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“Best of Both Worlds”: Alumni Perspectives on Honors and the Liberal Arts

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Abstract: This study explores the extent to which skills acquired through liberal arts curricula facilitate immediate post-graduate employment of honors college alumni. Using qualitative methods and semi-structured interviews ($n = 16$), authors examine the honors college experience and the attainment of skills through the lens of graduates (2017–2020) at a large research institution. Results indicate that while honors alumni identify certain skills that helped them realize initial employment, they were often unable to translate and apply these skills in professional workplaces, particularly nonacademic ones. Data further suggest that liberal arts skills (communication, research competence, critical reasoning, intercultural competence, interdisciplinary inquiry, disciplinary methods, and intellectual engagement) can be cultivated within honors colleges at large universities and are not particular to traditional liberal arts colleges. By focusing on earliest career experience rather than cumulative, this study is an essential contribution to outcomes-related discourse in the field of honors education.

Keywords: employment and education; college honors courses; value of liberal arts; career preparation; post-graduation outcomes

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INTRODUCTION

Honors colleges often tout being the “best of both worlds,” balancing the benefits of a large research university and a small liberal arts college (Breneman, 2010; Scott & Smith, 2016; Sederberg, 2008). This rhetoric is commonly used to recruit top students by offering them many of the same experiences at (heavily-subsidized) state institutions that they could otherwise find only at private liberal arts colleges (Kimball, 2014; Savage, 2019; Sederberg, 2008). That is, a selling point for honors education is that it provides students with a less expensive means to maintain access to an elite education (Kimball, 2014; Scott & Smith, 2016).

Regardless of whether a liberal arts education takes place within the honors college of a large research university or within a small liberal arts college, it can provide students with a multitude of benefits from building a deep love of learning to cultivating a sense of purpose (Roche, 2010; Stross, 2017; Zakaria, 2015). Students can also build skills during their liberal arts education that employers find valuable, such as communication skills, problem-solving skills, and working as part of a team (NACE, 2019; Pasquerella, 2019; Roche, 2010). Liberal arts advocates argue that the wide range of skills that students build will help them succeed in a range of first destinations while also giving them the toolkit to be successful long-term in an ever-changing job market (Gobble, 2019; Osgood, 2017; Stross, 2017; Zakaria, 2015).

Despite the benefits, students, parents, and politicians today are increasingly questioning the value of a liberal arts education (Pasquerella, 2019). Colleges have seen this skepticism displayed in funding declines (Pasquerella, 2019) and in student major selection (Brint, 2011; Flaherty, 2017; Weise et al., 2018). Given the current context, we have engaged in this project to unpack alumni perceptions of their experiences attending an honors college at a large public institution that emphasizes a liberal arts ethos. We build upon previous work focused on the values of higher education broadly and the connections between a liberal arts education and post-graduate outcomes.

This study aims to build a deeper understanding of the extent to which skills acquired through the liberal arts curriculum of an honors college help alumni reach their first destination post-graduation. To this end, we worked with The Honors College (THC) at an anonymous research university (ARU) to explore how former students benefited professionally from their liberal arts skills. (The university preferred to remain anonymous.)

THC is one of the ARU's nine colleges and is designed to be like a small liberal arts college within a large, public, flagship university. As described on their website, THC provides students with skills in problem solving, communication, and critical thinking that will help them become life-long learners and versatile members of society (*Why THC?*, n.d.). The faculty and administrators within THC largely approach teaching and learning with a liberal arts philosophy (former dean, personal communication, June 25, 2020).

While THC's strategy relies on the assumption that liberal arts skills have a positive influence on students' first destinations (i.e., their initial professional outcomes after graduation, such as first jobs, graduate schools, or volunteer positions), THC has little institutional data to support this claim. Thus, this study asks: In what ways are THC alumni using liberal arts skills to reach their first destinations?

LITERATURE REVIEW

We focus on the following seven sensitizing concepts—which align with the seven key learning objectives of THC (see Appendix)—in our conceptual framework: intellectual engagement, critical reasoning, disciplinary methods, communication skills, intercultural competence, interdisciplinary inquiry, and research competence. These seven skills also align broadly with other literature about the expected outcomes of a liberal arts education (cf. Haberberger, 2018; Seifert et al., 2008).

Intellectual Engagement

Intellectual engagement is essential to student development and student learning. Students who participated in diverse coursework show increases in cognitive development and writing skills (Mayhew et al., 2016). Evidence has also shown that honors college students are experiencing higher levels of key experiences that result in increased intellectual engagement. Seifert et al. (2007, p. 69) report that honors students experience “relatively higher levels of course-related interaction with peers, academic effort and involvement, instructor use of higher-order questioning techniques, instructor feedback to students, and instructional skill and clarity than their non-honors peers.” While researchers have highlighted that this type of academic and intellectual engagement is important for high-quality student learning, more qualitative and quantitative research is needed related to student outcomes and student engagement (Savage, 2019).

Critical Reasoning

Critical reasoning has been repeatedly identified as essential for college graduates by students, recent graduates, and employers (Hart Research Associates, 2015; Kotschevar et al., 2018; Wells et al., 2017). This concept is now emphasized throughout honors college curricula (Savage, 2019). Early work by Astin (1993) found that in a study of 25,000 students across 217 colleges, honors college participation did have a small, positive influence on analytical and problem-solving skills (as cited in Seifert et al., 2007). Seifert et al. (2007) also found that honors college students scored higher than their non-honors peers on combined measures of cognitive development and critical thinking. Employers also articulate a need for employees with critical reasoning skills, including a particular focus on “critical thinking, complex problem solving, communication, and applying knowledge to real-world settings” (Wells et al., 2017, p. 168). While over 80% of employers think it is very important for recent college graduates to have critical and analytical thinking skills, less than 30% of them report that recent graduates are prepared to utilize these skills upon entering the workforce (Hart Research Associates, 2015).

