

Program Review Evaluation of the Honors Program

Weber State University

I. Introduction

On Friday, October 24, 2014, the Program Review Team reviewed the Honors Program at Weber State University. After receiving a thoughtful and comprehensive five-year program review self-study, the Review Team met with a wide variety of Honors Program stakeholders. Those interviewed are listed in Appendix A. Dr. Richard Badenhausen (Professor and Honors Director at Westminster College), Dr. Dan Bedford (Professor, WSU Department of Geography), and Dr. Brad Carroll (Professor, WSU Department of Physics).

Following its 2009 Program Review, the Honors Program focused on six goals:

1. Offering well taught, intellectually stimulating classes to a range of students;
2. Integrating Honors more fully into the Weber community, especially through Departmental Honors;
3. Rigorously assessing the program and the honors learning outcomes;
4. Providing a variety of enriching experiences for Honors students outside of the classroom, including leadership, scholarship, and community service opportunities;
5. Maintaining the Honors Center as a safe, comfortable, and useful space for Honors students;
6. Pursuing and maintaining donor money to support Honors activities.

As we, the members of the Review Team, conducted our interviews, several themes emerged that reflected the Honors Program's efforts to achieve these goals. Each of these themes will be discussed. For each theme we have made

recommendations (things that should be done) and pointed out opportunities (things that could be done) for furthering the Honors Program's goals.

We begin with the obvious: the Honors Program is an excellent program with many strengths. It has a comprehensive mission statement that is supported by its goals. It offers diverse interesting and challenging interdisciplinary classes at all levels, and provides opportunities for student leadership, scholarship, and community service. It supports its students with comprehensive advising, and recruits excellent faculty to teach its courses. Honors alumni speak well of the Honors Program and of the impact it has had on their lives. We commend Dr. Mike Vaughn, WSU's Provost, and Dr. Ryan Thomas, Associate Provost and Dean of Undergraduate Studies, for their high level of support for the Honors Program.

II. Theme: Honors Director, Staff, Faculty, and Facilities

The foundation for its strength is the Honor Program's Director, staff, and faculty. These people are dynamic, engaged, committed, student-centered, and devoted to the success of the Honors Program.

We commend Dr. Judy Elsley for being extremely effective in her role as Director of the Honors Program. She is actively involved in every aspect of the program, and is an effective and powerful advocate for the Honors Program. She is devoted to the idea that the Honors Programs should serve the entire university community. Judy has regularly scheduled meetings with the Honors Faculty Advisory Board to ensure that the program is responsive to the needs of its students. She recruits high-quality faculty, drawing from both established faculty members and new faculty who have been here at least two years. Judy has high expectations for Honors instructors. She carefully assesses the performance of the Honors faculty using student questionnaires and comments,

and uses this information to maintain the high quality of Honors instruction at all levels. She is held in high regard by the Honors staff, faculty, and students. The Honors faculty know that if they require something for their classes to succeed, Judy will make it happen.

Dr. Christy Call serves in the relatively new position of Director of Departmental Honors, and we commend her for her effectiveness in expanding the participation in Departmental Honors at WSU. She meets with department chairs in support of the Departmental Honors program. Christy mentioned the challenges of communicating across campus, and has plans to obtain an “Honors app” that will provide a virtual meeting place where Honors stakeholders can have conversations and share documents.

The Honors staff forms the heart of the Honors Program; we commend them all for their performance and their devotion to the Honors Program. Marilyn Diamond, the Honors Advisor, provides a high level of advisement and personal support for all Honors students, who refer to her as their “college mom.” Marilyn has a positive impact on every aspect of the Honors Program. Although Aubrey Jenkins Lord, the Honors Office Manager, is relatively new to the Honors Program, she has learned quickly. Audrey handles the budget and maintains the Honors Center as an attractive place for students to congregate. She and Marilyn plan the Honors annual Nye banquet and other events, such as the valuable “Kickoff Picnic” at the beginning of the academic year. Aubrey supplies the software expertise for the Honors Program. She put together the new Honors website, which is handsome and much easier to navigate. The website contains attractive graphics and the Honors program site comes up first on a search of “Honors” and “Honors Program” in the university’s search box. Chris Fink, the Honors office assistant, does a bit of everything and, as a peer to the Honors students, can speak with them on their level. The three Honors staff

members coordinate and work together effectively. The Honors faculty know they can rely on the Honors staff to solve problems and otherwise support them.

