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From Orientation Needs to Developmental Realities: The Honors First-Year Seminar in a National Context

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INTRODUCTION

The transition into college remains one of the most formative and complex phases in an individual's life. Institutions of higher learning have responded to the challenges facing first-year students in myriad ways, most often by offering summer orientation programs, dynamic living-learning environments, tailored academic and psychological support services, and dedicated first-year seminars (FYSs) that seek to engage students in a range of curricular and co-curricular experiences. FYSs—courses intended to enhance the academic skills and/or social development of first-year college students—have become the curricular anchors grounding this broad array of programming. While addressing the developmental needs of first-year

students is the key driver of such seminars, they can also enhance student connection to the institution and have positive effects on retention, especially persistence to the sophomore year.

A deep body of research exists on campus-wide FYS programs, and evidence suggests that the FYS is a recurring interest in honors communities as well. However, the honors community lacks a comprehensive analytical framework that might provide an informed approach to the honors FYS. Important topics related to honors FYSs include how prevalent they are on campuses across the U.S.; what distinguishes them from other FYS offerings on campus; what kinds of resources they share with broader-campus programs; what curricular structures and learning outcomes characterize them; and what types of considerations motivate the creation of distinct seminars for first-year honors students. The overview of the honors FYS that follows, based on a national survey of honors programs and colleges conducted in 2014, addresses these topics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although research has focused intently on the developmental needs of college-age students, new frameworks for understanding the transition to college have emerged in tandem with the recognition of what psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett has termed “Emerging Adulthood,” a developmental category that for many has attained disciplinary status as a new life stage. Emerging adulthood, according to Arnett, is a time of instability, intensive identity exploration, and self-focus, a time that can seem at once daunting and full of promise. Neuroscience research has provided some physiological evidence for this new life stage with studies showing that the brain continues to develop through age twenty and beyond (Giedd et al.; Sowell et al.). Accompanying this conversation are debates in both popular media and scientific literature about the effects that certain prominent parenting styles—the self-esteem-boosting, the helicoptering, the cell-phone-tethering—are having on first-year college students. The current college generation seems both overprotected and underprepared, both coddled and anxious, as they seek to supplant the external motivations that have been placed on them by family and other social groups with more sustaining internal motivations. In honors colleges and programs across the country, this conversation has taken on a new urgency as both anecdotal and research-based evidence emerges concerning the mental health issues increasingly faced by high-achieving students (Center for Collegiate Mental Health; Scelfo).

Given these new realities—psychological, physiological, and cultural—efforts to address transitional issues in the college context have increasingly focused on first-year programming in general and the FYS in particular. The past three decades have witnessed a marked increase in the presence of FYSs on campuses across the U.S. (Young & Hopp): one recent study found that 96.5% of four-year institutions reported the presence of some type of FYS on campus (Barefoot, Griffin & Koch), and Young and Hopp found that nearly 70% of respondents indicated a FYS for the majority of enrolled students, suggesting that these seminars have taken on a deep institutional presence nationally.

With regard to honors communities, one might assume that less attention would be focused on students' basic orientation needs: the "who," "what," "when," and "where" addressed by a more remedial University 101 curriculum that took hold across campuses in the 70s and 80s. Research suggests, however, that honors programs and colleges, perhaps wary of overlooking or underestimating the core developmental realities students continue to face, are offering dedicated FYSs with increasing prevalence. The *2012–13 National Survey of First-Year Seminars*, a triennially published report currently in its ninth iteration, indicates that 24.1% of responding schools offer a distinct FYS for honors students, representing a marked increase over the 14% offering distinct honors FYSs cited in 2000 (Young & Hopp). According to Young and Hopp, special sections of FYSs intended for honors students occurred at a higher rate than those intended for any other unique student subpopulation despite the fact that honors units were only present, extrapolating data from Scott and Smith's demographic study, at approximately 60% of the campuses they surveyed. These numbers suggest that even as campus-wide, institutionalized FYSs have increased consistently over time, so too has the recognition within honors communities that their students would benefit from a distinct FYS tailored to their unique needs and goals.

The growth in broader-campus FYSs has been propelled and sustained by a well-established body of research on the first-year experience led by The National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (NCR). Founded in 1986, the NRC has emerged as the central clearinghouse for scholarship as well as best practices related to all aspects of the first-year experience. Their in-house journal—*The Journal for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition*—and their monograph series, recurring research reports, online courses, and a major annual conference have offered myriad venues for those seeking practical guidance or theoretical reflection on the FYS in particular. Unfortunately, this broader body of literature has

rarely focused on the honors FYS, and the honors community itself has yet to develop a comprehensive analytical framework that can both account for what is happening in the honors FYS in the present and lay a foundation for future developments.

Although a comprehensive framework is lacking, a robust conversation related to the FYS has begun to develop in the honors community over the last decade. An overview of annual conference proceedings of the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) going back ten years suggests that the conversation in the honors community, though persistent, is largely anecdotal or focused on a single institution and not often tied to the broader field of FYS research. This narrow focus is reflected as well in the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council (JNCHC)* and *Honors in Practice (HIP)*, where conversations about the honors FYS only occasionally emerge.

Since 2005, a handful of articles directly addressing the place of the FYS in an honors context have appeared in *JNCHC* and *HIP*. These articles tend to offer qualitative descriptions of unique models that fit the needs of a particular program. An article by Goldberger published in *Honors in Practice* in 2012, for example, lays out the rationale for a first-year seminar course at Mount Ida College that takes a “whole mind approach” (in reference to Daniel Pink’s book *A Whole New Mind: Why Right Brainers Will Rule the Future*). Although Goldberger’s model is not necessarily generalizable to other programs, the basic structure of the seminar reflects the critical characteristics of the FYS that are central to honors courses: the promotion of “critical thinking, interdisciplinary study, and close mentoring relationships with faculty” (79). In line with this focus on complexity and deep intellectual engagement, an article exploring the FYS at Ithaca College focuses on the development of metacognitive awareness and intentionality and also on independence in the learning process (Bleicher).

The most frequently occurring topic with regard to the honors FYS is the role of peer mentors in helping to achieve learning goals. Leichter, for example, discusses the impact of peer-leadership models in honors education, specifically describing the role of peer “co-mentors” in the first-year seminar. She argues that peer mentors serve as role models who guide students toward the mature engagement of a successful college student. Describing a similar model, Wang and colleagues focus on the impact of peer mentors on persistence in honors. They argue that these team leaders support the academic and social identity development that is critical to an honors student’s success.

