



WEBER STATE UNIVERSITY

Honors Program

HONORS PROGRAM FIVE-YEAR REVIEW, 2019-20 AND 2020-21

PROGRAM RESPONSE TO REVIEW REPORT

Prepared by Daniel Bedford, Program Director, January 6th-8th, 2021

Background and acknowledgements

The Honors Program review process was unusually long drawn out, due to the coronavirus pandemic which forced the closure of campus in the middle of spring semester 2020. Thus, the original review year of 2019-20 telescoped into 2020-21, as follows. The program's self-study report was prepared during fall semester 2019, with a review team site visit scheduled for late spring semester 2020. The site visit was postponed until fall semester 2020 (October 1st), and was held entirely virtually, over Zoom. The review team consisted of three distinguished WSU faculty members (Hal Crimmel, Marjukka Ollilainen, and Andrea Easter-Pilcher) and two highly accomplished external members (Richard Badenhausen, Dean of the Honors College at Westminster College and former President of the National Collegiate Honors Council, and Kate McPherson, director of the Honors Program at Utah Valley University).

I am enormously grateful to all members of the review team for their diligence, their careful scrutiny of the self-study report and of the program itself during the site visit, and their thoughtful and helpful recommendations made in the review report. Not only did the review team invest time ahead of the site visit both in reading the self-study and in meeting as a group to prepare, but the site visit itself consisted of a long day entirely on Zoom. Putting the reviewers through such an ordeal comes close to cruel and unusual punishment, and their willingness to go through it is testament to their dedication to Honors writ large, and to Weber State as an institution. It is also important to acknowledge the extremely hard work, professionalism, organizational skills, and dedication of the Honors team, specifically Megan Moulding, Rebekah Cumpsty, Mar Muster and, for 2019-20, Tia Nero, in compiling data for the self-study, and organizing and managing the Zoom version of the site visit. Without these exceptional individuals, it is hard to imagine how the site visit could have happened, let alone run as smoothly as it did.

Overall Response

In general, the review report was gratifyingly complimentary of the progress made by the Honors Program since the previous review five years ago. Additionally, however, the reviewers identified key structural challenges, in the form of the relationship between the Honors Program and Presidential Scholarship students. In a nutshell, decisions made 10-15 years ago set Honors on the course to its current situation: overwhelmed by far more students, required to take Honors classes and other services that Honors is obligated to provide, than the program has resources to support. This flood of students who are required to take Honors classes prevents students from enrolling who might have a genuine desire to take these classes, thus stifling diversity and bringing completion rates for Honors requirements to very low levels. While some Presidential Scholars do decide to become involved with Honors, and some of our best students and student leaders have been and are Presidential Scholars, overall, this group of students knows what they want from their time at Weber State University, and Honors classes are a distraction. This perspective was laid out in the program self-study, and confirmed by the reviewers.

The review report made 18 distinct recommendations, organized into five themes. Many of the recommendations made by the reviewers are actually out of the hands of the Honors Program alone. Instead, they raise questions for the Provost's Office, such as whether and how to restructure the relationship Honors and Presidential Scholars, straightening out the instructional wages budget, and to what extent and for what specific purposes additional staff can be hired. However, some recommendations are at the scale of the Honors Program alone. The following sections address each recommendation in turn, indicating for each one whether it is within Honors's power to pursue, and if it is, whether to pursue it, and the specifics of doing so.

Some (though not all) of the larger structural questions have already been answered. Following the delivery of the review report in mid-November, I participated in several meetings with Provost Ravi Krovi, and Associate Provosts Brenda Kowalewski and Bruce Bowen. The path forward, as identified in those meetings, is as follows. Requirements for Presidential Scholars will be reduced to three credit hours of Honors classes to be taken in the first year. Two other requirements-- book discussions, community service-- will either be folded into the Honors class requirement (book discussions will be offered as 1-credit Honors classes) or eliminated. These changes to scholarship requirements will be effective for AY 2021-22. The Aletheia Club, which used to serve as the home for the Honors/book/service requirements, will be phased out, and eliminated entirely by the end of AY 2021-22. These changes will allow the Honors Program to define and pursue a new vision for Honors at Weber State University, one that emphasizes a

more holistic view of what an Honors student can be, and which is more in keeping both with Weber State's nature as an open enrollment institution, and with cutting edge trends in Honors programs and colleges nationally. The Provost has tasked Honors with being ready for a new kind of Honors student by fall semester 2021. Although the Provost's Office is supporting this work with additional course releases for the director and assistant director, moving forward with these plans will very likely require additional resources, as noted in specific recommendations below. Two critically important areas are:

