

Honors Center Task Force Report
Prepared for
Michael Gottfredson, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education
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by
R. Richardson (Chair), M. Compitello, C. Desai, S. Hedden, D. Pingry,
and L. Tolbert

Executive Summary

The Honors Center is central to the mission of the University of Arizona. The Honors Center has effectively recruited students to the University who are better prepared, have better retention rates, and graduate in a more timely fashion than their peers. Honors students now number nearly 10% of the undergraduate population, with phenomenal growth such that they make up approximately 30% of the admitted freshman class for fall 1996. Honors students, who represent a broad cross section of the student population cutting across many socio-economic and disciplinary boundaries, have excelled academically and represent some of the most desirable qualities of an undergraduate population.

The continued success of the Honors Center, however, requires the serious commitment of the administration at the Provost level for at least the following two reasons. First, small class size offerings, the cornerstone of the Honors experience, are at odds with the Hurwitz goals which put pressure on departments to utilize faculty in large, lower division classes. Second, the Honors Center needs a revitalization at the upper division level for majors within the Colleges. A commitment from the Provost could result in requirements of each College for honors course offerings commensurate with the number of honors students in the Colleges, etc. We make detailed recommendations below aimed in part at increasing the participation of the Colleges in the honors curriculum. One recommendation is to consider separate honors designations at the lower division and upper division levels, which could lead to greater investment in the Honors Center by the Colleges. This would require that resources be transferred within the university to foster development of the Honors Center, with the resources managed by the Honors Center but including significant distribution to the Colleges. Necessary resources could range from \$0.5-1.5 million.

Introduction

The Honors Center has grown phenomenally in the last ten years (from 336 students in 1986 to 2635 in 1995, *without any reduction in entrance criteria*), to the point where it is one of the largest honors programs in the U.S. This growth has resulted from a number of factors, including the general attractiveness of the U of A to top students and very effective recruitment. This growth is bringing a group of highly desirable students to the U of A, ones likely to be retained, excel academically, graduate in a timely fashion, and ably represent the university in their post-baccalaureate careers. This growth, however, is putting extreme pressure on the Honors Center to provide a quality honors experience for the students in the program, and tests the institutional commitment of the university.

There are two critical issues at stake, one quantitative and the other qualitative or philosophical in nature. The quantitative issue is the availability of honors courses, at all levels, but especially at the upper division level. The qualitative issue concerns the 'quality' of the honors experience.

At the heart of the honors program are honors courses. One can argue about the benefits of various aspects of the program, but much of the power of the program begins in the classroom, where honors students have been told that their honors experience will include, among other things, small, rigorous classes. The lack of availability of honors courses has been a traditional problem, but could easily approach alarming proportions in the near future. As examples:

- In 1995/96 11% of the freshman class are honors students, but less than 3% of the spaces in 100 level courses are for honors students (i.e., less than half of the incoming class can expect to take an honors class in their freshman year).
- Honors classes for upper division courses are so often unavailable that it is a major impediment to graduating with Honors (only about 20% of honors students graduate 'With Honors').

The honors course availability issue is, of course, complex. Many departments would like to offer honors courses, but have faculty fully committed to teaching other courses. This is especially exacerbated by the Hurwitz goals, which drive many departments into putting faculty resources and effort into providing ranked faculty for lower division undergraduate courses.

Thus, availability of honors courses is ultimately a resource issue. We estimate that to meet the needs of upper division honors students, it is appropriate that each of the about 90 departments or academic units provide on average at least one upper division honors course or section per semester. Additional resources to meet such a need are of the order of \$1.5M (on the assumption that a course in any semester equals one third to one half of a faculty teaching load, and that the average faculty salary is around \$40-60k). Such additional funding for almost any program at the university, regardless of merit, is highly problematic in the current or foreseeable budget climate. However, it must be emphasized that without additional resources, the Honors Center faces a nearly impossible task of

even maintaining its program, let alone meeting the needs of one of the fastest growing programs on campus. Even if support at approximately one third this level (i.e., \$0.5M) were made available, creative solutions would still be necessary to provide adequate access to an appropriate honors experience for students in the program. As detailed below, the Honors Center should be responsible for allocating any additional resources.

The most important qualitative issue facing the Honors Center is maintaining the 'quality' of the honors experience. In particular, as the number of honors students has risen much faster than any institutional support, the ability to offer individual attention and special opportunities (academic, intellectual and cultural) is seriously eroded. The danger of the 'honors experience' devolving into honors students in large classes writing an extra term paper is real unless efforts are made to assure that services touted in recruiting highly qualified students to the Honors Program are actually available.

Recommendations

We thus recommend that the university commit to the following goals:

1. Recognition that the Honors Center plays a fundamental role in the academic health and well-being of the University of Arizona.
2. Providing sufficient General Education offerings so that all honors students can take at least one honors course per semester. This requires nearly doubling the number of honors courses in General Education.
3. Providing sufficient upper division honors courses that honors students can expect to take one such course per year in their majors. There must be a commitment to the honors experience for majors.