This emphasis on peer education, along with the tendency toward enriched academic seminars, is also evident in campus-wide offerings,

especially as FYs have increasingly come under the purview of academic affairs (Young & Hopp). Indeed, much of the expansive research done on broader-campus FYs can be extended to honors communities. Studies have shown that FYs can improve outcomes such as higher grade point averages, more meaningful interaction with faculty and peers, and increased use of campus services and resources (Greenfield et al.). Soria and Stubblefield, focusing on the reflective engagement that many FYs employ, find that students whose strengths and interests are identified and employed in the first year have higher academic self-efficacy and more positive engagement in the learning process. As broader-campus FYs have begun looking beyond the “University 101” model that was so foundational for the FY in its early years, there has been an increasing emphasis on peer educators (Latino & Ashcraft), integration of curricular and co-curricular experiences (Keup & Petschauer), and incorporation of high-impact practices (Kuh, “Student Engagement” and *High-Impact Educational Practices*). Furthermore, although the social and academic development of students is at the forefront in conversations about FYs, institutions have begun to understand the importance of the first-year experience in promoting retention (Ishler & Upcraft). It follows that a dedicated honors FY might similarly be a driver of retention in honors. For all of these reasons, then, the honors community would do well to attend more fully to, and to participate more regularly in, this growing field of research.

The FY has emerged as a remarkably flexible tool that can accommodate general education requirements, partake in broader linked curricula, encourage student connection to the institution, and be strategically scaled to suit specific institutional contexts and student needs. Though the research literature in honors lacks quantitative reflections on how the FY has encouraged resource awareness, sponsored student success, and impacted honors retention at individual institutions, one need not make a giant leap of logic to conclude that an honors FY might offer clear benefits for the intellectual culture of an honors community.

CURRENT STUDY

During the fall of 2014, we conducted the first national survey of the honors first-year seminar (hereafter called the 2014 Honors FY Survey). The 2014 Honors FY Survey sought to collect information that would lead to a comprehensive overview of the honors FY and how it differs from broader-campus offerings in key areas. We sought comparative data on seminar type, staffing structures, grading protocol, credit load, program longevity, seminar

type, and staffing structure. We also sought information that would help us gauge the prevalence of honors FYs on campuses across the country as well as information on the curricular and pedagogical structures of honors FYs, the resources they most commonly introduce, and the student development emphases or program objectives that define the honors FY. Finally, the survey sought qualitative data on what motivated the creation of a distinct honors FY at surveyed institutions. The descriptive analysis in this paper is intended to help honors programs and colleges as they develop, adapt, and assess honors FYs. We also anticipate that our results will help those who oversee broader-campus FY programs better understand how their offerings might effectively engage high-achieving students.

Materials and Methods

The 2014 Honors FY Survey was administered from September through October of 2014 via an email link to a web-based survey. Though the primary focus was the honors FY, the survey asked respondents for information about both the honors FY and campus-wide offerings, when relevant, in order to compare the two. Although all comparisons are drawn from our data set, the picture that emerged of the FY in our data was largely consistent with the *2012–13 National Survey of First-Year Seminars (NSFYs)* conducted by Young and Hopp.

Our survey instrument was designed and administered using Qualtrics survey software, and the survey design itself was developed using the *2012–13 NSFYS* as a model with permission of the lead author Dallin Young. Some of the survey questions were either lightly adapted or taken directly from the *2012–13 NSFYS* (see Appendix for a copy of our survey instrument, which notes those questions adapted from the *2012–13 NSFYS*). Most of the questions were choice-based, including some that were forced-choice and others that allowed for multiple responses. A few questions at the end of the survey were open-ended, thus providing an opportunity for respondents to share qualitative information unique to their institutions or to qualify and clarify selections made in the choice-based questions.

For an early iteration of the National Survey of the First-Year Seminar, Barefoot first reviewed course descriptions for approximately 200 courses and then developed a basic typology for FYs, which was later modified to include the “hybrid” seminar (Tobolowski & Associates). The 2014 National Honors FY Survey used this typology as well:

1. **Extended orientation seminar.** Often called “Freshman Orientation,” “College Survival,” “College Transition,” or “Student Success,” these courses include an introduction to campus resources, time management, academic and career planning, learning strategies, and student-development concerns.
2. **Academic seminar with generally uniform content across sections.** This type may be an interdisciplinary or theme-oriented course, sometimes part of a general education requirement. The primary focus is on academic theme/discipline but often includes academic skills components such as critical thinking and expository writing.
3. **Academic seminars on various topics.** This seminar’s content may be similar to #2 except that specific topics vary from section to section.
4. **Basic study skills seminar.** Offered for academically underprepared students, the seminar focuses on basic academic skills such as grammar, note taking, and reading texts.
5. **Hybrid.** This type has elements from two or more types of seminars.

Description of Sample

A total of 831 institutions were invited to participate via the point-of-contact for each institution, a list provided by the NCHC. We also announced the survey and invited participants via the NCHC listserv. The 831 institutions invited to participate represent approximately 55% of all honors colleges and programs nationwide, an estimate based on information provided by Richard I. Scott and Patricia Smith. Of the 831 campuses contacted, 37.7% completed the survey (N=313), a response rate in line with reported responses for web-based surveys in organizational research (Holton).

In terms of the composition of our survey respondents, Table 1 shows a comparison of institutional characteristics for all responding institutions broken down by the institutional structure of the honors division, i.e., program or college, on campus. In the broader context of honors, Scott and Smith found that honors programs comprise 87.9% of all honors communities and honors colleges 12.1%. They also found that the ratio of four-year to two-year

honors communities is 65.1% to 34.9%. As our data show in relation to these percentages, our sample includes a proportionally higher representation of honors colleges and four-year institutions.

Because honors programs are more common than honors colleges and are well represented in our sample, data regarding programs are likely more reliable. Because we had a low response-rate from two-year institutions, we did not engage in any analysis related to this group.

Results

Seminar Presence and Resource Sharing

Using responses to questions related to the presence of honors and broader-campus FYS offerings at any given institution, we were able to establish a comprehensive overview of the honors FYS in its institutional context. Of the 313 schools who responded to this survey, 71% offer a campus-wide