Recommendation: The Honors Director and staff should pursue ways of institutionalizing Marilyn's high-impact practices so they may continue to benefit the Honors Program in the years to come.

The Honors Director and staff are commended for their efforts in obtaining data that will allow them to track the performance of the program and its students, thus enabling better planning and resource management. Judy in particular is to be commended in persuading the Banner programmers to create the code necessary to obtain this data.

The Honors Center and classroom offer an attractive and well-equipped setting where Honors student can learn, study, be advised, and interact with each other and with the Honors Director and staff. Students appreciate the availability of a welcoming place to study, use the computers and the kitchen area, and relax.

The Honors Student Advisory Board is to be commended for its hard work and creative efforts. The board creates and plans special events and service learning opportunities in coordination with the Honors staff. They are thoughtful and understand the challenge of communicating and recruiting Honors students at a commuter campus with a large number of non-traditional students. They suggested that term limits might be applied to the board members so more students might be involved in the Student Advisory Board. In speaking with other Honors students, they reported the suggestion that the Honors Center remain open later to better serve students. They also wished there were more opportunities for travel, such as the field trips to San Francisco.

Opportunity: Working with the Honors Student Advisory Board, the Director and staff should investigate the possibility of extending the Honors Center's hours by, for example, giving Honors students their own code for the Center's door, or by hiring a work/study student to be present during the late afternoon and evening hours. While security will inevitably be a concern when allowing student access to the Honors Center after hours, individual access codes allow comings and goings to be tracked precisely, thus somewhat allaying such concerns.

III. Theme: Departmental and University Honors

Everyone we interviewed noted the steady increase in the number of Departmental Honors students and the slow attrition of those in University Honors. While all were pleased with the increased integration of the Honors Program with the academic departments through Departmental Honors, the view that University Honors should be allowed to wither was held only by a minority. Students noted their perception that University Honors was a valuable addition to their diploma and transcript, and allowed them to continue their Honors experience throughout their WSU career. Others expressed their concern that, because most departments do not require an Honors course for Departmental Honors, many students will miss the quintessential Honors experience of taking diverse interdisciplinary courses. They also wondered what would happen to the upper-division Honors courses, and worried that Honors would offer only lower-division courses. However, Ryan Thomas pointed out that the two hundred Aletheia students, who are required to take an Honors course every year, would provide enough students to fill the upper-division Honors courses.

Recommendation: The Review Team believes the two options of Departmental and University Honors are complementary, with Departmental Honors serving to lift the students and engage them so they may then enroll in

University Honors. The two options of Departmental Honors work in concert, and both should be maintained.

Recommendation: The Honors Program should continue working to expand the participation in Departmental Honors to more departments, and to encourage all departments to include in its Department Honors contract a requirement that students take at least some of their general education courses within the Honors Program. The College of Business and Economics, which currently has no departments offering Departmental Honors, is especially ripe for cultivation, as two recent hires in the College (one faculty, one administrative staff) are alumni of the WSU Honors Program.

IV. Theme: Aletheia Club Students

Since Fall 2012, the Aletheia Club (for the recipients of Presidential Scholarships) has required its members to enroll in one Honors course per year. The addition of some 200 Aletheia members has had a significant impact on Honors courses. Many people commented on the larger class sizes, as expected when an average of 100 additional students per semester are enrolled in Honors courses. Ryan Thomas mentioned that the level of Honors support has risen to accommodate this increase in numbers. During our conversations, a number of collateral issues arose. The Aletheia Club requires a cumulative 3.75 GPA. Because the average GPA varies markedly from college to college, this places greater pressure on some Aletheia Club students than others. Some made the argument that high expectations lead to high performance. Indeed, faculty noted that students have become more serious in their Honors studies. However, we heard comments that students are also more grade-conscious and more averse to risk-taking, which runs counter to the ideal that an Honors course should involve exploration without fear. Furthermore, the requirement of a 3.75 GPA may unduly impact under-represented groups and first-generation college students

who are particularly challenged during their first semesters in higher education, and could thus unintentionally exclude these students from the Aletheia pipeline into Honors. While flexibility in assessing the consequences of dropping below a 3.75 GPA was mentioned, in the event of unusual extenuating circumstances, it was not clear that such flexibility would necessarily apply to under-represented or first-generation college students, for whom the entire first year of college might be unusual. Honors advisors and faculty can help mitigate any unintentionally adverse impacts on the Aletheia Club students.