We believe it would be extremely short-sighted on the part of the university to attempt to 'solve' these problems by curtailing the size of the Honors Center. The Honors Center has grown without any reduction in admission standards, which are comparable or above those of most of the other honors programs we have seen. Failure to recruit the very best students to this university is not in its best interests.

How, then, can we creatively address the issues of course availability and the quality of the program?

The following specific recommendations are designed to meet the above goals:

1. A firm commitment from the Provost to deans and department heads that offering honors courses is an important element of the university's academic mission. This firm commitment could take the form of requirements at the College level for a number of honors offerings at lower and upper division levels commensurate with the number of honors

students in the College, for example. It could also take the form of making honors activities a part of all Academic Program Reviews, annual reviews, Promotion and Tenure guidelines, and performance evaluations of academic professionals and staff involved in undergraduate education. Other measures of participation include the availability of departmental Honors advisors and college participation in Honors Orientation. There must be recognition at the highest administrative level that honors offerings cannot be sacrificed in an attempt to satisfy Hurwitz goals, which are often at odds with providing small classes for honors students. Finally, additional financial support could be made available, perhaps on a competitive basis through the Honors Center, to help supplement innovative/creative honors offerings.

2. Separate honors designations on diplomas for lower-division General Education (General Education Honors or Lower Division Honors?) versus an honors designation for the four year program that includes upper-division major courses and a capstone experience (typically an honors thesis). This would help to separate the lower division and upper division problems in the program, hopefully allowing greater satisfaction among the many honors students currently unable to meet the four year requirements. Each College could be given the responsibility to develop its own Honors Program for majors at the upper division level, working in conjunction with the university Honors Center (see also #3 below).
3. The Honors Center must play a central role in the honors experience. While we have recommended possible adoption of separate lower division and graduation level honors designations, with greater ownership and participation of the Colleges in the graduation level program, the Honors Center must play a strong role with a strong director. Our vision of the Honors Center sees it continuing to play a fundamental role in university recruitment, being responsible for the lower division aspects of the program (including advising for undecided honors students, for which it needs additional funding), and acting as a coordinator/facilitator for the graduation level program. We recommend that funding for the graduation level program be channeled through the Honors Center to Colleges to insure both quality and a strong Center.
4. Many of the most student-appreciated benefits of the Honors Center are not excessively expensive to the university (the access to at least some small size classes does have a cost, but is a cornerstone of the program). In addition to small class size, these benefits include early registration, library privileges, honors residence halls, and computer facilities. Based on the budget of the Honors Center, the university currently spends significantly less per honors student than our peer institutions. It is important that the university affirm that access to the benefits most appreciated by honors students is critical to the success of the Honors Center.
5. Increase access to upper-division honors courses by better use of 400/500 courses. Currently, all such courses are available for honors credit by enrolling in the 500 offering. Unfortunately, several factors limit the

usefulness of this option. First, it seems few faculty or students are aware of the option. Second, it is only currently available to students who are seniors (according to SIS), and only by petition. These impediments should be removed. Care must be given to insure that the 500 level offerings provide a quality honors experience for undergraduates.

6. Contract offerings, where honors students in regular upper division courses enter into a contract with the faculty member to enrich the normal class offering. Significant education must take place on the part of both faculty and honors students so that the enrichment reflects the expectations of an honors experience. The opportunity for such contract offerings should ideally be identified in course listings and the catalog, and the total number of such credits in an honor student's portfolio should be limited, perhaps to a total of six units (3 units at lower division and 3 units at upper division). Faculty and departments should receive appropriate SCH credit for such contract offerings.
7. Make it in the best interests of Colleges to fully participate in the Honors Program. This could involve university recognition of College achievements in the Honors Center (at the simplest level by publishing the number of Honors offerings, spaces in Honors courses relative to the number of Honors students, numbers of students graduating with honors, etc., in Deans Council, for example).
8. The Director of the Honors Center should sit on the newly constituted University Curriculum Committee.
9. A standing university Honors Advisory Board or Committee should be established to provide continuing faculty oversight and demonstrate commitment to the Honors Center. The National Council of Honors Centers (NCHC) considers such a Board or Committee one of the criteria of a fully developed Honors program. This is the only criterion of the NCHC which we do not currently meet.
10. Consideration should be given to a model where all honors students take a one or two semester sequence of courses offered under the aegis of the Honors Center (which currently cannot offer courses) that would provide a foundation for the honors experience and common ground for all honors students. This is one of the few substantive differences between the honors programs here and at ASU, for example. It would take creativity to find faculty for such offerings. Faculty could have courtesy joint appointments in the Honors Center (another measure of Collegiate participation in the Honors Center; see #7 above). Other institutions have solved this problem by having competitions for the teaching of such offerings, with winners receiving funding to offer the courses.