TABLE 1: COMPARISON OF INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

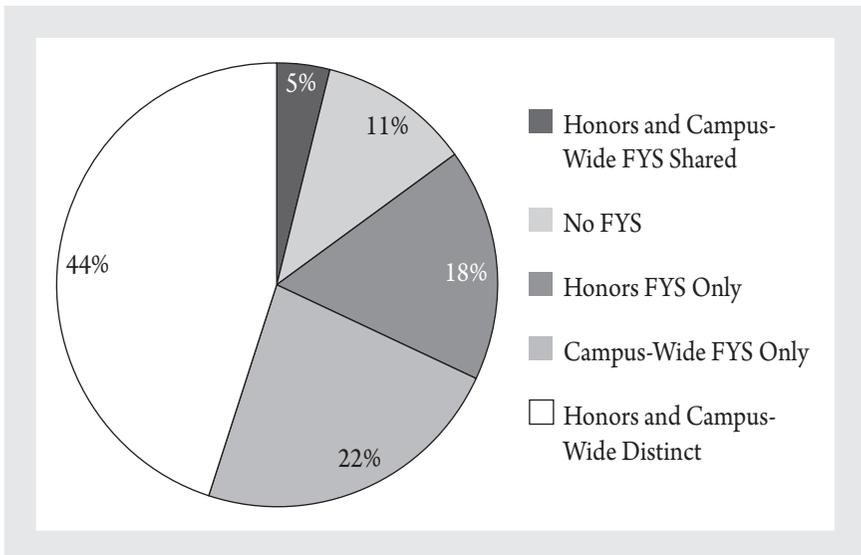
Institutional Characteristics	Honors Program Percentages	Honors College Percentages	Total Sample Percentages
FYS Survey Sample	77%	23%	100%
Control Type (N=313)			
Public	59.6%	91.8%	67.3%
Private, non-profit	40.3%	8.2%	32.7%
Institution Type (N = 312)			
Two Year	16.4%	4.11%	13.0%
Four Year	83.6%	95.9%	87.0%
First-Year Students, Campus-Wide (N = 311)			
Fewer than 500	19.9%	4.1%	16.2%
501–1000	23.2%	9.6%	20.1%
1,001–2000	23.2%	27.4%	24.2%
2,001–4,000	16.6%	30.1%	19.8%
More than 4,000	17.0%	28.8%	19.8%
First-Year Students, Honors (N = 200)			
Fewer than 101	70.9%	26.0%	59.3%
101–300	19.0%	47.9%	25.8%
301–500	5.9%	20.6%	9.4%
Greater than 500	4.2%	5.5%	4.5%

FYS intended for the general student population. Figure 1 indicates where the honors FYS is distinct from the campus-wide FYS offerings; where the honors FYS is housed within the campus-wide FYS curriculum as a special section intended for honors students; where honors and campus-wide FYS offerings exist in the absence of one another; and where no FYS exists in either the honors or the campus-wide context.

These data show that 66% of honors divisions surveyed indicated some type of honors FYS, whether it exists separately from campus-wide offerings (45%), as a subsection of the campus-wide FYS (4%), or in the absence of a campus-wide FYS (17%). The responses indicated, in relation to a question asking whether such courses are typically required, that in 78% of the cases where a distinct honors FYS is offered, the course is mandatory. These data suggest that the honors programs and colleges represented in this sample consider some type of FYS to be an important foundational experience for honors students. Furthermore, as the significant overlap of distinct broader-campus and honors FYSs indicates, it is not simply the absence of an institutionalized FYS program that spurs the development of an honors FYS; rather, there seems to be something about the nature and objective of honors education itself that gives rise to this distinction.

Although the honors FYS exists most often as distinct from campus-wide offerings, resource sharing between these two entities in the area of curriculum,

FIGURE 1. PRESENCE OF HONORS FYS IN RELATION TO CAMPUS-WIDE FYS (N = 313)

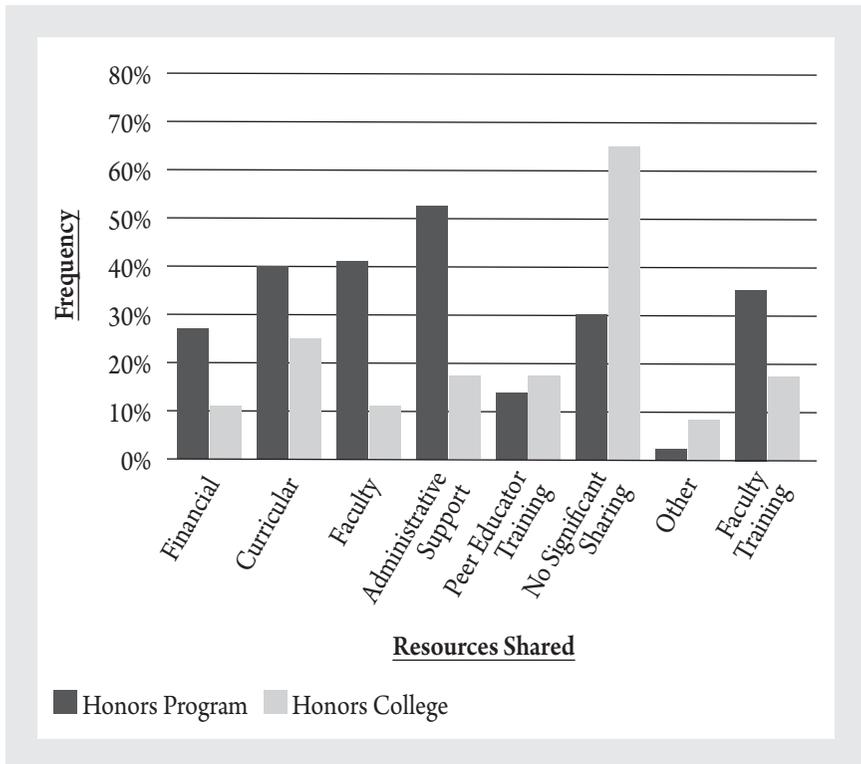


faculty, and administrative support occurs with some frequency, especially for honors programs. Most interesting, though, is that of the institutions reporting inclusion of honors students in some type of distinct FYS, 90% of honors colleges are offering FYSs without financial support from the broader-campus program as compared with 75% of honors programs ($\chi^2(1) = 7.46, p < .0063$). Honors colleges and programs also differ in terms of sharing of curriculum ($\chi^2(1) = 5.88, p < .015$) and faculty ($\chi^2(1) = 28.88, p < .00001$) with the broader-campus FYS. In fact, honors colleges were significantly more likely to report no significant resource sharing ($\chi^2(1) = 26.01, p < .00001$).

Seminar Type

Using the established FYS typology discussed in the methods section, the 2014 Honors FYS Survey asked respondents to indicate the seminar type for their campus-wide and honors offerings, respectively. Of the respondents, 39.5% indicated that the extended orientation is the most common campus-

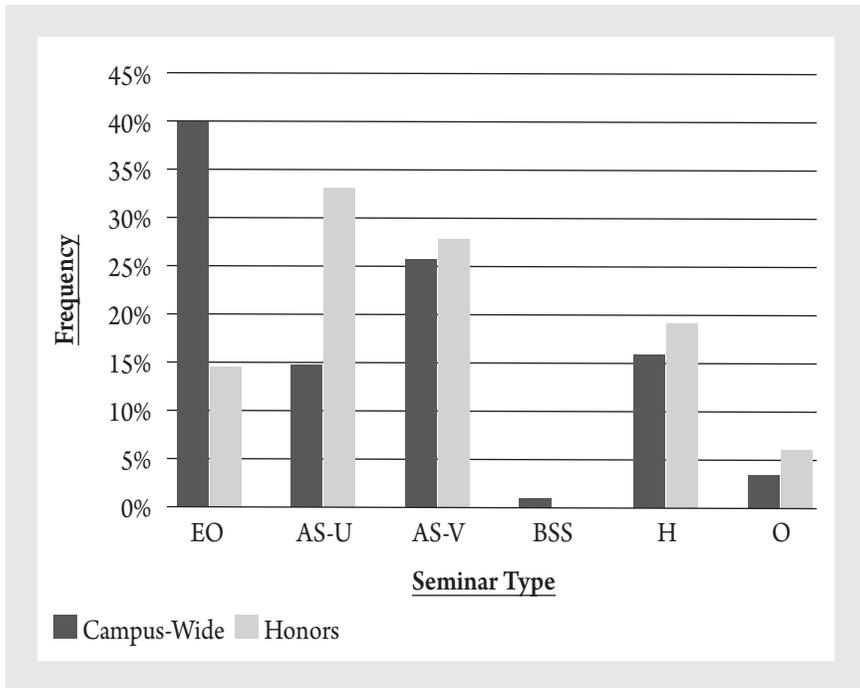
FIGURE 2. RESOURCES HONORS FYSs SHARE WITH THOSE WHO ADMINISTER CAMPUS-WIDE FYS (N = 144)