Recommendation: The Honors Director and staff should monitor the path to completion of students from different cohorts who are Aletheia Club members, and use this data to advocate fine-tuning, if necessary, the Aletheia Club conditions and criteria. One possible solution would be to establish separate tiers of GPA requirements: a lower one for first-year students and then rising requirements after that.

Recommendation: As part of its usual conversations with Honors faculty and students, the Honors Director and staff should identify the impact of Aletheia Club students, and through advising of both students and faculty act to minimize any adverse impacts.

V. **Theme: Communication, Internal and External**

The issue of effective communication arose frequently as the Review Team conducted its interviews. The Honors Program is commended for its extensive communication within its program with students, faculty, and donors. The Honors faculty attend a luncheon before the semester they teach to become oriented to the program and to ask questions and share advice. The Honors faculty we interviewed suggested that an additional informal meeting, mid-semester, would be helpful.

The Honors website is effective in reaching the wider community. Announcements of talks and other activities are advertised on the website and on posters that are distributed across campus. Alumni can “Share their Story” under the Alumni tab on the Honors website; they also reported they would like to maintain meaningful contact (“not a reunion”) with the program, such as being invited to participate in book groups and other activities. Word-of-mouth publicity, as students share their Honors experiences, is invaluable. However, many of the groups we interviewed acknowledged that communicating with external groups was challenging, especially on a commuter campus with many non-traditional students, and could be improved.

Recommendation: The Review Team believes that more effective use of technology and social media should be made to bring the Honors Program to the attention of its external audience. The Honors Program should establish its own Facebook page, administered jointly by the Office Manager and by one or two students on the Student Advisory Board. The administrators can view the Facebook pages of other departments and student groups for ideas on how best to proceed. Privacy settings can be managed to ensure the quality of the Honors Facebook page.

Recommendation: The Honors Program should include its Departmental Honors advisors on the list of departmental advisors that is made available to students.

Opportunity: The Honors Program should investigate the possibility of establishing a permanent presence in a high-traffic area. For example, a dedicated TV monitor in the Union building could continuously show videos that advertise the Honors Program’s upcoming activities and events.

Opportunity: The Honors Program should regularly communicate with and cultivate a relationship with the Ogden Standard-Examiner's education editor (currently Becky Wright).

Opportunity: The Honors Student Advisory Council should look into collaborating with other student groups across campus.

Opportunity: A suggestion was made to start a "The Prof Picks the Flick" activity. A professor picks a movie that is available on DVD, and Honors students are invited to watch the movie and stay afterward for a 30-minute discussion period.

VI. Theme: Recruitment

The Review Team commends Dr. Bruce Bowen, Associate Provost for Enrollment Services, for his office's efforts on behalf of the Honors Program. The Honors Program is prominently featured in the brochures and pamphlets provided for prospective students, and the location of the Honors Program is pointed out on campus tours. Prospective students are given an "interest card" which lists the Honors Program. The Recruitment Office makes 136 visits per year to high schools; the Honors Program is always mentioned during a visit. The Aletheia scholarships, which cover full tuition costs (among other things), serve as valuable recruiting tools to the Honors Program by requiring that recipients take at least one Honors class each year.

VII. Theme: Resources

We have already commended the Provost for his generous support for the Honors Program. At present, the Honors Program has a budget that is adequate for its needs, with additional monies supplied by the Provost as the number of Aletheia

students has increased. However, as stated in NCHC's "Basic Characteristics of a fully Developed Honors Program," the Honors Program should ensure that "adequate infrastructure resources, including an appropriate budget as well as appropriate faculty, staff, and administrative support when necessary, are allocated to honors so that the program avoids dependence on the good will and energy of particular faculty members or administrators for survival."

Recommendation: The Honors Director should work with the Provost and others to provide the Honors Program with adequate funding through regular increases to its budget, rather than relying on the largesse of university administrators, especially in light of the significant growth of the program in recent years (over 200% increase in number of students over a four-year period).

The Honors program receives generous donations and grants from the Ralph Nye Foundation and the Eccles Foundation in support of its activities. Judy is to be commended for utilizing this money thoughtfully to obtain the maximum benefit for the program and for her careful follow-up with donors to communicate the manner in which those contributions have contributed to student learning (an observation echoed by a representative from the Advancement Office). When the Review Team met with Kyle Braithwaite, the development director who works with Honors, he seemed disconnected from the Honors Program. He was unable to verbalize what was special about the Honors Program, and would be unlikely to excite a potential donor about the possibility about donating to the program. Neither could he name dollar amounts or fundraising goals for the Honors Program.