- **Expanding the Honors team to include a staff member with specific responsibility for diversity, equity and inclusion work.**
- **Developing and running an Honors Teaching Fellows program,** to bring more consistency and stability to the Honors course offerings from one semester to the next.

These two proposed expansions stem from specific recommendations made in the review report. Examination of each recommendation in turn now follows.

Reviewer recommendations by theme

Honors Staffing, Resources, & Budget

The recommendations here are principally for the Provost's office, as they are based mainly on the recognition that the Honors Program is significantly under-resourced relative to workload.

Recommendation 1: *"Hire an Aletheia Club/Phi Kappa Phi coordinator to manage the many demands of these two programs, including staging the collateral Aletheia programming like book discussions and banquets and the PKP chapter administrative oversight activities."*

Response: Honors strongly supports this recommendation. Although the Aletheia Club is being phased out and the requirements of Presidential Scholars radically streamlined, if the extraordinary growth in Presidential Scholar numbers continues (as it has for the last 5-6 years), Honors staff will be overwhelmed, again. Furthermore, the WSU chapter of Phi Kappa Phi continues to grow, and many of the administrative tasks associated with managing the chapter cannot simply be handed off to volunteer time from faculty. This approach was tried for a few years up until fall 2016, and the chapter stagnated. Dedicated administrative staff support is necessary for the chapter to continue thriving, with all of its associated benefits to students (notably chapter scholarship awards and national fellowships for pursuit of graduate study).

Recommendation 2: *"Fund one or two new faculty lines in Honors, perhaps as shared lines in partnership with other fast growing programs that have an interdisciplinary orientation, a precedent already established in the College of*

Science and College of Social and Behavioral Science. Ideally, one of those hires would have (in addition to their teaching obligations in honors) responsibility for diversity, equity, inclusion programming and curriculum, using the model currently in place where the new Assistant Director of Honors is a faculty member who also has administrative responsibilities in the area of assessment coordination."

Response: Honors strongly supports this recommendation. This is an exciting suggestion. The establishment of an Honors Teaching Fellows program, for example, with faculty brought half time into Honors, for limited periods (say three years), would bring stability to the course offerings, and strengthen Honors staffing on key issues such as diversity, equity and inclusion.

Recommendation 3: "Create more transparency around instructional costs by folding those actual expenses in the honors budget."

Response: Honors strongly supports this recommendation. At present, the Honors instructional wages budget bears little resemblance to reality. While this might seem to be an enviable position for an academic program, what happens when the money runs out or institutional priorities change? A realistic, set instructional wages budget would be most welcome.

Recommendation 4: "Fund a summer stipend for the Assistant Director of Honors."

Response: Honors strongly supports this recommendation. The Assistant Director position includes responsibility for promoting and mentoring applicants to national and prestigious fellowships and scholarships (such as the Fulbright Program). This task in particular requires significant work during the summer.

Recruitment, Admissions, Scholarships

Recommendation 5: "Reduce the course enrollment pressures of the Presidential Scholarship program by either 1) decoupling the scholarship program and honors entirely or 2) reducing and targeting the honors course requirement for Presidential Scholarship students to a single first-year seminar experience (FYS) of the sort described below in Theme VI: Curriculum."

Response: There is clear recognition within the Provost's Office that Presidential Scholar numbers have simply grown too large for the status quo to be maintained. As noted earlier, this issue will be addressed starting fall 2021, along the lines of the reviewers' option 2. For Presidential Scholars now being recruited, the Honors requirement has been scaled back to just three credit hours of Honors classes during the first year. Although a common First-Year Seminar experience for Presidential Scholars sounds desirable, again, sheer numbers make this impractical. In fall 2020, around 230 new Presidential Scholars joined the university. For Honors to maintain the small class sizes that are a hallmark of the Honors experience, 15-

16 sections of the suggested FYS would need to be offered per year, not accounting for additional growth of Presidential Scholars (which seems unrealistic). If the Presidential Scholar numbers continue to grow as they have done for the last 5-6 years, scaling back the Honors requirement can only be a temporary solution. A more complete decoupling may be necessary in the near future.