Disciplinary Methods

Disciplinary methods—whether in the humanities, social sciences, or natural sciences—are often developed and refined by carrying out academic research (cf. Lopatto, 2010). While these skills are often honed via scholarly research, they are not only useful within academic research careers but also beyond them. That is, practical experience with the scientific method and with developing field-specific research questions and evidence-based analysis has been seen as beneficial in preparing students for the workplace (Wells et al., 2017, p. 169). Specifically, 68% of employers surveyed think that locating, organizing, and evaluating information—a disciplinary method common in the humanities—is very important for recent college graduates (Hart Research Associates, 2015). Additionally, 56% of the same employers think that working with numbers/statistics—a disciplinary method common in the social and natural sciences—is very important for recent college graduates (Hart Research Associates, 2015). Despite their importance, less than 30% of those employers believe that recent college graduates are prepared to undertake these tasks in the workplace (Hart Research Associates, 2015).

Communication Skills

Communication is one of the most sought-after skills in the labor market (Weise et al., 2018). In a survey of honors college graduates from South Dakota State University, alumni shared the most valuable personal and professional skills they gained while in the honors college. They relayed that the ability to communicate their ideas and beliefs with clarity, civility, and respect was among the top skills that they had acquired (Kotschevar et al., 2018, p. 143). They also noted that their ability to produce effective written communication had an important impact on their professional endeavors.

Research indicates that liberal arts skills such as communication skills are also valuable to employers (NACE, 2019; Pasquerella, 2019; Roche, 2010). According to Hart Research Associates (2015), more than 80% of employers believe that it is important for recent college graduates to have oral and written communication skills; however, less than 30% of employers think that recent college graduates are prepared in this area. Further research indicates that hiring managers and executives also listed oral communication as one of the top skills desired when seeking candidates (Hart Research Associates, 2018).

Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence is generally understood as the enhancement and appreciation of differences among cultures. More specifically, five measures of students' global and intercultural competencies include the following: applying disciplinary knowledge globally, understanding the complex nature of global issues, having linguistic and cultural competency in a language other than their own, and the ability not only to work with people from other cultures but to do so comfortably (Stebledon et al., 2013, p. 6). The literature indicates that diverse interactions promote other skill sets that include academic ability, leadership, civic attitudes and behaviors, and positive diversity attitudes (Mayhew et al., 2016, pp. 550, 553).

Study abroad programs also contribute to intercultural competence. In one study, participants reported that studying abroad increased self-confidence, expanded understanding of intercultural perspectives and issues, and contributed to academic development (Dwyer & Peters, 2004). Stebledon et al. (2013) stated that formal study abroad programs sponsored by a college or university contribute to students' intercultural and global competencies in

a way that generally meets or exceeds the outcomes of other types of international travel. Additionally, 66% of employers indicated that they are more likely to consider hiring a recent college graduate who participated in a field project with people from different backgrounds/cultures, and 51% are more likely to hire a recent college graduate who finished a study abroad (Hart Research Associates, 2015).

Interdisciplinary Inquiry

Alumni perspectives on the usefulness of interdisciplinary inquiry in the workplace are mixed. On the one hand, alumni from the more than 600 institutions within the Council of Independent Colleges were asked to share their perspectives, and many noted how they had been exposed to different ways of thinking that prepared them “to adapt to a rapidly changing world and career” (Nugent, 2015, pp. 28–29). On the other hand, the survey of South Dakota State University alumni, which asked them to rank the most valuable personal and professional skills gained while in the honors college, found that “analyz[ing] and integrat[ing] multiple sources of information” were among the least selected skills (Kotschevar et al., 2018).

Employers recognize the value of interdisciplinary inquiry, however. As previously noted, 68% of employers surveyed reported that it was very important for recent college graduates to be able to locate, organize, and evaluate information from multiple sources (Hart Research Associates, 2015). However, only 29% of the same employers thought recent college graduates were prepared to utilize this skill in the workplace (Hart Research Associates, 2015).

Research Competence

Most of the studies about the impacts of research experiences are STEM-focused or discipline-specific (Craney et al., 2011; Dowd et al., 2018; Seymour et al., 2004). Lopatto (2010) noted that some of the benefits gleaned from summer research experiences (SREs) in STEM disciplines could be applied to other contexts. His work on SREs highlights potential learning outcomes in the areas of enhanced disciplinary skills, research literacy, communication skills, professional development, and personal gains derived from engagement in a research community. Still, there has been minimal investigation of senior capstone or thesis projects. In Padgett & Kilgo’s (2012) national study, they determined that these culminating experiences lead to increased student performance on learning objectives. Additionally, the culminating

experiences have the potential to positively impact employment opportunities for graduates. A research study indicated that 87% of employers are more likely to consider hiring a recent college graduate who has completed a senior thesis/project demonstrating knowledge, research, problem-solving abilities, and communication skills, and 80% are more likely to consider hiring a recent college graduate who has done a research project collaboratively with peers (Hart Research Associates, 2015).

DATA & METHODS

Data

To better understand how liberal arts skills help THC graduates reach their first destinations, we adopted a qualitative research approach. We chose this method because, as Patton (2001, p. 21) describes, “the open-ended responses permit one to understand the world as seen by the respondents . . . to understand and capture the points of view of other people without pre-determining those points of view.” As a result, we conducted semi-structured interviews with THC alumni.

