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Funding Honors Needs through Student Government Resources

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In recent years, issues of funding have been largely absent from Honors literature. This is a curious omission because the availability of funding is the single most likely factor to further or hinder a program's development. Many of our programs are well endowed, especially in scholarships, but it's rare to find an honors program with generous resources in operating funds, despite the inclusion of an item relating to an "adequate budget" in the NCHC's well-known "Basic Characteristics of a Fully-Developed Honors Program."

The reasons for this dearth of operating funds are easy to identify. First, reductions in state support have forced many public institutions to cut program budgets. Second, private funding is rarely able to fill the gap between program needs and available resources. Most donors, alumni included, are more inclined to contribute to scholarships than to support ongoing operational needs such as travel, faculty development, and research costs simply because it's easier for them to grasp how a deserving student might need scholarship assistance than to understand how that same deserving student would benefit from, say, having the resources to present original research at a conference. Sadly, neither state legislatures nor generous donors are likely to see the light and increase our operating budgets any time soon.

Small wonder, then, that budget-starved honors directors are frustrated to see co-curricular groups receiving ample student-fee supported funding to cover everything from the annual Greek leadership conference at the beach to the rugby club's trip to New Orleans for the Mardi Gras tournament. But how many honors programs have actually applied for such funding? Probably very few, since most of us would assume that such funding is only available for student groups and organizations rather than for academic programs, which are normally funded through academic channels.

That equation, however, can be turned on its ear by rethinking how honors works. If a voluntary student organization such as an ecology club can solicit funds from the Student Government Association, what is to prevent an organization of honors students from doing the same? At my institution, the students in the honors program met, elected their officers, formulated a mission and a set of goals, and wrote a constitution for what became the Honors Student Association. Once the elections were held and the constitution was published

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in the SGA-prescribed format, the HSA became, literally overnight, the largest student organization on campus.

What remained to be done? Our institution's SGA allocates resources on a semester basis, and SGA-recognized student organizations may apply for funding for their activities at the beginning of each term. After the SGA had formally recognized the Honors Student Association, our organization was given approval for funding activities as diverse as the freshman honors orientation retreat and the annual fall retreat (open to the general membership); student travel to conferences, including costs for registration, meals, lodging, and transportation; and various social events to promote organizational recognition, such as the senior honors dinner.

Clearly, such a model might not work on all campuses. For one thing, the student government may require that recognized organizations be open to all students. In our case, we argued successfully that our student organization was open to all eligible students who chose to take honors courses whether they were formally admitted into the program or not. But even a demand for more open membership may not compromise a program's principles inasmuch as the honors program and its student organization are clearly not identical entities.

The benefits of such an arrangement, if successfully effected, are manifold. By supporting activities previously covered by the honors program's limited operating budget, student-fee-supported funding can not only directly meet academic goals, such as student participation in national conferences, but also free up the funding necessary to cover ongoing costs of honors faculty development and mentorship, just for starters. Those of us not yet taking advantage of such funding opportunities should consider investigating them. The benefits are too numerous to overlook.

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