Other Discussion Items:

1. The possible university-wide adoption of a Core set of general education courses poses special challenges for honors students. Many honors students enter the university with AP credit in discipline-based subjects such as English, history, foreign language, math, physics, etc. The ultimate fate of Core is still very much undecided, and even if it is adopted, a transitional phase seems likely in which discipline based courses may well be used as Tier I courses. This committee has a vision for Core, however, for which the ultimate participation of honors at the Tier I level is highly desirable. We see the goal of Tier I offerings as being synthetic, integrated courses that cut across disciplinary boundaries. This goal is of equal value for all students. This committee felt strongly that should this vision of Tier I offerings prevail, then honors sections of Tier I offerings should be made available, with AP credit applying to disciplinary offerings (envisioned either as Tier II offerings or disciplinary courses in the majors or as preparation for the majors, including such courses as math, chemistry, physics, English, foreign language, history, etc.). We envision that appropriately designed honors sections of Tier I offerings would be challenging and rewarding to honors students with significant AP background. It should be possible, however, for the especially well prepared honors student to test out of Tier I offerings, but not on the basis of AP credit alone, and with the expectation that the Tier I offerings would be of such rigor and breadth that a significant proportion of incoming honors students would take the course.
2. The committee considered other models for the Honors Center, most notably the creation of an Honors College. We recognize that there is growing in-state competition for honors students, and that ASU uses such a model, and that NAU is restructuring its honors program along the lines of a separate curriculum for honors students. The committee did not feel there were any compelling reasons for the university to adopt an Honors College model at this point. Such a model could involve significant additional bureaucratic overhead in terms of a dean and College staff. The change could be accomplished without significant bureaucratic overhead by simply changing the name of the Honors Center to the Honors College, but the committee did not see any particular benefit from a simple name change. To emphasize a point made throughout this report, the committee felt that the Honors Center's greatest need was a firm commitment from the Provost that would instill in Colleges and departments greater incentive to provide adequate honors offerings. We felt that such a commitment would be more effective, for example, than creating an Honors College and asking the dean of such a college to compete for resources. The committee does recommend that further consideration be given to an Honors College model, with input from students and faculty and the university Honors Advisory Board or Committee, as soon as it is established.
3. One of the strategies that might elicit greater participation in the Honors Program is to ask each college to take the responsibility for developing its Honors Program--in consultation with the Honors Center and a (to-be-created) university Honors Advisory Board or Committee. For example, the Honors Program in the College of Business and Public Administration would be under the aegis of the Dean of the College. The BPA Dean presumably

would assemble a group of his/her faculty to identify the coursework/experiences/outcomes that they believe would constitute Honors in BPA. The expectation would be that the faculty members would collaborate with the Honors Center and university Honors Advisory Board or Committee when decisions are made regarding Gen Ed courses that would fit into an Honors in BPA program.

4. The rate of graduate with honors is much too low (only about 20% of honors students graduate 'With Honors'). We have already made significant recommendations that should help increase the graduation rate 'With Honors' (i.e., separate lower division and graduation level honors designations, greater access to honors courses, more college and departmental involvement in the Honors Center). One additional area that could improve the graduation rate 'With Honors' involves the senior thesis or capstone experience. Additional resources could help students overcome financial impediments to doing thesis projects. Such funding, currently available through the Honors Center only at a very low level, could help raise the graduation rate 'With Honors'.
5. The Honors Center itself is staffed by a small, dedicated cadre of workers who are extremely committed to the program. They are very effective at recruiting honors students to the university, and at providing some much needed services to the students (including some academic and scholarship advising). If the Honors Center is to continue providing advising services for undecided honors students, a valuable service, it needs additional resources. In our limited interviews with honors students we found them to be generally very satisfied with the Honors Center staff in particular, and the Honors Center in general. We encourage the staff of the Honors Center to actively cultivate good working relationships with deans of the various colleges to encourage full college participation in the Honors Center. As previously mentioned, many of the most valued aspects of the honors experience (small classes, early registration, library privileges, honors residence halls, and computer facilities) do not revolve around services directly supplied by staff in Slonaker House, although that staff is clearly student centered and acts strongly on behalf of honors students. The Honors Center provides a number of services that can be costly (field trip to Mexico, Forum lunches, etc.) that by their nature are somewhat costly and can only be made available to relatively few students. The value of such services must be continually reviewed to insure maximum utilization of limited resources.

In summary, the Honors Center has served the university and honors students well, but is facing significant challenges as its size has grown dramatically. What the Honors Center needs the most is administrative support and commitment, at the Provost level, to assure full college and departmental participation in the face of often conflicting pressures to move faculty and resources away from small classes for honors students.

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