Sample

THC alumni from the classes of 2020, 2019, 2018, and 2017 were interviewed for this study. We invited 476 THC alumni to participate, and 16 volunteered to be interviewed. Initially, we sought to conduct the qualitative study using a maximum variant sample. The goal of this strategy was to sample for maximum heterogeneity, thus increasing respondent diversity relevant to our research questions. After obtaining initial responses from alumni interested in being interviewed, we worked with THC to target diverse perspectives. However, THC indicated that they did not have data regarding alumni’s racial identities; therefore, we could not target individuals from these backgrounds. Instead, we sent an additional email to all alumni indicating that we were seeking participants from specific racial identities, but this yielded no additional participants. Thus, we were left with a convenience sample of THC alumni who had self-selected to be part of our study.

We collected information about each interviewee’s graduation year, college/school, major, and first destination. According to THC’s Strategic Plan, the vast majority of THC students have majors in the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS). Most of our interviewees graduated from the CAS and were

thus reflective of THC's population. Additionally, THC reports that 46% of its graduates go to graduate school, 41% obtain employment, 12% participate in service activity, and 9% travel (*Life After THC*, n.d.). Our interviewees were somewhat reflective of the THC target population in this regard, but their pathways to their first destinations were more nuanced. For example, 14 of the 16 interviewees obtained some level of employment directly after graduation. Of the 16 interviewees, only 2 went directly to graduate school. However, at the time of the interviews, 8 of the 16 participants were in the process of applying to graduate school or were in graduate school following their initial employment opportunity. We did not collect demographic information about the interviewees' gender or race/ethnicity, so we cannot compare our sample to the target population using these criteria.

Table 1 presents a breakdown of the graduation year, college/school, and first destination of interviewees.

Methods

To collect our qualitative data, a THC staff member emailed THC alumni from the classes of 2020, 2019, 2018, and 2017 inviting them to participate in the study. Potential participants were instructed to email the researchers if interested. After emailing, participants were sent the date and time for the interview as well as a Zoom link. Interviewees had the opportunity to participate by phone or Zoom because in-person interviews were not possible due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Each researcher conducted 5–6 individual interviews with alumni. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Quotations used in this report were also edited for readability by removing fillers such as “like,” “um,” and “you know.”

The interview protocol was organized to probe the professional experiences of alumni their first year after graduating from the ARU. We used Arum and Roksa's (2014) “Employment and Graduate School” portion of their interview protocol as an early foundation for developing our questions about the ways liberal arts skills helped THC alumni reach their first destinations. We focused specifically on how alumni identified, applied for, interviewed for, and selected their first destinations after graduation. These questions helped to determine what liberal arts skills alumni used that they had obtained in their THC experience. Additionally, the protocol sought to highlight potential gaps in resources from THC and/or ARU.

TABLE 1. INTERVIEWEE CHARACTERISTICS

| Pseudonym | Graduation Year | ARU College/School | First Destination |
|-----------------|-----------------|--|--|
| Taylor Moore | 2018 | College of Business/ College of Arts and Sciences | Research employment → Graduate school ¹ |
| Joe Deming | 2018 | College of Arts and Sciences (STEM) | Employment → Graduate school ¹ |
| Erica Johnson | 2018 | College of Arts and Sciences | Employment |
| Carla Smith | 2018 | College of Arts and Sciences (STEM) | Gap year/employment → Graduate school ^{4,1} |
| Jacob Spiller | 2018 | College of Arts and Sciences (STEM) | Employment → Graduate school anticipated ² |
| Noah Parker | 2018 | College of Arts and Sciences | Graduate school |
| Howard Jacobs | 2019 | College of Arts and Sciences (STEM) | Research employment → Graduate school ¹ |
| Candace Jones | 2019 | College of Arts and Sciences | Employment → Graduate school ¹ |
| Tim Hill | 2019 | College of Arts and Sciences | Employment |
| Kelly Day | 2019 | College of Arts and Sciences (STEM) | Research employment → Graduate school anticipated ² |
| Jade Allen | 2020 | College of Arts and Sciences (STEM) | Graduate school |
| Ruby Solomon | 2020 | College of Arts and Sciences (STEM) | Volunteer/Employment → Graduate school ^{3,1} |
| Samantha Brown | 2019 | College of Arts and Sciences/School of Journalism and Communications | Fellowship/Employment |
| Ellie Smith | 2017 | School of Journalism and Communications | Gap year/Employment ⁴ |
| Veronica Turner | 2017 | School of Journalism and Communications | Gap year/Employment ⁴ |
| Whitney Malone | 2019 | School of Music and Dance | Gap year/Employment → Volunteer/Employment ^{4,3} |

Notes: ¹First destination was employment but continued to graduate school within two years or less; ²Applied to graduate school in 2020 and awaiting outcome; ³Joined service organization; ⁴Traveled or taught English abroad.

Data Analysis

After conducting interviews, we developed a data analysis plan to identify themes that aligned with our research question. Our analysis included the following phases: listening tours, analytic memos, and developing and implementing a coding scheme. These phases allowed for a comprehensive review and analysis of the qualitative data.

LISTENING TOURS

Each interview was recorded and transcribed via Zoom and Otter.ai. Each team member listened to the interviews they conducted to ensure accuracy of the transcripts and to become refamiliarized with the content in preparation for creating analytic memos and developing a coding scheme.

ANALYTIC MEMOS

Each team member crafted an analytic memo that summarized key themes from the interviews they conducted. The memos provided an opportunity to articulate descriptive information about the interviewees, to identify overarching themes amongst the interviews, and to identify lingering questions. This process helped to elucidate themes and create a foundation for comparison across interviews.

DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING A CODING SCHEME

We used a deductive approach for our qualitative study using THC's learning objectives to frame our coding. We then applied a multipronged approach to coding the data. According to Thomas (2006), this approach allows researchers to "use detailed readings of raw data to derive concepts, themes, or a model through interpretations made from the raw data" and allows the theory to emerge without the constraints of preconstructed methodologies. The team identified general themes throughout the interviews. Each team member used these themes to complete the first round of coding for the five to six interviews they had individually conducted. A joint coding scheme for the entire data set was then developed based on this initial round of coding. Subsequently, every interview was recoded three additional times using this data coding scheme. Team member one was responsible for identifying and confirming general themes in the entire data set. Once that was complete, a second team member coded the interviews to fine-tune themes where necessary. The third team member completed the final round of coding

to confirm themes and resolve any discrepancies among coders. This process of triangulation among coders reduced bias in our findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are derived from the analysis of our 16 alumni interviews. During our interviews, we focused on whether liberal arts skills helped alumni reach their first destinations. We focused on themes in alignment with the seven THC learning outcomes (see Appendix). These learning objectives arose throughout our interviews; however, they were not all mentioned equally by interviewees. Table 2 outlines the frequency with which each learning objective was coded in our analysis.

Communication skills were mentioned most often during the interviews, nearly three times more than research competence, while disciplinary methods and intellectual engagement were coded the least number of times. Below, we discuss the themes that emerged via our interviews and how they align with THC's liberal arts learning outcomes and related literature.

Communication Skills

Participants magnified three focal points in the area of communication skills. Those foci included oral communication skills, written communication skills, and increased proficiency in scientific writing.

Communication skills were a consistent and significant topic for all participants, who were extremely aware of how their communication skills helped them reach their first destinations. These skills were particularly helpful in building confidence and helping students prepare for graduate programs. Alumni spoke about both oral and written communication skills.

TABLE 2. LEARNING OBJECTIVES CODING PREVALENCE

| Learning Objective | Number of Excerpts with This Code |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Communication skills | 149 |
| Research competence | 54 |
| Critical reasoning | 33 |
| Intercultural competence | 27 |
| Interdisciplinary inquiry | 18 |
| Disciplinary methods | 13 |
| Intellectual engagement | 12 |

Experiences such as public speaking, debate, and practicing for presentations helped them to garner and hone their oral communication skills. Veronica commented:

You have to do public speaking; you have to do your research. And I think that whole experience helps you become a better public speaker. And in this role that I was interviewing for, part of it was attending these public speaking events through this grant. And so that [skill] was something that I relied on.

In addition to the oral communication skills, they talked about how THC experiences transformed their writing skills, which were useful in preparing graduate school applications. Candace said:

I mean, I think it goes without saying, like the writing skills that I got from the Honors College were absolutely necessary for writing my personal statement.

Science majors spoke specifically about how their acquired communication skills helped to refine their scientific writing skills, as Howard expressed:

And I think ultimately I could develop my scientific communication skills. It was basically . . . a little bit more readable, like for a general audience. I think it really honed my scientific writing skills and my ability to do research—learning new laboratory methods and kind of learning how to ask those questions and how to answer them. So those are definitely the skills that I'm taking away and still trying to develop.

Overall, participants consistently talked about the importance of communication skills and how THC helped them to improve, which in turn helped them to reach their first destinations.

Participants articulated that communication skills were helpful during their academic career, when choosing a first destination, and in first jobs or graduate school. THC expects that its students will be able to “practice active participation and oral communication of ideas in a group setting” as well as “recognize and employ the conventions of academic writing, presentation, and discussion” (see Appendix). Alumni responses clearly indicate that this skill helped them to reach their first destinations and remained useful in their careers, studies, and daily lives. These conclusions are supported by research that indicates the value of liberal arts skills, such as communication skills, to employers (NACE, 2019; Pasquerella, 2019; Roche, 2010). In fact, these skills are noted as some of the most desired in the labor market (Weise et al., 2018).

Research Competence

Alumni focused on three aspects in the area of research competence: the thesis project, creating new knowledge, and research skills. Participants talked often about the research skills that they had acquired during their time at THC. It was one of the few competencies that most of them named explicitly. Not only were they aware that THC had provided them with this skill, but they could articulate its value in interview settings, on applications, and in other processes associated with reaching their first destinations. They noted that the skill was a necessity in their graduate school applications and that they had clearly demonstrated its application through their thesis project. In reference to her personal statement for graduate school, Jade stated:

And then I spent quite a bit of time talking about what I've done since being in [the] lab. So the story arc of my research of starting in the lab: I had that kind of mini project, how that led me to the thesis, and how the thesis has now led me to other projects and other collaborations. . . .

Participants talked about their research competence in two distinct ways. Some talked about research in terms of a scholar who creates new knowledge while others talked about researching to find and/or prepare for first destinations. Those who expounded on their research competence for the purpose of reaching their first destination used spreadsheets and systematic thinking to choose their first destinations. Ruby expressed:

Oh okay, yeah, picking which med schools: that was a lot more of me honing into scientists' spreadsheet version of me. You know, in that case I talked more with some of my research mentors in the lab—I worked in a biology lab—so coming up with like an unbiased way to try to find which schools to apply to, and then I talked to my pre-med advisor . . . and I created this huge spreadsheet that had the school and all of these attributes about it, like its cost, its location, MCAT, GPA, key things about it. And I just go school-by-school through this one registry of schools.