Recommendation 6: *"To balance out the reduction of Presidential Scholarship students in honors classes that would inevitably occur with the decoupling approach or reduction of course requirements, **increase outreach and application pathways to honors to a wider range of students at Weber** both in the first-year application process (a simple check-box demonstrating an expression of interest in honors on the first-year application for all students can initiate communications flow to such students) and for current students at Weber who might have missed the honors opportunity when applying initially."*

Response: This has always been a goal of the Honors team, with outreach efforts to First-Year Experience classes, tabling at events, reaching out to students who express interest in Honors at orientation, and numerous other approaches. We have been unwilling, and unable, to do as much as we wanted, because it struck us as disingenuous to promote Honors classes when it was evident that there was little or no room for students who were not Presidential Scholars. Spring semester 2021 will be a crucial time for developing a communications campaign for the entire university regarding a new vision for the Honors Program.

Recommendation 7: *"**Rethink the relationship between the Aletheia Club and the Presidential Scholarship. Is a separate club necessary, especially one with a confusing, elitist-sounding name which is perhaps not well-aligned with an open enrollment institution?**"*

Response: Honors strongly supports this recommendation. As noted earlier, the Aletheia Club is being phased out over the next academic year. According to Associate Provost Bruce Bowen, the name Aletheia Club will cease to appear in recruitment and promotional material from AY 2021-22 onwards.

Recommendation 8: *"**Increase outreach and recruitment of students historically underrepresented in higher education into the honors program through some of the strategies outlined in the recent NCHC position paper "Honors Enrollment Management: Toward a Theory and Practice of Inclusion."***

Response: Honors strongly supports this recommendation. Existing connections with the Center for Multicultural Excellence, Diversity Office, and Wildcat Scholars program (which began life as an Honors class) could be leveraged here, but new connections could be forged with the DreamWeber program as well. Serious thought will need to be invested in identifying other, less obvious paths

forward for increasing participation in Honors from historically underrepresented students. Spring semester 2021 presents an ideal opportunity for this.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Recommendation 9: *"Conduct a diversity climate survey of honors students to better understand the challenges and opportunities that currently exist for students from diverse backgrounds who are trying to navigate honors."*

Response: This is a good idea in principle, and has been utilized to good effect in the Westminster College Honors Program. Weber State's situation is somewhat different, not least because of the dominance of Presidential Scholars. A diversity climate survey will need to be tailored to our own specific circumstances. The feasibility of conducting such a survey will be explored during spring semester 2021.

Recommendation 10: *"Build a diversity strategic plan that charts out a five-year plan for reenvisioning honors—its practices, curriculum, and values—through the lens of diversity, equity, and inclusion."*

Response: Honors strongly supports this recommendation. We will need to draw on expertise from other areas of campus, but again, spring semester 2021 is the opportunity for crafting a diversity strategic plan.

Recommendation 11: *"Engage in this work with campus partners eager to help. The review team was gratified to spend time with Weber staff and faculty ready to collaborate with honors on DEI work and was especially impressed with the energy and vision of staff in the Multicultural Center, Development Office, and DreamWeber program who had creative ideas about partnering with honors."*

Response: As noted above, diversity work in Honors will require the support and advice of other units on campus. They have expertise and experience significantly beyond what we have by ourselves.

Recommendation 12: *"As mentioned above, the honors program requires additional staffing to support this work, as the current personnel already have a full list of responsibilities."*

Response: This is a critical element for moving Honors forward. We recognize that a global pandemic, and the budget cuts that have gone with it, is not an ideal time for hiring new staff. However, creative solutions to funding might be available. This will be important to explore in spring 2021.

Communication and Misconception around "Honors"

Recommendation 13: *"Enact some of the structural changes around scholarships and admissions mentioned above that will fundamentally*

change who has access to honors, which will help clear up some of the confusion.”

