

WEBER STATE UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM

SELF STUDY 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Areas of focus for the review team: The process of conducting the self study has highlighted five areas in need of particular attention. These are:

- **Honors completion rates.** Although the number of students enrolling in Honors is growing, the number completing Honors requirements is not (yet). How can this be changed?
- **Honors curriculum structure.** One possible reason why completion rates are low is that students are unable to make the current requirements work with their schedules. Indeed, Honors may now have a 1990s-era curriculum structure for a 2020s-era student body. Objectively, if a student does not begin taking Honors classes in their freshman year, it is very difficult for them to complete the requirements. What alternative curricular models exist that might be considered for WSU's Honors Program?
- **Assessment.** The current system for assessing the quality of Honors classes, and the amount of student learning taking place in them, is weak. However, assessing complex, multi-faceted Honors classes is not straightforward. What approaches might be implemented to improve assessment of Honors classes?
- **The Aletheia Club.** This is an umbrella organization that exists to organize and manage a set of requirements for students on Presidential Scholarships. The Honors Program was made responsible for the Aletheia Club in fall 2016, taking over completely in fall 2017. This group of students has grown very significantly, quadrupling over the last five years from 85 to 392 students. This growth threatens to overwhelm the Honors Program. Indeed, because Presidential Scholars are required to take Honors classes, there is little room for anyone else, which might be contributing to the low completion rates noted above. What, if anything, can be done to manage this situation?
- **Staffing levels.** Honors was given significant new responsibilities starting in fall 2016. By almost any measure, Honors is far more active today than it was four years ago. Are current staffing levels appropriate to the number, range, and depth of tasks required of the Honors Program by the university? Given that requests for new staff are commonplace, what alternative models might be proposed?

Context: The Weber State University Honors Program provides a welcoming community for intellectually curious, academically adventurous students, faculty and staff. This community is built through Honors classes (small, discussion-based, on unusual topics), Honors events, and the Honors Center, which serves as a study and social space for Honors students (and increasingly Honors faculty and staff as well). The Honors Program reports directly to the

Provost's Office, via the Associate Provost for High Impact Programs and Faculty Development. To a greater or lesser extent, the Weber State University Honors Program meets all 17 of the basic characteristics of a fully developed Honors Program identified by the National Collegiate Honors Council (this list is available via the program review website).

The Honors Program offers opportunities for students to graduate with three different types of Honors. In keeping with Weber State University's nature as an open enrollment institution, the WSU Honors Program is itself open enrollment, with no requirements for joining. However, each of the three different types of Honors has different requirements for completion. These are:

- **General Honors.** Students completing 12 credit hours of Honors classes before completing their Associate's degree graduate with General Honors when they graduate with their Associate's. A GPA of at least 3.5 is required at the time of graduation. The latest data indicate that 157 students were enrolled in General Honors in academic year 2018-19.
- **University Honors.** Students completing a total of 21 credit hours of Honors courses, plus a 3-credit hour capstone, either in Honors or in their major department. At least 9 credit hours of 1000/2000 level classes, and six credit hours of 3000/4000 level classes, must be taken. Classes taken for General Honors may be used to count towards the requirements for University Honors. A GPA of at least 3.5 is required at the time of graduation. The latest data indicate that 68 students were enrolled in University Honors in academic year 2018-19.
- **Departmental Honors.** Students complete a set of requirements established by major departments in conjunction with the Honors Program. These requirements are established for the department as a whole, and typically do not vary from student to student within a department (although they do vary from department to department). Most Departmental Honors requirements do not include taking any Honors classes. The latest data indicate that 283 students were enrolled in Departmental Honors in academic year 2018-19.

The key theme that captures Honors at Weber State University over the last four years is *change*. As the previous Honors Program director was approaching retirement, a largely new team, with fresh ideas, took over the reins at the senior level of the university's administration. This new team was then well positioned to implement changes to the Honors Program when a new director took over in fall 2016. These changes have been both deep and wide, and have brought very substantial challenges, as well as opportunities. Within two years, Honors took over management of the university's chapter of The National Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi; the Aletheia Club, which handles requirements for students on Presidential Scholarships to engage in a book discussion and 12 hours of community service each year, as well as taking a number of Honors classes; and national and prestigious scholarships and fellowships, such as Rhodes, Marshall, and Fulbright. These tasks are in addition to running the Honors Program

itself. Simultaneously, Honors moved into a newly-renovated Honors Center in the library, and managed both staff cuts and a 100% turnover in remaining staff.

Throughout this turbulent period, the Honors Program has excelled. The number of General and University Honors students over the last five years follows a “hockey stick” curve, of gradual decline followed by rapid increase, bottoming out in 2016-17 and more than tripling over the following two years. Honors students are increasingly diverse, are publishing in regional Honors journals, and are receiving national awards. Ever-more faculty, at all career levels and from every college at the university, are teaching Honors classes. Significant new donations to the Honors Program have been secured. Phi Kappa Phi inductions have increased, to the point where the WSU chapter has been awarded the Circle of Excellence- Platinum level (the highest), for chapter growth, by the national office, in each of the last two years (fall 2018 and fall 2019). One student in each of the last two years has successfully applied for significant funding from Phi Kappa Phi for graduate study. Presidential Scholarship students find their required book discussions measurably more engaging.

There is little doubt that Honors at WSU is succeeding in its mission overall, although there are clear areas in need of improvement, as noted in the areas of focus listed above. However, despite these clear measures of success, the Honors Program is showing distinct signs of strain. Staff experience very heavy workloads, tight deadlines, and subsequent high levels of stress. The large growth of Presidential Scholarship numbers, in particular, has been very time-consuming and resource-intensive to manage, and there is no clear evidence in sight that the university has any plans to manage this growth, besides encouraging it. In short, the Honors Program is in danger of burning brightly, but briefly.

Using the five areas of focus listed above, how can the Honors Program avoid this outcome, and instead transition to a situation of stable, sustained success?