Some noted that the thesis and these research skills mattered when they were attempting to get a job. Kelly provided context for how her thesis helped her in her interview when she relayed the following:

Yeah, I mean, the general gist of the best way to interview for a lab is to read some of their work and be able to talk about specifics of their

research, so that you sound knowledgeable, and then also to be able to talk about what you've done. So I know from one of the interviews in particular that I did, they asked me to put together a presentation on my own research. And I was like, "Well, my thesis is coming up. That's really good practice, that's fine." But things like that. You need to be able to talk knowledgeably about your own experiences and then be able to make connections to their work and what you're interested in about their work.

The continued use of research competence depended upon alumni's first destinations. For those opting for graduate school, the research skill was useful long-term, but it was less notable for those who talked about other employment.

Alumni consistently spoke positively about the research competence skill and how it impacted them. THC's learning outcomes state that their students will be able to "develop research competence through inquiry, project-based and active learning, based on students' own questions" (see Appendix). THC is intentional about offering an in-depth research experience to students through the senior thesis, which the literature explains is critical and necessary to build liberal arts skills (Padgett & Kilgo, 2012; Pascarella et al., 2005; Seifert et al., 2008). Alumni described how they used research competence as a tool to reach their first destinations and how their ability to conduct research via the thesis process was essential to their success.

Critical Reasoning

Interviewees highlighted two subject areas in the area of critical reasoning: unintentional preparation and analytical development. Participants were aware of their critical reasoning skills and made direct links between this skill and how it helped them to reach their first destinations; however, they did not all attribute these skills directly to their THC experience, as Ruby demonstrated when she said she believed THC had "unintentionally" prepared her for her first destination:

it's great that I could think about Plato, but how is that going to translate into having a corporate boss? So, I think it's more unintentional that [THC] taught me how to think and be critical. And I'm able to translate that [into my career field] even if that wasn't like [THC's] obvious goal. . . .

Similarly, when Jacob was asked about how THC helped prepare him for his position, he was quick to mention that THC did not help with the "content

and specifics” but that it might have helped with “how my mind thinks and being analytical and processing and multitasking.” While he went on to pinpoint communication and writing skills specifically, he acknowledged that some skills, like how his mind thinks, are more nebulous, and “there’s no way to really, I don’t know, describe those and describe how I learned them and picked up the skills in college.”

Alumni could clearly articulate how the application of critical reasoning assisted them in reaching their first destinations. They said that their analytical development helped them think critically about their coursework and post-graduation plans, as Ruby indicated:

It became helpful for me just getting in the habit of producing large quantities of written words, and also being analytical about it too and really reflecting on my experiences. So much of what I learned in the Honors College is to be able to reflect and look back, so that was extremely valuable.

Additionally, some participants indicated that they used their critical reasoning skills to articulate the relevance of their experiences in job interviews. For example, Whitney talked about preparing for interviews:

I had a couple topics that I thought I would like to highlight, and so I tried to work my answers to fit whatever question they were asking, like obviously, as applicable. And then I also thought about, like, if I were the person hiring, what would I be looking for in a candidate, what would I expect to hear?

Whitney also described how critical reasoning helped her in her teaching job abroad. She described learning to “give constructive criticism in real time” and that she “found that useful when evaluating student presentations [abroad].” Tim, on the other hand, was reluctant to connect his THC experiences to the development of his critical reasoning skills. He attributed these skills to his summer work experiences; however, when asked if his thesis came up in the interviews, he said “Yeah, yeah. Talked about that a fair amount.” Tim did not appear to believe that his thesis helped him develop critical reasoning skills. Ultimately, alumni were able to identify critical reasoning as a skill they obtained from their college experience, and while some attributed this directly to THC, others did not.

Participants could clearly identify and articulate critical reasoning as a THC learning outcome. THC expects its students to “apply and demonstrate critical reasoning through the use of appropriate evidence and methods” (see

Appendix). Not only were alumni aware that they obtained critical reasoning as a skill, but also they could articulate how they applied it as students and how it played a role in helping them reach their first destinations. This awareness is consistent with previous findings in which honors college alumni identified critical thinking as one of the most valuable skills they gained from their honors college experience (Kotschevar et al., 2018). THC alumni articulated that critical reasoning was particularly helpful in the analysis of their coursework and post-graduation plans. In contrast to some alumni's perceptions that they had not acquired their critical thinking skills from THC, Astin (1999) argues that liberal arts experiences, like those cultivated by THC, contribute to positive outcomes in students' critical thinking.

Intercultural Competence

Three themes surfaced in participant interviews in the areas of intercultural competence: experiences abroad, employment, and use of a second language. Alumni were aware of how intercultural competence helped them reach their first destinations. Their understanding of intercultural competence was mostly related to acquiring proficiency in a second language by being in another country and/or experiencing another culture, however. Carla said, "the French position was frankly something I applied for as, like, a backup . . . but, I think, I had studied abroad in France, and I wanted to keep using my language skills, so that motivated that decision [to teach English in France after graduating]."

Alumni's intercultural competence was useful professionally in many ways that included pursuing employment as a nanny or a journalist, teaching English abroad, and working in foreign affairs. Erica illustrated her use of intercultural competence to reach her first destination in international congressional relations:

So a lot of those resume skills I highlighted . . . show that I knew about government—how government works—and also have an Arabic skill and studied the Middle East. So those were some of the components I used.

Ellie reiterated how intercultural competence gained by experiences abroad impacted the interview process when she was seeking employment opportunities. Additionally, her experience highlights how THC participants gained intercultural competence outside of their honors college experience:

Like I was able to do some international journalism with, through the journalism school. We traveled to Sri Lanka and to Morocco on

various trips to do just some immersive on the ground journalism working groups in communities there. And so those were experiences that I often brought up as well.