wide FYS at their institution, a number consistent with the 2012–13 NSFYS. As Figure 3 indicates, however, campus-wide and honors offerings differ ($\chi^2(5) = 41.5, p < .0001$). Specifically, extended orientation seminars are significantly less likely to be the model used for the honors FYSs ($\chi^2(1) = 16.04, p < .0001$). Instead, honors FYSs are more likely to be academic seminars on either uniform or various content, which, when combined, form a distinct majority (61%) of the FYSs offered in honors whereas in campus-wide FYS offerings academic seminars make up less than half (40%) ($\chi^2(1) = 8.0, p < .005$).

Though extended orientation seminars (which relate more closely to the familiar “University 101” model) are one of the least commonly offered stand-alone types in the honors context, the hybrid seminar types—as reflected in the optional qualitative responses related to this question—often include an extended-orientation element even if this orientation focus is tailored specifically to the honors audience, e.g., early introductions to research opportunities, opportunities for community engagement, and networking with faculty and peers.

FIGURE 3. COMPARISON OF SEMINAR TYPE, CAMPUS-WIDE (N = 223) AND HONORS (N = 202)



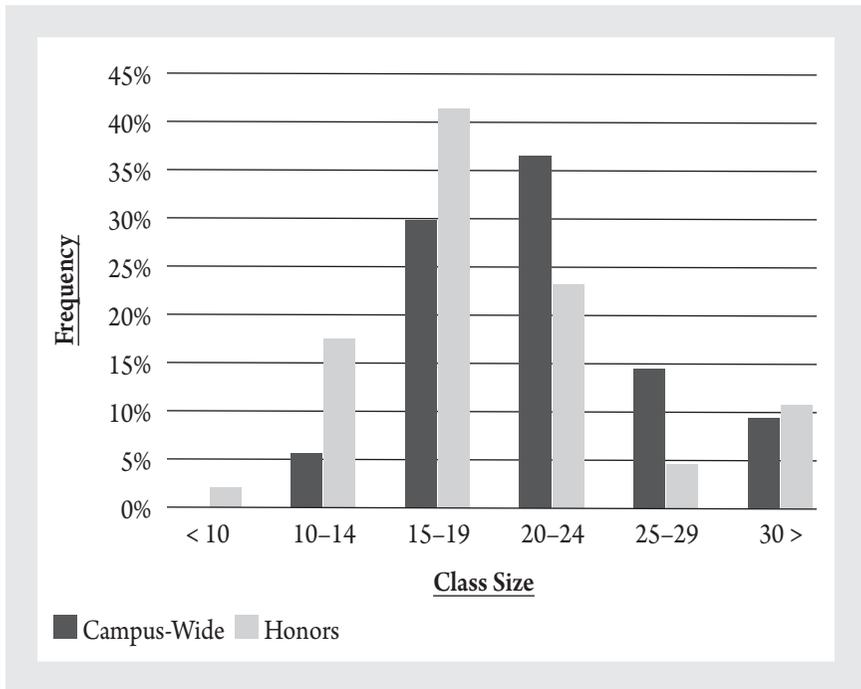
EO = Extended Orientation; AS-U = Academic Seminar, Uniform; AS-V = Academic Seminar, Various; BSS = Basic Study Skills; H = Hybrid; O = Other

Class Size, Credit Load, Grading, and Staffing

Beyond identifying the prevalence of honors FYs nation-wide and determining distinct tendencies in seminar type and crucial areas of resource sharing, the 2014 Honors FYs Survey sought information on other non-curricular features of the FYs in both honors and campus-wide contexts. Our data indicate no significant variance between honors and campus-wide FYs when it comes to credit load ($\chi^2(5) = 7.1, p < 0.2$) and grading procedures ($\chi^2(5) = 1.4, p < 0.5$). The vast majority of FYs are offered as either three- or one-credit options, with such sections evenly split and comprising roughly two-thirds of all sections offered. Very little difference was found in terms of grading processes, with over 80% of both honors and broader-campus FYs offering a letter grade for the course.

Although certain metrics such as grading protocol and credit load are generally similar across honors and campus-wide FYs, honors seminars are more likely to be smaller, with 39.3% of respondents noting average class size under 20 students for honors FYs compared to just 23% for campus-wide

FIGURE 4. COMPARISON OF CLASS SIZE, CAMPUS-WIDE (N = 214) AND HONORS (N = 202)



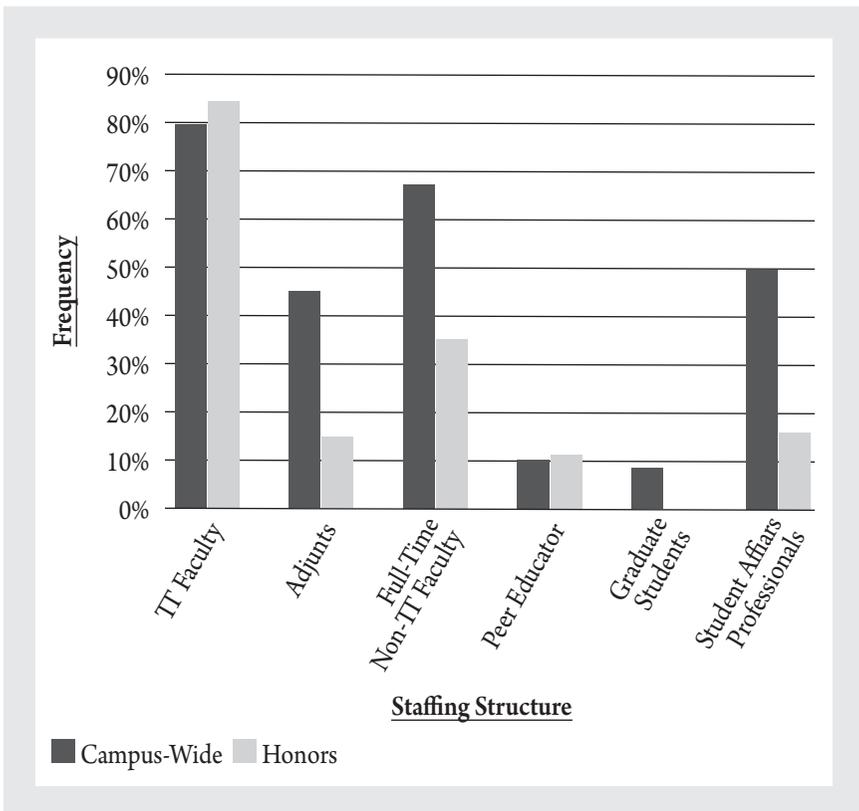
FYSs, $\chi^2(5) = 38.8, p < .0001$ (note: “unsure” responses in the case of broader-campus responses were excluded from analysis).

