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The Impact of Honors on the Campus Community

LARRY RICE, PRESIDENT

Rogers State University

HONORS DIRECTOR: JIM FORD

The development of an honors program at Rogers State University a decade ago brought about significant positive changes to our campus, where more than three-quarters of our students are the first in their families to attend college. Throughout the years, these young scholars have elevated academic discourse across campus and delivered an impact felt well beyond their honors classrooms.

As we consider how an honors program has benefited our university, it is important to provide some context to our unique history. Rogers State University holds the distinction of being Oklahoma's newest regional institution of higher education, but it has roots that go back to shortly after Oklahoma's statehood. For most of our history, we operated as the Oklahoma Military Academy, with an on-campus high school and junior college. In the early 1970s, the military school became a community college that operated for more than a quarter-century. From that community college, the Oklahoma

Legislature in 1999 created Rogers State University to address unmet educational needs for the state's second largest metropolitan area.

Our service area includes some of the poorest communities in a state where one in six people live below the poverty line. Even with one of the nation's lowest in-state tuition rates, 84% of our students require some form of financial aid to attend college. We also find that the majority of our students are not fully prepared for college, with more than 55% requiring some level of remediation in English, math, reading, and/or science.

Our campus leadership soon determined that adding an honors program would be crucial to our growth as a regional four-year university. The creation of the RSU Honors Program in fall 2005 served purposes both practical and idealistic. With its full scholarship that included room and board, it provided an enrollment incentive to attract accomplished students, while improving the quality of our academic enterprise through the addition of some of Oklahoma's best and brightest students.

Quite frankly, the move allowed RSU to attract outstanding students who might not have otherwise given a second look at a regional university that had recently transitioned from a community college just five years earlier. Further, the generous scholarship package opened doors for many students who had academic credentials to attend larger or more established schools but nevertheless chose to attend RSU. About 90% of our honors program students are from Oklahoma, with most living a short drive from our main campus in Claremore.

The RSU Honors Program was built on the high-impact educational practices developed by George Kuh, the founding director for the National Survey of Student Engagement. Built on the foundation of the honors program's learning community, the program also includes enriching activities like service learning, internships, and study-at-large (study abroad). Most RSU bachelor's degree programs include an intensive senior capstone project, which is a recommended practice from NSSE. These features, when taken in combination, help broaden student perspectives and strengthen the academic experience.

The honors program was designed around learning communities of academic high-achievers enrolled in a small number of designated honors courses. Students in the RSU Honors Program typically take about a third of their classes within the program, with the majority of their studies taking place in classes where they mingle with the entire student population. Soon

after the honors program launched, longtime faculty noted that honors students helped spark more in-depth conversations and elevated discussion among students of all levels.

In its honors curriculum, RSU eschews traditional lecture classes. As a result, the development of the curriculum is complex, yet we have found that both faculty and students enjoy a richer classroom experience as a result of the active learning styles adopted in our honors classrooms. As the program gained traction, an increasing number of our faculty volunteered to teach honors courses and reported experimenting with how they approached teaching the subject matter. As a result, many faculty members have been able to refine their curriculum in traditional classes based on the outcomes from teaching a related honors course.

The implementation of service learning has been a growing trend among honors programs nationwide and has been a feature of the honors program since its inception. We require our honors students to complete at least twenty-five hours of volunteer service each semester, and we find that many of our honors students go beyond the minimum requirement, which should not be a surprise for those who have worked closely with high-achieving students. The addition of service learning activities has opened the lens with which students view their communities and fulfills our institutional mission to prepare students for service in a diverse society.

We have had several entering students who were academically advanced but had led relatively sheltered existences, never traveling far beyond their small Oklahoma hometowns. As these students matured in the honors program, their confidence increased, and they explored new opportunities that stretched their boundaries, including traveling overseas to participate in RSU's study-at-large opportunities. We have witnessed the transformation of students who were apprehensive at the beginning of their study-at-large session but then returned from the experience eager to participate in another travel program.

Although I have concentrated on the benefits of our honors program, I would also like to take the opportunity to mention our President's Leadership Class, a four-year scholarship program designed to develop student leaders. The RSU Honors Program and the President's Leadership Class were established during the same period. Through the past decade, the two academic enrichment programs have worked in unison to attract a thriving group of academically advanced students with leadership skills. In fact, some students

have participated in both programs; this year six students are members of both programs, which together serve as flagship programs that cultivate academic talents within a generation that needs new leaders.

Like most universities, Rogers State University continues to develop well-rounded graduates who are capable of independent, critical thinking while being actively engaged within their communities. While each of our academic programs seeks to deliver us to that point, I believe that the RSU Honors Program deserves special recognition for increasing student quality at a critical juncture in a young university's history. I look forward to seeing what the next ten years of this remarkable program will bring to the university and to our state.

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