The ability to speak a second language boosted their confidence and served as a talking point in their personal statements, as Candace indicated:

I wrote my personal statement broadly on the experience of, like, learning a second language—that language specifically being Spanish—about teaching English speakers, and then my thesis was [on a related topic]. A lot of my statement was about . . . some things that I had learned from my professor . . . the one who is, like, quadrilingual.

While THC lists intercultural competence as one of its primary student outcomes, alumni cited their major coursework and their study abroad experiences as the primary sources of this skill.

Acquiring proficiency in a second language was paramount in obtaining intercultural competence for many participants, which is in line with THC's learning objective that students will “demonstrate intercultural competence through linguistic diversity and awareness of and appreciation for diverse cultural backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives” (see Appendix).

While students were explicit about their linguistic diversity, they did not speak overtly about their appreciation and awareness of other cultures outside of their experiences abroad. Nevertheless, the literature indicates that diverse interactions promote other skill sets that include academic ability, leadership, civic attitudes and behaviors, and positive diversity attitudes (Mayhew et al., 2016, pp. 550, 553). Students who are consistently engaged in diverse collegiate experiences have increased critical thinking skills (Pascarella et al., 2014).

Interdisciplinary Inquiry

In relation to interdisciplinary inquiry, participants highlighted three themes: their living environment, coursework, and fields of interest. Alumni recognized that interdisciplinary inquiry provided them with the skill of a different way of thinking, but they could not describe how it helped them reach their first destinations.

Participants cited their housing assignments and coursework as the root of their interdisciplinary inquiry. Jade described how housing impacted her interdisciplinary exposure:

So they have the [Honors] Scholars Hall, which is the freshman dormitory that they guarantee housing for all the first year students in the Honors College. You don't have to choose to live there, but if you want to, they reserve a spot for you. And so what it allowed me to do is basically make a bunch of friends who were also in the Honors College, but it spans multiple disciplines. And so now, who I consider to be my three best friends and I, all met in that dorm hall, and one of them was an econ major, one of them was in cinema studies, and then one of them was international studies . . . so we were all in completely different parts of the university and wouldn't have met otherwise if we weren't all living together.

Noting that interdisciplinary courses helped him find the field of interest he wanted to pursue, Howard stated:

And I think, in general, all the sorts of different subjects that I had to study for all sorts of different professors and classes I guess I wouldn't have otherwise. I think it did end up making me more well-rounded and more, just like, interested more generally, in different sorts of academia and like, gave me . . . a broader appreciation of things beyond just my tiny little field that I'm in right now.

Likewise, when asked what skills had helped him identify the graduate schools he would like to attend, Noah said:

I think what was key in helping me identify those options was the breadth of the things I learned at [the institution]. I think that really made me interested in both getting more education and learning—learning more about how to impact public policy.

Overall, alumni said that the new way of thinking expanded their minds and provided them with a more well-rounded thought process even though they were unable to draw connections to reaching their first destinations outside academia.

The fact that students can acquire an appreciation for interdisciplinary inquiry from not only the classroom but also their living environment is consonant with the literature. “[T]he liberal arts college experience is not limited to the curriculum alone. The residential community itself, as well as the many avenues for engagement, from athletics to governance to special interest clubs and community service, present the student with yet another array of diverse experiences and practices” (Nugent, 2015, p. 29). Although interdisciplinary

inquiry is highlighted as a common skill acquired from a liberal arts education (Astin, 1999; Seifert et al., 2008), participants in our study struggled to translate its value to first destinations beyond academia. This finding aligns with that of Kotschevar (2018), who reported that honors alumni rarely identified interdisciplinary inquiry as one of their most valuable professional skills.

Disciplinary Methods

THC's disciplinary methods learning outcome refers to the ability to "identify and appropriately apply disciplinary methods in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences" (see Appendix). Our interviews with alumni revealed, however, that many were under the impression that teaching disciplinary methods was not the purpose of THC. They attributed the acquisition of these skills instead to their major coursework or to their hands-on experience. Jade, for instance, felt that THC faculty actually communicated this idea to students:

The perception of many of the core [THC] faculty . . . seems to be . . . that the science students come to the Honors College to learn liberal arts skills, and then you learn your science skills somewhere else. You go to your major for that. That's not what we do.

However, Jade also mentioned one THC course taught by a science faculty member that truly contributed to significant learning gains in her understanding of different disciplinary methods:

I think I learned those liberal arts skills in—in the courses that were taught by scientists that were not taught by the humanities professors [in THC], like that Biology of Politics course that I took. I feel like that's really when I learned what philosophical thinking is . . . where I learned those kinds of skills that I would associate with liberal arts. And that was taught by a scientist. And it was partly so successful because he understood the knowledge base we were coming from and knew how to incorporate our misconceptions in a way that helped us learn . . . he understood as a scientist. He went through that transition of having to abandon this rhetoric that we spit out [about] what the scientific method is, who a scientist is, what the process of science is, and [that] it's this objective perfect system. We spit out that rhetoric even though we know it's not true, and so how do we establish a new rhetoric? It's actually a lot of what we do. That doesn't devalue what science is; it actually puts science in a level field

of knowledge with other knowledge bases, including social sciences and humanities because they're all valid ways of collecting information about what's going on.