Staffing structures also show a marked difference between honors and campus-wide FYSs, with honors sections using tenure-track faculty most frequently followed by other full-time instructors. Although the honors and campus-wide FYSs do not differ significantly in the use of tenure-track faculty, honors is less likely to use adjuncts ($\chi^2(1) = 24.38, p < .0001$), non-tenure track faculty, ($\chi^2(1) = 19.24, p < .0001$), and student affairs professionals, ($\chi^2(1) = 29.77, p < .0001$).

Curricular and Pedagogical Structures, Resource Focus, and Student Development Emphases or Program Objectives

The FYS is a remarkably flexible curricular entity, serving a vast array of student learning and institutional objectives. The 2014 Honors FYS Survey

FIGURE 5. COMPARISON OF STAFFING STRUCTURE, CAMPUS-WIDE (N = 223) AND HONORS (N = 201)



asked respondents to identify important seminar traits in three distinct categories: curricular and pedagogical structures, resource exposure, and student development emphases or program objectives. After being asked to identify all relevant items in each category, respondents were asked to select the three most important items in each category in relation to their FYS.

Tables 2–4 capture the various emphases that the honors FYS attempts to achieve in the categories noted above. Following each table is an explanation addressing the three most important items selected from those noted in the table data.

Of the survey respondents, 198 provided responses to this question about curricular and pedagogical structure. Both in frequency (as reflected in Table 2) and ranking, respondents indicated that discussion-based elements (78% ranked in the top three) and assignments that encourage student collaboration (52% ranked in the top three) are the most important. Advising and mentoring (39% ranked in top three) and experiential learning (31.3% ranked in the top three) were also nominated fairly frequently. The remaining types of curricular and pedagogical structures were mentioned by some programs, but their importance was less clear overall. The qualitative responses offered a few additional insights, with several respondents mentioning the importance of writing, particularly reflective writing, and the importance of introductions to faculty and the disciplines.

Of the respondents, 191 answered the question about resources (as reflected in Table 3). Again, both the frequency and ranking of the selected offices and resources reflected the same pattern, with library resources (52.51% ranked in top three) and the undergraduate research office (50.28% ranked in top three) nominated as the most important. Respondents also indicated the office related to student learning and tutoring and the international study office as of critical importance. Although the community engagement and career services offices were mentioned by a majority of respondents, these resources were not cited in the top three as often (26.2% and 19.4%, respectively).

Of the 198 respondents who answered the question about student development outcomes (as reflected in Table 4), most affirmed the importance of critical thinking (64% ranked in the top three), followed by academic skills at 42%, reflective engagement at 34%, and student-faculty interaction at 30%. Although honors and college retention were noted with some frequency as relevant program objectives, respondents chose honors retention as a priority item only 23% of the time and institution-wide retention even less at 5%.

**TABLE 2. FREQUENCY OF CURRICULAR AND PEDAGOGICAL STRUCTURES AND STRATEGIES RELATED TO HONORS FYS
(MULTIPLE SELECTIONS WERE ALLOWED) (N = 198)**

Criteria	Response	Percentage
Discussion-based elements	182	91.92%
Assignments that encourage student collaboration	145	73.23%
Individual advising and mentoring	125	63.13%
Emphasis on experiential learning	100	50.51%
Lecture-based elements	83	41.92%
Link to honors living-learning community	79	39.90%
Peer-educator involvement	77	38.89%
Engagement with campus common reading	73	36.87%
Team teaching	56	28.28%
Curricular link with another course	47	23.74%

TABLE 3. CAMPUS RESOURCES AND OFFICES TO WHICH STUDENTS ENROLLED IN THE HONORS FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR ARE EXPOSED (N = 191)

Criteria	Response	Percentage
Library resources	159	83.25%
Office or resource related to promoting undergraduate research opportunities	131	68.59%
Office or resource overseeing study abroad and international education opportunities	121	63.35%
Office or resource overseeing community engagement opportunities	107	56.02%
Office or resource overseeing career counseling and professional development	105	54.97%
Office or resource promoting student learning (tutoring, academic skills development)	103	53.93%
Office or resource offering psychological services counseling	88	46.07%
Office or resource related to applications to nationally competitive awards and fellowships	85	44.50%
Office or resource related to diversity training and awareness and multicultural student programs	66	34.55%
Office or resource overseeing sexual misconduct issues and victim services	56	29.32%

Student activities board	49	25.65%
Office or resource related to campus safety	46	24.08%
Student government association	46	24.08%
Other	21	10.99%

TABLE 4. STUDENT-DEVELOPMENT EMPHASES OR PROGRAM OBJECTIVES FOR THE HONORS FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR (N = 198)

Criteria	Response	Percentage
Critical thinking	176	88.89%
Student-faculty interaction	166	83.84%
Academic skills	164	82.83%
Reflective engagement and self-exploration	154	77.78%
Honors retention	154	77.78%
Negotiating college transition	115	58.08%
College retention	104	52.53%
Understanding of the liberal arts	103	52.02%
Opportunities for campus involvement	102	51.52%
Information literacy	99	50.00%
Leadership	98	49.49%
Community engagement / public service	96	48.48%
Strategic academic and extracurricular planning	84	42.42%
Career exploration	68	34.34%
Disciplinary exposure	63	31.82%
Diversity training	42	21.21%
Health, wellness, and safety	33	16.67%
E-portfolio creation	26	13.13%
Portfolio creation	24	12.12%