Response: As noted earlier, this is happening, effective fall 2021.

Recommendation 14: *“Conduct an internal communications campaign after those structural changes are enacted, so that current Weber students realize that honors is a possibility for them. Make sure to draw departmental faculty, advisors, and especially staff engaged in DEI work into this partnership.”*

Response: This will be a critical component of the work to reimagine Honors, starting spring 2021. It has been clear to the Honors team for several years that students carry misconceptions about Honors, and Honors staff have conducted research on the nature of “Honors identities” held (or not held) by students. As a somewhat slow learner, however, I have only recently realized that misconceptions about Honors are not only widespread among students, they are widespread among faculty, staff and administration as well. Serious thought, and serious work, will be required to change impressions that, for example, Honors is only for students with a high GPA, and that Honors classes inherently require more work.

Recommendation 15: *“Work with the Registrar, IT, Institutional Research, and Alumni Affairs to clear up any coding challenges around who is actually in honors and who has graduated from honors. There was continual confusion among most of the individuals involved in the review about numbers of students in honors and also identities of students graduating with honors—particularly departmental honors students—which makes it hard for honors staff to track students and difficult for the Development office to reach honors alums.”*

Response: This may be less of a concern than it appears. Tableau Dashboard has made tracking numbers much easier, and the deployment of an Honors app in the eWeber Portal (thanks to WSU’s Web Application Development team) makes it much easier to track numbers, and progress, of Departmental Honors students. We can be more careful to ensure that names of Honors graduates are sent to the Development Office at the end of each semester.

Curriculum

The Honors curriculum and set of requirements need a comprehensive re-examination to assess their suitability for (a) the ways in which WSU students engage with higher education in the 2020s and (b) a reimagined Honors Program, which breaks down stereotypes of who Honors students are, and appeals much more broadly across campus. The recommendations made in the review report are quite specific, and may or may not lie on the most appropriate path forward. It is clear, however, that the underlying issues that drive the recommendations are real and need to be addressed.

Recommendation 16: *"Given that honors offers 17 different courses within the general education curriculum (according to the director of the general education program) while many programs offer just 1-2 courses, **consider narrowing the breadth of different offerings, so as to lessen pressures around staffing, tracking, and assessment, among others. The program could reduce the number of different classes while increasing sections of like classes, which also might reduce student difficulty in getting into classes and offer honors an opportunity to better shape its identity around a common pedagogy and curricular approach.** This reduced number of classes (and increased number of sections across different times) might also help improve program completion rates."*

Response: Maintaining oversight of so many different classes has indeed been challenging, in particular with regard to assessment, both of student learning and of overall course quality. However, several recent developments have begun to show progress, notably introduction of a new course evaluation instrument for students at the end of spring 2020, and the hiring of a new position (Assistant Director) with responsibility for assessment, earlier that same semester. Reducing the number of classes in the catalog, as proposed in this recommendation, is a possibility, but will be pursued only after careful consideration, and only as a last resort. It is not immediately clear why fewer classes but more sections would be easier for students to get into, nor is it clear why it would be easier to staff these fewer classes with qualified instructors. Indeed, the breadth of available courses in Honors allows for a high degree of flexibility, making it possible to accommodate many exciting and innovative ideas for classes from faculty eager to teach them. While scaling back the number of classes is appealing, rather like tidying up one's house, it is a course of action not easily reversed.

Recommendation 17: *"Another option would be to **offer all first-year honors students a common First-Year Seminar experience**, which would provide many of the advantages mentioned above, as well as presenting opportunities for community building and retention work, work that might eventually have an effect on the very low program completion rates. One approach would be to create interdisciplinary "shell" courses that could be taught by faculty from many different disciplines. For example, a single class on "The Climate Crisis" could be offered (or team taught) by biologists, chemists, human geographers, data scientists, communication faculty, political scientists, etc. which gives the institution flexibility in staffing while still offering students a common experience. Such a FYS would also offer nice tie-ins to co-curricular programming like the scholarship book discussions, which seem to have become more robust over the past number of years. This "shell" model could also be applied across the entire honors curriculum. Because the program does not currently have any required courses, honors may want to consider making the FYS class required, as well as adding a parallel experience for transfer students, associate degree students, or those who join honors midstream."*

Response: This is an interesting suggestion, and one that Honors might take up, although there are multiple other ways to address the same issues. One possibility being entertained is to use the HNRS HU 1000 Construction of Knowledge class in the role of FYS suggested here, as the questions of what we know and how we know it can be applied to many different subjects. Alternatively, many Honors classes are variable title and several of them could potentially serve in the 'shell' role proposed here. Given that the Honors Program is on the cusp of a significant reinvention, careful consideration will be needed during spring 2021 of how best to promote stability, retention, and completion.