While Jade was the only interviewee to be able to point to specific THC coursework that contributed to her knowledge of disciplinary methods, several alumni did mention that discipline-specific skills were commonly asked about or necessary in interviews and applications. Samantha said that her thesis in the field of international journalism helped demonstrate her knowledge of discipline-specific methods in job interviews:

[My thesis] showed that I could interview people. It showed that I could execute a project that's a long-term project, plan steps, and do it in advance . . . it showed that I could plan in advance, I could write . . . I can do research. I can find sources using initiative. You know, like, I was in a foreign country, but I was still able to find 25 people to talk to me about a pretty sensitive topic . . . using Twitter and connections and other things.

Others, like Joe, lacked the ability to transfer their discipline-specific skills to other domains. When asked what he wished he had had more training in during his time at THC, he said:

More training on, like, how do you write professionally? And how do you write specifically for the purpose of getting admitted to a graduate institution of study? What is it that people are looking for? What is it that you should emphasize? And how do you write what is an awkward letter? . . . Because I think within the Honors College and within college in general you write a lot of research focused papers, or you, in the case of my friends who were in the journalism school or in the business school, you write a lot of technical reports, articles, things that you would be expected to put together in a portfolio for your later applications, but within the field of graduate school, I think there's a gap there of, like, what does this application process look like?

Beyond Jade and Samantha, other participants were less familiar with how the disciplinary methods learning outcome was connected to THC's liberal arts curriculum, and interviews like Joe's demonstrated what the literature has shown: that there are gaps in liberal arts students' ability to apply different disciplinary methodologies across varying contexts (Anders, 2017; Hart Research Associates, 2018; Hutton, 2006; Roche, 2010; Weise et al.,

2018; Wells et al., 2017). These findings also corroborate the more than 70% of employers who did not feel students were prepared to use disciplinary skills in the workplace (Hart Research Associates, 2015).

Intellectual Engagement

Three overarching themes emerged from participants' comments about intellectual engagement: exceptionally intelligent students, challenging courses, and an implicit love of learning. Participants spoke positively about the level of intellectual engagement they experienced within THC. Specifically, students indicated that they were surrounded by peers within THC who were exceptionally intelligent. As a result, they indicated that they learned more, thus enhancing their THC experience. Erica stated:

I learned so much also from my fellow students. Just getting to know people in the smaller class sizes, I think, was extremely helpful to get to know maybe their background. A lot of them were from [this state]. That was kind of fun to see, and also they're just brilliant people. They're brilliant students who have done so much and continually were driven to do so much throughout our time at [ARU]...

Participants saw intellectual engagement as a benefit of THC and a clear characteristic of THC's students. Howard explained, "and so I think there's a lot of benefit of that. I think I was able to have, like, a lot more discussions with people who were clearly, like, engaged with the material. Otherwise, they really wouldn't be in the Honors College."

In addition to being surrounded by students who challenged them intellectually, participants indicated that the course content was more challenging. As a result, students expressed that they worked harder to meet the elevated THC academic expectations. Taylor explained:

So I think that it challenged me like a lot more than my business classes did, so I felt like I was actually pushing myself. It definitely made me a better writer, which was good. . . . I got to take psychology classes, and I took a class on genetics, and I would have never had that opportunity . . . if I was just in the business track. . . .

Finally, participants said that students enjoy and find THC experiences useful because they have an implicit love of learning. They also indicated that if they did not have this orientation toward learning, THC experiences would not be helpful in reaching their first destinations. Veronica expressed:

My favorite classes of all of college were my first ever class and my last ever class and both of them were honors college classes. There was wisdom literature and there was an ethics class. And these were classes that, I mean, I guess if you look at my resume [they] wouldn't matter to my resume, but they mattered a ton in the way that I think and the way that I continue to think . . . outside of yourself and . . . about the world in a different way. That sounds really cheesy, but I think that that partnered with my very tangible and hard skills within journalism was very refreshing. . . .

While some of the participants were aware of the usefulness of the intellectual engagement offered by THC experience, some indicated that its usefulness was contingent on one's career path. Taylor said:

My best friends also did it [participated in THC], and like they're also all, I mean, mostly all going into academia. So I think that that's what a key thing is: that's what it prepares you for and sets you up [for], and I didn't even realize that it was basically like four years of grad school training, but that's what it is. If you don't go into grad school, I'm not really sure what it does for you, other than like, you know, I mean the 'learning is good' kind of thing. I don't know if it really sets you apart or if it gives you really any fundamental skills, other than grad school prep.

Overall, students spoke positively about the intellectual engagement they experienced because of their participation in THC. However, many were not explicitly aware of how this skill helped them to reach their first destinations.

THC expects that students will "show initiative, independence, and intellectual engagement in the classroom and in assessments" (see Appendix). Students talked about the intensity of their writing requirements and how their classroom experiences deeply influenced their level of intellectual engagement. Participants indicated that being surrounded by exceptionally intelligent peers, engaging in challenging courses, and possessing an explicit love of learning contributed to their ability to cultivate intellectual engagement through THC. As Roche (2010, p. 10) has indicated, "learning for its sake" is requisite for success beyond the college years and can be cultivated through a liberal arts experience.

As suggested by Seifert et al. (2008), liberal arts experiences like THC's positively impact liberal arts outcomes such as lifelong learning. Alumni consistently discussed the many ways that they experienced intellectual

engagement during their time at THC; however, they could not articulate how it helped them reach their first destinations. Overall, participants were not aware of the value or usefulness of the skill outside of academia.

CONCLUSION

This study has provided an important addition to the literature as it explores the role of liberal arts skills in students' first post-graduation outcomes. Advocates of liberal arts education claim that it develops broadly applicable skills that are advantageous to students many years beyond college graduation (Roche, 2010; Stross, 2017; Zakaria, 2015). However, the literature does not present an in-depth review of how students are using liberal arts skills to reach their first destinations post-graduation.