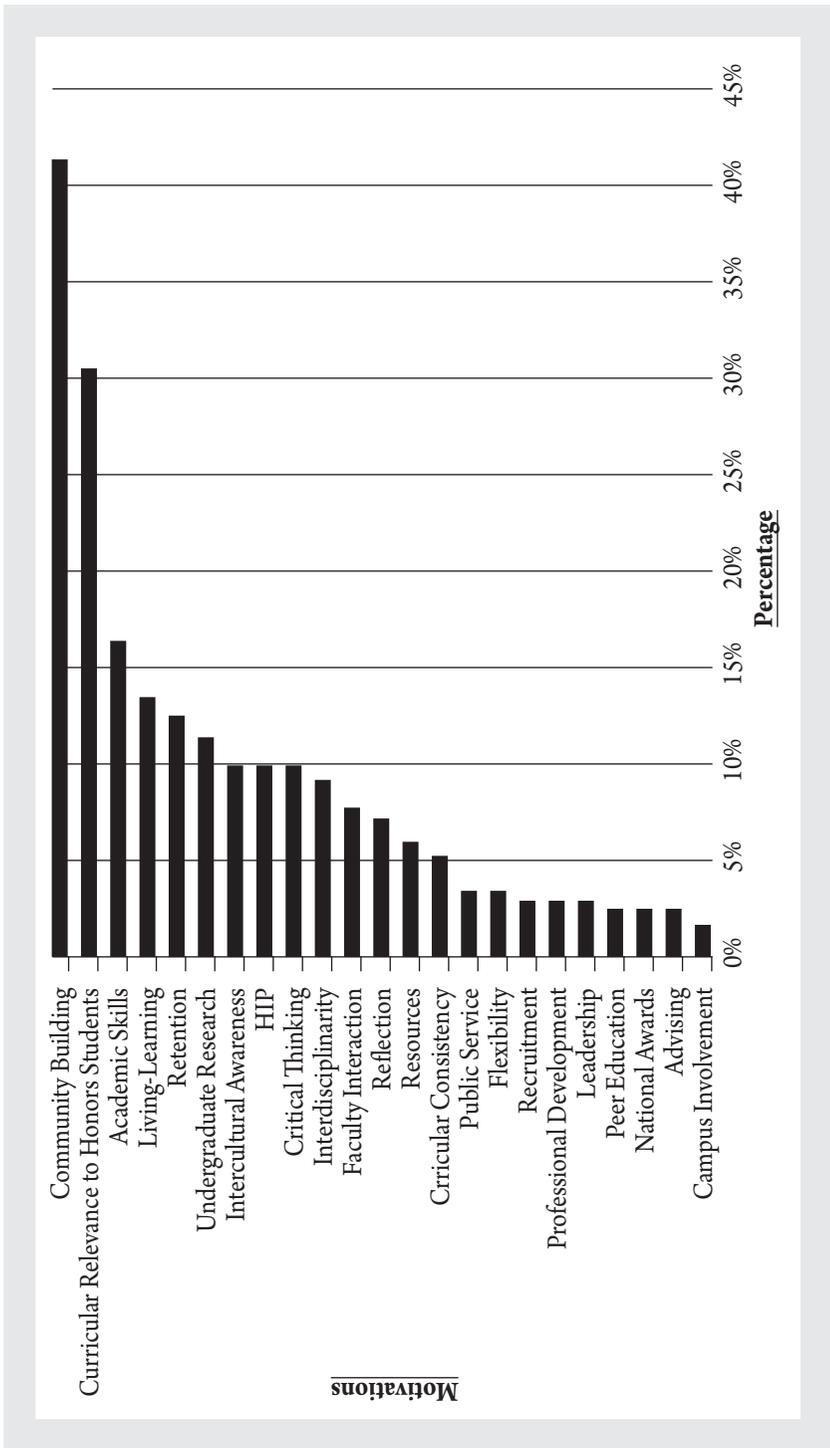
Motivations for Creating a Distinct Honors FYS

One of the final questions on the 2014 Honors FYS Survey was a qualitative question that asked respondents what motivated the creation of a distinct honors FYS course at their institution. We received 171 responses to this question that both confirmed the quantitative data and brought up a few new and important concerns that are not as clearly reflected in those data. By asking about motivations, this question evoked responses regarding student learning objectives, curricular structures, and institutional goals as well as less concrete reflections on what distinguishes honors FYSs from campus-wide offerings. We categorized these qualitative data according to specific keywords, as reflected in Figure 6.

Because the category labels were based on the qualitative data, the motivations often represent both divergent and redundant indicators of specificity, which can complicate conclusions drawn. For example, High-Impact Learning Practices, abbreviated as HIP in Figure 6, includes undergraduate research and intercultural awareness even though these two motivations are represented by separate keywords on the graph. Nevertheless, we felt it important to reflect closely what respondents indicated rather than to group distinct learning practices under one umbrella category. Notably, the top two motivations in Figure 6 are only indirectly represented in responses to earlier questions related to the various emphases, curricular structures, and objectives of honors FYSs and therefore deserve individual attention.

The overriding core motivation was community/cohort building, which is not directly related to the pedagogical structure of the course or to student learning outcomes. This result echoes a campus-wide concern, evident in the 2012–13 NSFYS, with cultivating connection to the institution, though this occurs on a much smaller and more intimate scale in the honors setting. If campus-wide FYSs encourage students simply to plug in or to have some anchor to ground them, honors FYSs have a more substantive emphasis on encouraging students to be fully networked and to assume control of their own academic and extracurricular trajectory. Furthermore, the concern with community in honors often involves a connection to a living-learning environment. Honors communities are integral; they are formed around the idea that students can push and challenge one another, often more effectively than their professors or the institution itself can. The sense of community, then, goes beyond a mere need for connection to the institution and becomes a critical factor in any given student's experience, a factor felt personally, academically, and professionally.

FIGURE 6. MOTIVATIONS FOR CREATING A DISTINCT HONORS FYS (N = 171)



Another common area of concern that is perhaps implicit throughout the survey but much more explicit in the context of the question about motivations is the sense that high-achieving students require a relevant and challenging first-year curriculum that speaks to their unique goals and capabilities. The overall sense, here, is that honors students expect a certain level of rigor and that the expectations of campus-wide FYs tend to be too low, possibly suggesting elitism—a perception with which honors colleges and programs often struggle. “We felt like the general first year seminar did not push Honors students academically and risked making college an unsatisfying experience,” one respondent writes. “We wanted to make sure that we were pushing the best students to do their very best work in the very first semester.” Another respondent is blunter in arguing that an honors FYs needs to be relevant to the honors student population:

Honors students do not need the scavenger hunts to campus offices and some of the other silly FYs experiences. Students were disenchanted with a college requirement taught by non-faculty that emphasized study skills and post-orientation familiarity with the university’s resources. They were eager for more serious dialogue on a range of topics related to the various disciplines and the liberal arts.

This respondent also expresses a common theme throughout the qualitative reflections, with another comment: “Offering an alternative general education experience for high achieving students is important so that they would not be bored in standard general education first year courses.” While some state the case rather critically, the broader sentiment reflects an eagerness to challenge high-achieving students with a rigorous, tailored approach to the FYs. The expectations of honors students are high, and it follows that honors educators should have high expectations for their students. The goal, one respondent writes, is “to build a distinct academic and social culture for honors students to understand the expectations of the high level of work expected of them and to begin to engage them with the honors community and the larger community.”

Though community building, relevance to the specific needs of honors students, and exposure to high-impact practices are more frequently noted motivating factors, several ideas that received less emphasis merit some attention as well. Professional development opportunities received little attention in the qualitative responses, for example, as did leadership. Perhaps these are areas that receive more attention elsewhere in the curriculum and seem less

pressing for first-year students, or the lower mention of these items might reflect the shift in honors contexts away from extended orientation seminars where campus resources, such as career centers, are explored.