Recommendation: Kyle should be included in Honors planning and other activities to become better acquainted with the program. An Honors student could possibly be identified to work in his office and assist in fundraising efforts.

This might help the Development staff get a better feel for Honors and have specific individual Honors stories to tell when meeting with donors.

Recommendation: The Honors Director and staff should create a prioritized list for donors, listing a range of dollar amounts and a number of itemized uses for those funds. One example of a “big-ticket item” might be a several-million-dollar donation to support and pay for a Study Abroad trip every year for select Honors students.

Opportunity: All donors to the Honors Program should be invited to the Nye Banquet and be recognized for their generosity at the event.

Opportunity: Given the reality of tight resources, the Honors Program is to be commended for its creative approach to staffing, in particular its shared position with the Physics Dept. Although these sorts of arrangements are tricky to establish, the institution should be supportive of Honors if it decides in the future that such hybrid positions serve the dual interests of Honors and a disciplinary department. At the recent NCHC conference in Denver, there was a well-attended session devoted to this very form of staffing, suggesting that programs across the country are pursuing this strategy.

VIII. Theme: Assessment

The Honors Program is commended for its assessment efforts. Christy Call attended a three-day NCHC workshop devoted to assessment this summer and the speed with which she is integrating some of those new ideas into the Honors curriculum is remarkable. The program has developed assessment spreadsheets for each General Education class that mesh Honors outcomes with discipline-specific, university-wide learning outcomes. The Honors faculty we interviewed found this grid useful, but noted that it was sometimes problematic

to mesh the Honors requirements with the Gen Ed requirements of certain disciplines. The Review Team agrees with the faculty member who pointed out the importance of participating in this university-wide assessment project: this is how the Honors program interfaces with the academic departments. This assessment validates Honors by holding it accountable to the same standards as departments.

In addition, the Honors program administers three paper assessments at the end of each Honors class. Two of these provide valuable student feedback on the particular Honors course and on the Honors program. The third invites faculty feedback on their Honors experience that semester. The Honors faculty stated that the student comments provided by the paper assessment were the most valuable information they receive for assessment purposes and one staff member commended Judy for the care with which she reads and considers student comments on Honors classes.

Recommendation: The Honors Program should continue refining its assessment tools and strategies better to suit its needs and those of its faculty and students.

Opportunity: Because the program has not yet “closed the loop” with its assessment feedback, it might be worth gathering the Honors faculty together once a year to discuss a targeted issue like “How to Use Student Feedback to Improve Honors Classes.” The faculty with which we spoke seemed amenable to the idea of meeting on occasion to discuss Honors-related matters.

IX. Conclusion

The Honors Program at Weber State University is impressive. In fact, its staff believe that Honors is in its best shape ever at the University. It offers diverse

interesting and challenging interdisciplinary classes at all levels that are taught by carefully recruited faculty, and provides opportunities for student leadership, scholarship, and community service. Honors students are advised well, and the program is assessed in a meaningful way. This report attests to the valuable contribution of the Honors Program to the entire Weber State University community.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Richard Badenhausen" followed by a horizontal line.

Dr. Richard Badenhausen

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "D. Bedford".

Dr. Dan Bedford

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bradley M. Carroll".

Dr. Brad Carroll

APPENDIX A

FIVE-YEAR REVIEW TEAM DAY

Honors Director	Dr. Judy Elsley
Director of Departmental Honors	Christy Call
Honors staff	Marilyn Diamond, Honors Advisor Aubrey Jenkins Lord, Departmental Honors Manager Chris Fink, Office Assistant
University Advancement/ Development	Kyle Braithwaite, Development Director/Annual Fund & Academic Affairs
Honors Student Advisory Board	Corbin Standley, HASB President Quade Standley Samantha Edmunds Clarence “Boomer” Kelley, Honors/BIS Senator
Honors students	Joseph Favero Isaac Marshall JaCoby Marston Tia Walker Hailey Wright
Honors faculty	Toni Asay, English Carl Porter, English/Director of Student Support Dr. Sue Harley, Botany Erik Stern, Performing Arts (Dance) Catherine Zublin, Performing Arts (Theatre)
Student Recruitment	Dr. Bruce Bowen, Associate Provost for Enrollment Services
Honors Program supervisor	Dr. Ryan Thomas, Associate Provost & Dean of Undergraduate Studies
Honors alumni	Dr. Bryant Thompson Elizabeth Memmott Hill Ashley Remkes