusion. These essays discuss African American, Latina/o, international, and first-generation students as well as students with disabilities. Other issues include experiential and service learning, the politics of diversity, and the psychological resistance to it. Appendices relating to NCHC member institutions contain diversity statements and a structural diversity survey.

Shatter the Glassy Stare: Implementing Experiential Learning in Higher Education edited by Peter A. Machonis (2008, 160pp). A companion piece to Place as Text, focusing on recent, innovative applications of City as Text™ teaching strategies. Chapters on campus as text, local neighborhoods, study abroad, science courses, writing exercises, and philosophical considerations, with practical materials for instituting this pedagogy.

Teaching and Learning in Honors edited by Cheryl L. Fuiks and Larry Clark (2000, 128pp). Presents a variety of perspectives on teaching and learning useful to anyone developing new or renovating established honors curricula.

Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council (JNCHC) is a semi-annual periodical featuring scholarly articles on honors education. Articles may include analyses of trends in teaching methodology, articles on interdisciplinary efforts, discussions of problems common to honors programs, items on the national higher education agenda, and presentations of emergent issues relevant to honors education.

Honors in Practice (HIP) is an annual journal that accommodates the need and desire for articles about nuts-and-bolts practices by featuring practical and descriptive essays on topics such as successful honors courses, suggestions for out-of-class experiences, administrative issues, and other topics of interest to honors administrators, faculty, and students.
NCHC Publication Order Form

Purchases may be made by calling (402) 472-9150, emailing nchc@unl.edu, visiting our website <http://www.nchchonors.org>, or mailing a check or money order payable to: NCHC • University of Nebraska–Lincoln • 1100 Neihardt Residence Center • 540 N. 16th Street • Lincoln, NE 68588-0627. FEIN 52–1188042

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monographs:</th>
<th>Member</th>
<th>Non-Member</th>
<th>No. of Copies</th>
<th>Amount This Item</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessing and Evaluating Honors Programs and Honors Colleges: A Practical Handbook*</td>
<td>$25.00</td>
<td>$45.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beginning in Honors: A Handbook (4th Ed.)</td>
<td>$25.00</td>
<td>$45.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundraising for Honor$: A Handbook*</td>
<td>$25.00</td>
<td>$45.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Handbook for Honors Administrators</td>
<td>$25.00</td>
<td>$45.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Handbook for Honors Programs at Two-Year Colleges*</td>
<td>$25.00</td>
<td>$45.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Honors College Phenomenon</td>
<td>$25.00</td>
<td>$45.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honors Composition: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Practices</td>
<td>$25.00</td>
<td>$45.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honors Programs at Smaller Colleges (3rd Ed.)*</td>
<td>$25.00</td>
<td>$45.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If Honors Students Were People: Holistic Honors Higher Education</td>
<td>$25.00</td>
<td>$45.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspiring Exemplary Teaching and Learning: Perspectives on Teaching Academically Talented College Students*</td>
<td>$25.00</td>
<td>$45.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Other Culture: Science and Mathematics Education in Honors</td>
<td>$25.00</td>
<td>$45.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partners in the Parks: Field Guide to an Experiential Program in the National Parks</td>
<td>$25.00</td>
<td>$45.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place as Text: Approaches to Active Learning (2nd Ed.)</td>
<td>$25.00</td>
<td>$45.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparing Tomorrow’s Global Leaders: Honors International Education</td>
<td>$25.00</td>
<td>$45.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting the Table for Diversity</td>
<td>$25.00</td>
<td>$45.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shatter the Glassy Stare: Implementing Experiential Learning in Higher Education</td>
<td>$25.00</td>
<td>$45.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching and Learning in Honors*</td>
<td>$25.00</td>
<td>$45.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journals:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council (JNCHC) Specify Vol/Issue <strong><strong>/</strong></strong></td>
<td>$25.00</td>
<td>$45.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honors in Practice (HIP) Specify Vol ____</td>
<td>$25.00</td>
<td>$45.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Copies Ordered and Total Amount Paid: $ |

Name _______________________________ Institution _______________________________
Address ____________________________________________________________________________
City, State, Zip _____________________________________________________________________
Phone __________________ Fax __________________ Email _____________________________

*Print-on-Demand publications—will be delivered in 4-6 weeks. Shipping costs will be calculated on the number of items purchased. Apply a 20% discount if 10+ copies are purchased.