This study provides context for how liberal arts skills help students to reach their first destinations, such as employment, prestigious fellowships, and graduate programs. Moreover, it confirms that liberal arts skills can be cultivated outside of the traditional liberal arts college environment and instead in an honors college at a research institution (Kimball, 2014; Roche, 2010). Honors colleges provide access to those who might not otherwise be able to afford an elite liberal arts college. This study also provides additional breadth to the literature indicating that thesis and research experiences contribute to students' personal and professional development. In the literature, most of the studies about the impacts of research experiences are STEM-focused or discipline-specific (Craney et al., 2011; Dowd et al., 2018; Seymour et al., 2004); however, our findings indicate that research competence, such as writing a thesis, also helps students reach their first destinations.

While THC students obtain liberal arts skills that help them reach their first destinations, they are often unable to articulate, recognize, translate, and apply the liberal arts skills they have acquired to their career settings—especially non-academic ones (cf. Anders, 2017; Hart Research Associates, 2018; Hutton, 2006; Roche, 2010; Weise et al., 2018; Wells et al., 2017). Since employers find liberal arts skills valuable—in some instances, more valuable than the academic major—honors colleges need to ensure that students can not only identify the liberal arts skills that they have cultivated but also have an explicit understanding of how such skills can and should be used to reach their first destinations.

The findings and recommendations of our study provide insights and opportunities for further research dedicated to the outcomes of honors graduates. We recommend future studies that explore whether there is an economic

return on a liberal arts education from an honors college once graduates reach their first destinations or whether they must wait several years to feel the impact of the economic benefits. We also recommend additional research on whether students' sense of belonging within an honors college affects their development of liberal arts skills while in college and their application of liberal arts skills after college. Both are particularly important as honors colleges explore ways to attract diverse populations and as students continue to weigh the costs and benefits of a liberal arts education.

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APPENDIX

THC Learning Objectives

| Evaluation Criteria | 100 Level | 200 Level | 300 Level | 400 Level |
|---|--|--|--|---|
| 1. Critical Reasoning Apply and demonstrate critical reasoning through the use of appropriate evidence and methods. | Develop ability to read and question critically; think logically, and reason effectively. Identify the major assertions and assumptions of an academic argument and evaluate its supporting evidence. | Develop and articulate well-reasoned arguments supported with appropriate evidence. Integrate material from multiple sources in support of a single argument. | Develop innovative research questions and determine the evidence needed to support an argument. | Integrate complex and diverse bodies of evidence in support of sophisticated and original arguments. |
| 2. Communication Skills Use effective communication skills, both written and oral, by constructing coherent, logical, and persuasive arguments. | Practice active participation and oral communication of ideas in a group setting. Recognize and employ the conventions of academic writing, presentation, and discussion. | Productively engage in academic dialogue and debate. Express complex ideas clearly in writing and demonstrate strong command of structure, syntax, and mechanics. | Articulate the purpose, methodology, and results of independent research integrating material from multiple sources. | Demonstrate the ability to communicate complex and difficult concepts orally and in writing to both specialists and a broad audience. |
| 3. Research Competence Develop research competence through inquiry, project-based and active learning, based on students' own questions. | Use appropriate methods for identifying and accessing relevant and reliable sources. | Evaluate the use of diverse research methods for the production of knowledge. | Define and refine research questions, and synthesize, integrate, and evaluate relevant and reliable sources of evidence. | Adapt appropriate research skills to a thorough and effective investigation of a research topic or problem. |

| | | | | |
|--|--|--|---|--|
| <p>4. Intellectual Engagement Show initiative, independence, and intellectual engagement in the classroom and in assessments.</p> | <p>Collaboratively and independently explore and evaluate issues, ideas, data, and/or sources.</p> | <p>Develop and articulate reasoned responses to issues, ideas, data, and/or sources.</p> | <p>Identify and engage with individual interests within a broader research area.</p> | <p>Demonstrate independence, initiative, and self-direction in well-conceived individual research papers and projects and in group projects.</p> |
| <p>5. Disciplinary Methods Identify and appropriately apply disciplinary methods in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences.</p> | <p>Identify a range of disciplinary approaches and characterize the diverse perspectives they offer.</p> | <p>Assess and evaluate the use of disciplinary methods.</p> | <p>Employ approaches, methods, and writing style appropriate to the discipline(s) and audience.</p> | <p>Critically reflect on methods within the course discipline(s).</p> |
| <p>6. Interdisciplinary Inquiry Engage in interdisciplinary inquiry by integrating insights from more than one research approach and by synthesizing diverse perspectives and modes of thinking.</p> | <p>Describe the value of a liberal arts perspective across fields of inquiry.</p> | <p>Explore the contributions of different disciplinary perspectives within a field of inquiry.</p> | <p>Synthesize ideas and information from relevant disciplines in support of arguments.</p> | <p>Adapt, analyze, integrate, and critically reflect on methods within relevant disciplines.</p> |
| <p>7. Intercultural Competence Demonstrate intercultural competence through linguistic diversity and awareness of and appreciation for diverse cultural backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives.</p> | <p>Describe the underlying premises in their own and others' arguments or perspectives.</p> | <p>Engage with and reflect on examples of diverse human identities, experiences, and thought.</p> | <p>Appreciate the role of diverse perspectives in shaping complex arguments. Characterize the importance of research ethics and describe best practices.</p> | <p>Demonstrate an ability to empathically consider and present issues from multiple nuanced perspectives.</p> |