Further, the concerns raised in this recommendation can be extended to include a lack of a meaningful peer cohort group-- students do not move meaningfully together through a sequence of Honors classes. This has happened in large part because the overwhelming majority of students enrolled in Honors classes do not have an interest in completing the Honors requirements. They are Presidential Scholars who take whichever class fits with their schedule. Some students might select classes for other reasons, but scheduling appears to be the dominant one. This has completely disrupted a potential course sequence of 1000-, followed by 2000-, followed by 3000- and 4000-level classes. The potential for a meaningful course sequence does exist in the Honors course catalog at present, but it has been impossible to realize under current circumstances.

Recommendation 18: *"Consider steps that might bring more consistency and clarity to the departmental honors program by allowing honors more involvement in coordinating this curriculum and aligning the classes around a common pedagogy, curricular approach, outcomes, or some other feature. The current highly distributed nature of departmental honors leads to confusion (even among departmental chairs who oversee these programs) and uneven experiences: as noted in the Executive Summary, most departmental honors requirements do not require taking any honors courses. Because the population of students taking departmental honors is greater than that of the university honors and general honors populations combined, it is worth trying to unify these learning experiences a bit more and establish a clearer relationship with the honors program."*

Response: This has been a concern for several years. However, in the absence of resources to work on Departmental Honors, and in the presence of mounting pressures from several quarters (the explosive growth of the Aletheia Presidential Scholarship, increasing student numbers and engagement with Phi Kappa Phi, staff turnover, etc.), it simply has not been possible to take this on until very recently. With the addition of an Assistant Director position to the Honors team a year ago, we are now starting to build stronger relationships with Departmental Honors, which constitutes a first step towards greater involvement of the Honors Program with Departmental Honors, with a goal of greater consistency across departments.

This work has been hampered somewhat by the COVID pandemic, but we are making progress, and will continue to do so.

Conclusions and Major Action Items

The review process has highlighted a key issue at the core of Honors: the balance, or tension, between structure and control on one hand, and flexibility on the other. This tension is exemplified by questions raised and recommendations made regarding Departmental Honors and the Honors curriculum. At present, Honors follows a very loose structure, allowing for great flexibility on the part of individual departments (pertaining to Departmental Honors) and course instructors (pertaining to curriculum). This has benefits; but it is possible that the current high flexibility/low structure model is not optimal. This will be a major area for consideration during spring 2021.

The recommendations examined above have an appropriately strong emphasis on changing the current balance between staffing and workload. We are in the process of reducing workload by reducing the Honors requirements for Presidential Scholars, and phasing out the Aletheia Club. However, to fully realize the potential of the Honors Program to contribute to student success at WSU, additional staffing and faculty resources will be needed. Of the various recommendations made along these lines, two stand out:

- **Hiring a new staff member with a specific focus on diversity, equity and inclusion.** Breaking down long-standing barriers to participation in Honors by underrepresented students is not a trivial task. Efforts to increase diversity among student populations in elite universities and colleges have met with limited success and serve as testament to the challenges. If we are serious about this objective, meaningful resources must be devoted to it. Hiring a staff member with appropriate experience and expertise will be a critical step.
- **Developing an Honors Teaching Fellow program,** in which 2-3 faculty members are recruited for a fixed term (such as 3 years), with a 25-50% Honors teaching commitment. This would allow real stability, consistency and reliability in Honors course offerings, and has the potential to contribute significantly to student completion of Honors.

Finally, the Honors Program has been granted the space to conduct a top-to-bottom reimagining and reinvention, during spring 2021. Serious examination of the existing curriculum will be a part of this process, as will a comprehensive campus-wide communications and outreach effort.