Finally, some ideas emerged in this list that we did not anticipate. Retention is a key institutional driver for campus-wide FYs, and retention—whether at the institution or within honors—is an abiding motivation for honors divisions as well. Interestingly, however, recruitment came up as a recurring theme as well. Given how anxious high school seniors are about their momentous college transition, a well-defined and exciting FYs might ease some of their concerns about college and serve as a draw in some cases. The emphasis on curricular relevance and a sense of community also serve as recruitment tools as they embody the honors experience: a tailored and rigorous education in a supportive community of scholar-citizens.

CONCLUSION

The established body of research about FYs in a broad-campus context has defined FYs as courses designed to enhance the academic skills and/or social development of first-year college students. Whereas our survey data suggest that this conceptual framework is relevant to the honors community, we believe that the nature of the honors FYs is different in some fundamental ways. An honors FYs is a course that does not simply enhance but fundamentally directs and grounds the academic and social transition processes faced by first-year honors students. Given the high academic expectations for honors students, the honors FYs is an opportunity to orient them within the networks, the resources, and the scholarly habits that will be critical to their success. Honors FYs can take place in the context of an extended orientation, with specific exposure to undergraduate research, professional development, nationally competitive opportunities, deep community engagement, and reflective practice, to name a few key focus areas; or honors FYs can take place as a more tailored and intentional academic experience keyed to first-year writing, general education, or honors-specific requirements. Either framework—or some combination thereof—is suitable as long as it is in tune with the evolving needs and capacities of honors first-year students at any given institution. The key is to create space for curricular experiences that expose honors students to the critical thinking skills and integrative learning opportunities that will power their unique academic and professional development.

Clearly, the honors FYS exists in a space of curricular variation and innovation that emerges alongside a host of institutional, curricular, and pedagogical variables. The list of motivating factors in Figure 6 suggests something of this dynamic range. Although the present research cannot recommend specific strategies for working within those distinct contexts, we hope it suggests some broader national patterns that can help individual honors programs as they develop, refine, or assess their own FYSs.

We also hope that this initial attempt at understanding the honors FYS in a national context will inspire further research. Key areas remain to be addressed, including the role of the honors FYS in both honors and broader-campus retention, uses of the honors FYS as a recruitment tool, and the extent of cooperation and sharing between those who run or teach in campus-wide FYSs and those who lead honors divisions. Even more important, an understanding of how the honors FYS serves the specific developmental needs of highly talented students warrants more attention. Another critical area for consideration that our data did not expose is the role of peer mentors in helping new honors students acclimate to honors expectations. Exploring these and other areas more fully will bring us closer to understanding what constitutes success in an honors FYS in relation to student goals, faculty experience, and the broader imperatives that inform honors communities across the country. Even in research not focused directly on the FYS, we would also encourage an awareness that the FYS often exists at the intersection of multiple programmatic and institutional imperatives, and it should therefore be a prominent part of more general conversations as well.

In the interest of extending this line of research, we are currently designing a follow-up survey instrument that will address areas that remain unclear or ambiguous in the present survey while also presenting a diverse array of best-practice profiles and assessments that honors divisions might look to when revising or initiating their own FYS offerings.

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APPENDIX

Honors First-Year Seminar Survey 2014

Thanks for taking part in this survey. The first part of the survey asks for basic information about your institution and, if relevant, its first-year seminar offerings. The second part of the survey asks for more detailed information about your honors program and, if relevant, its dedicated first-year seminar. The majority of the questions require check-box responses, though you will have an opportunity to offer qualitative feedback near the end of the survey.

Please respond by Friday, October 24. Some of the survey questions are adapted from *2012–2013 National Survey of First-Year Seminars: Exploring High-Impact Practices in the First College Year*, by D. G. Young and J. M. Hopp, 2014, Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. Copyright 2014 by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina. Specifically questions 8, 9, 12, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, and 24 from the *NSFYS* have been reprinted or adapted here with permission. All rights reserved.

Q1 To ensure that we do not receive duplicate entries, please provide your full institution name: _____

Section 1: Institution-Wide Questions

Q2 Please select the category that best describes your institution's type:

- Two-year institution (1)
- Four-year institution (2)

Q3 Please select the category that best describes your institution's funding structure:

- Public (1)
- Private, not-for-profit (2)
- Private, for-profit (3)

Q4 Approximately how many first-year students did your institution enroll in the 2013–2014 academic year?

- less than 500 (1)
- 501–1,000 (2)
- 1,001–2,000 (3)

- 2,001–4,000 (4)
- More than 4,000 (5)

Q5 Approximately how many first-year students did your honors program enroll in the 2013-2014 academic year?

- Fewer than 50 (1)
- 50–100 (2)
- 101–150 (3)
- 151–200 (4)
- 201–300 (5)
- 301–400 (6)
- 401–500 (7)
- Greater than 500 (8)

Q6 Please select the category that best describes the institutional presence of honors on your campus:

- Honors College (2)
- Honors Program (1)
- Other (3) _____

First-year seminars are courses designed to enhance the academic skills and/or social development of first-year college students.

Q7 Does your institution offer a broader-campus first-year seminar intended for the majority of the general student population?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

**If No Is Selected, Then Skip To Q15*

Q8 Is this broader campus first-year seminar mandatory for most students?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- Unsure (3)

Q9 Which of the following best describes the broader-campus first-year seminar offered at your institution? *Note: the category selected should relate to the first-year seminar with the highest enrollment on your campus*

- Extended orientation seminar—Sometimes called freshman orientation, college survival, college transition, or student success course. Content often includes introduction to campus resources, time management, academic and career planning, learning strategies, and an introduction to student development issues. (1)

- Academic seminar with generally uniform academic content across sections—May be an interdisciplinary or theme-oriented course, sometimes part of a general education requirement. Primary focus is on academic theme or discipline, but will often include academic skills components, such as critical thinking and expository writing. (2)
- Academic seminar on various topics—Similar to previously mentioned academic seminar except that specific topics vary from section to section. (3)
- Basic study skills seminar—Offered for academically under-prepared students. The focus is on basic academic skills, such as grammar, note taking, and reading texts. (4)
- Hybrid—Has elements from two or more type of seminars (please specify) (5) _____
- Other (6) _____

Q10 How many credits do students enrolled in the campus-wide first-year seminar earn?

- 1 (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- Greater than 3 (6)
- Non-credit (4)
- Varies depending on type (5)

Q11 How is the campus-wide first-year seminar on your campus graded?

- Letter grade (1)
- Pass / Fail (2)
- Other (3) _____

Q12 What is the average class size of the campus-wide first-year seminar?

- fewer than 10 (1)
- 10–14 (2)
- 15–19 (3)
- 20–24 (4)
- 25–29 (5)
- 30 or greater (6)
- Unsure (7)

Q13 Who teaches the campus-wide first-year seminar? *Note: multiple selections allowed*

- Adjuncts (2)
- Full-time non-tenure-track faculty (3)
- Graduate students (5)
- Peer educators (undergraduate students) (4)
- Student affairs professionals or other staff (6)
- Tenure-track faculty (1)

Q14 For approximately how many years has a first-year seminar of any kind been offered on your campus?

- 0–5 Years (1)
- 6–10 Years (2)
- 11–15 Years (3)
- 16–20 Years (4)
- 20+ Years (5)
- Unsure (6)

Q15 Based on your current knowledge of first-year seminar programming on your campus, please indicate distinct student populations for whom first-year seminars are offered. *Note: multiple selections allowed*

- General student population (broader-campus offering required for the majority of enrolled students) (1)
- Honors students (5)
- Academically under-prepared students (2)
- First-generation students (4)
- International students (6)
- Learning community participants (7)
- Pre-professional students (e.g., pre-law, pre-med) (8)
- Provisionally admitted students (9)
- Student athletes (10)
- Students enrolled in developmental / remedial courses (11)
- Students participating in dual-enrollment programs (12)
- Students residing within a particular residence hall (13)
- Students with specific majors or in specific schools (14)
- Transfer students (15)
- TRIO participants (16)
- Undeclared students (17)
- Other (please specify) (18) _____

** If Honors students Is Not Selected, Then Skip To End of Survey*

Section 2: Honors Program Questions

Q16 Does your honors program offer its own first-year seminar course?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- No, but we plan to implement an honors first-year seminar course (3)

Q17 Is the honors first-year seminar course mandatory?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q18 Which of the following best describes the honors first-year seminar?

- Extended orientation seminar—Sometimes called freshman orientation, college survival, college transition, or student success course. Content often includes introduction to campus resources, time management, academic and career planning, learning strategies, and an introduction to student development issues. (1)
- Academic seminar with generally uniform academic content across sections—May be an interdisciplinary or theme-oriented course, sometimes part of a general education requirement. Primary focus is on academic theme or discipline, but will often include academic skills components, such as critical thinking and expository writing. (2)
- Academic seminar on various topics—Similar to previously mentioned academic seminar except that specific topics vary from section to section. (3)
- Basic study skills seminar—Offered for academically under-prepared students. The focus is on basic academic skills, such as grammar, note taking, and reading texts. (4)
- Hybrid—Has elements from two or more type of seminars (please describe the hybrid first-year seminar). (5) _____
- Other (6) _____

Q19 What is the average size of the individual honors first-year seminar at your institution?

- fewer than 10 (1)
- 10–14 (2)
- 15–19 (3)
- 20–25 (4)

- 25–29 (5)
- 30 or greater (6)

Q20 How many credits do students enrolled in the honors first-year seminar earn?

- 1 (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)
- Greater than 3 (6)
- Non-credit (4)
- Varies depending on type (5)

Q21 How is the honors first-year seminar graded?

- Letter grade (1)
- Pass / Fail (2)
- Other (3) _____

Q22 Who teaches the honors first-year seminar? note: multiple selections are allowed

- Adjuncts (2)
- Full-time non-tenure-track faculty (3)
- Graduate students (5)
- Peer educators (undergraduate students) (4)
- Student affairs professionals or other staff (6)
- Tenure-track faculty (1)

Q23 Approximately how many years has a first-year seminar been offered through the honors program?

- 0–5 Years (1)
- 6–10 Years (2)
- 11–15 Years (3)
- 16–20 Years (4)
- 20+ Years (5)

Q24 What resources does the honors program first-year seminar share with the broader-campus first-year seminar and, if relevant, its institutional home (e.g. an office of the first year or academic experience)? *Note: multiple selections are allowed*

- Administrative support (4)
- Curricular (2)
- Faculty (3)

- Faculty training (9)
- Financial (1)
- Peer educator training (5)
- No significant sharing exists between the two seminars (6)
- Other (8) _____

Q25 Please select items from the list below that reflect important aspects of the honors first-year seminar's broader curricular and pedagogical structures. *Note: multiple selections are allowed*

- Assignments that encourage student collaboration
- Curricular link with another course
- Discussion-based elements
- Emphasis on experiential learning
- Engagement with campus common reading experience
- Individual advising and mentoring
- Lecture-based elements
- Link to honors living-learning community
- Peer-educator involvement
- Team teaching
- Other _____

Q26 The list below contains the curricular and pedagogical structures you selected in the previous question. Please select the three items that you consider most fundamental to the honors first-year seminar.

** Selections made from Q25 included here*

Q27 Please select items from the list below that reflect important campus resources and offices to which students enrolled in the honors first-year seminar are exposed. *Note: multiple selections are allowed*

- Library resources
- Office or resource offering psychological services counseling
- Office or resource overseeing career counseling and professional development
- Office or resource overseeing community engagement opportunities
- Office or resource overseeing sexual misconduct issues and victim services
- Office or resource overseeing study abroad and international education opportunities

- Office or resource promoting student learning (tutoring, academic skills development)
- Office or resource related to applications to nationally competitive awards and fellowships
- Office or resource related to campus safety
- Office or resource related to diversity training and awareness and multicultural student programs
- Office or resource related to promoting undergraduate research opportunities
- Student activities board
- Student government association
- Other _____

Q28 The list below contains the campus resources and offices you selected in the previous question. Please select the three items that you consider most fundamental to the honors first-year seminar.

** Selections made from Q27 included here*

Q29 Please select items from the list below that reflect important student-development emphases or program objectives for the first-year seminar:

Note: multiple selections are allowed

- Academic skills
- Career exploration
- College retention
- Community engagement / public service
- Critical thinking
- Disciplinary exposure
- Diversity training
- E-portfolio creation
- Health, wellness, and safety
- Honors retention
- Information literacy
- Leadership
- Reflective engagement and self-exploration
- Negotiating college transition
- Opportunities for campus involvement
- Portfolio creation (collection of professional documents such as resume, personal essay, academic artifacts, etc.).
- Student-faculty interaction

- Strategic academic and extracurricular planning
- Understanding of the liberal arts
- Other _____

- Q30 The list below contains the student development emphases or program objectives you selected in the previous question. Please select the three items that you consider most fundamental to the honors first-year seminar.
- Q31 What motivated the creation of a distinct honors first-year seminar course at your Institution? You might note, among other considerations, course-load concerns, issues of flexibility, a focus on resources or high-impact learning experiences of particular relevance to honors students, a lack of a campus-wide first-year seminar, or the importance of the honors first-year seminar to the honors cohort or living-learning experience.
- Q32 If available, please include a link to relevant information on the web about your program's first-year seminar course:
- Q33 If you would like the honors first-year seminar at your institution to be profiled in more detail as a best practice, please include your contact name and email below so we can follow up to ask a few additional questions and collect relevant supplementary materials (syllabus, course objectives, etc.).

