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A Study of Honors Program Attrition: What are they Missing?

A Project Presented to
the Faculty of the Undergraduate
College of Business
James Madison University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Bachelor of Business Administration

by Laura Ann Jennings

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Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Marketing, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Business Administration.

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DEDICATION PAGE

I dedicate this project to Dr. Kenneth Bahn. Although he is not here to see the finished product, his guidance and dedication to helping students succeed has inspired me throughout this process to continually improve and adapt my project to create something that would make him proud. Dr. Bahn, you are greatly missed.

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INTRODUCTION

An honors program is designed to provide high ability students with a special and different learning experience. It can also be defined as “Any special program for very able students offering the opportunity for educational enrichment, independent study, acceleration, or some combination of these” (Purdue University, 2011). Students generally experience many benefits such as smaller class sizes, an enriched curriculum, priority registration, research opportunities, study abroad and scholarship opportunities, and faculty mentorship. Honors programs show immense university support for student development, which is a major contributor to a student’s adjustment and growth. According to the National Collegiate Honors Council, honors programs in colleges and universities increased in number by 10% from 1999-2003 (Boulard, 2003). Today, more than 220 honors programs exist nationwide in comparison to the 100 programs that existed over 30 years ago. While every institution offers its own unique opportunities for students within their programs, most generally have the following goals: (a) meet the needs of superior students, (b) attract and retain superior students and faculty, (c) enhance the institution’s public image, (d) recognize and reward superior students and faculty, and (e) increase the transfer rate of students to 4-year institutions (Bulakowski & Townsend, 1995; Heck, 1986).

When the average student begins his or her college career, whether they are paying in-state or out-of-state tuition, they pick a major of interest, obtain a degree, and build many friendships and memories along the way. But some students are determined to take their college experience a step further. For these high achieving students, Honors programs and colleges offer many opportunities to make the most of

their higher education. Participating in an honors program provides the challenges necessary for these students to stay motivated and stimulated (NCHC 2014)

Honors programs are valuable to institutions in many ways. First, without them there would be less recognition for students with high potential, or worse, their potential may not be fully realized. Honors programs provide encouragement and support to students in their struggle for excellence (Osbourne, 1989, p. 28). Second, honors programs help the institution recruit superior students who are looking for a challenge. These students are great representatives of the school and what its students are capable of. Third, students in honors programs may provide inspiration to non-honors students. Although some honors classes are exclusively for honors students, these students interact with non-honors students in other classes regularly as well. “The presence of a gifted student in a college class...can enliven discussion and move a class toward higher level discourse...” (Robinson, 1997, p. 220). Finally, honors programs may also help the school to recruit and acquire valuable faculty members. “Outstanding teaching talent is always in short supply, and honors teaching may attract and hold those whom the institution would least like to lose” (Austin, 1986, pg. 3, cited in Owens and Travis 2013).

Effective honors education should promote lifelong learning through personal engagement, intellectual involvement, and a sense of community (NCHC 2014). It offers opportunities to “educate in a way that inspires creative citizenship among people who are humble enough to recognize the powerful potential of collaboration, confident enough to confront tomorrow’s problems, proud enough to sparkle with compassion,

and ardent enough to make a better world” (Wolfensberger 2012). Not only do these opportunities benefit students themselves throughout their entire lives, but they also help universities to fulfill their mission statements. For example, James Madison University maintains its mission as, “We are a community committed to preparing students to be educated and enlightened citizens who lead productive and meaningful lives” (Current Students Honors Page 2014). The JMU Honors Program is an integral part of achieving this mission as it allows students to take their studies above and beyond their expectations.

The James Madison University Honors Program prides itself on providing students with “opportunities to cultivate critical thinking and creative expression in a supportive community of like-minded students and faculty” (Current Students Honors Page 2014). It is clear that honors programs are extremely important and beneficial to students, faculty, and institutions as a whole. But these programs are not without obstacles. We discover a paradox here because despite the many positive effects of its Honors Program, James Madison is facing a very high attrition rate.

Background Research:

In spite of the many positive benefits that honors programs provide, the number of students who complete honors degrees is extremely low. A recent study at Oklahoma State University (OSU) showed that with a beginning freshman honors class of 300 students, approximately 70 students obtained honors degrees after four or five years. This is a completion rate of 28%, which is unfortunately not an outlier of completion rates for honors programs across the country (Campbell 2006).

To analyze a high attrition rate in honors programs, we must first look at how students are selected into these programs. There are a multitude of predictors for honors program completion that administrators have used to choose their honors students. Campbell and Fuqua found that high school GPA, class rank, first-semester college GPA and freshman honors housing were some of the most important factors to look at when analyzing of program retention (Goodstein and Szarek 2013). National rankings like standardized test scores are also frequently determining factors for admission. However, even if the student is a good match for the honors program, it is equally as important that the program is just as desirable to them. “To attract these high-achieving students, universities may offer applicants incentives such as merit scholarships, smaller classes, honors residential options, research experiences, and enrichment programs” (Urda 2012).

Once students are accepted and have committed to the honors program, there needs to be incentive to continue. Long, Herbert and Mcbee explain that many gifted students seek lower-cost alternatives to Ivy League schools in institutions with honors programs. Therefore, a school’s honor’s program must be worth giving up the opportunity to attend a more prestigious school (Urda 2012).

Another issue we’ve read about is students who are not taking full advantage of the opportunities that honors programs offer. “Students can receive benefits of membership only if they actively use the services available to them” (Urda 2012). Students may join the program initially because of encouragement from their parents or the impressive addition to their resume, but then not fully engage in the program. Even worse, they may just prolong their membership by doing the minimum requirements so

that they can enjoy the benefits of membership while avoiding responsibilities for as long as possible. “Students who are not fully involved in the curriculum or programming of honors programs cannot obtain all the academic, intellectual, social, or cultural benefits available” (Urda 2012).

As we continued to look further into what causes attrition in university Honors Programs, we found that there is a limited amount of extant research. “The limited discussion in the literature of honors program completion may suggest some reluctance to address this delicate topic” (Goodstein and Szarek 2013). Our goal is to further this research and provide valuable insight regarding what causes attrition in honors programs and how honors administrators can better suit their students’ needs. This will be done by analyzing one university’s experience and highlighting themes that can help solve the attrition issue for universities around the country.

METHOD

To identify what factors contribute to such a low retention rate and what the JMU Honors Program is doing well, a qualitative interview approach was used. Through our study, we will confirm, deny, or extend prior research on program completion and conclude with recommendations of ways the program can be improved.

A total of 18 students who were either planning to complete their honors requirements (12) or decided to drop the program (6) were interviewed and audio recorded as they spoke about their journey through the JMU Honors Program.

Participant	Year	Major	Completing program?	Track
1	Senior	Computer Science, Math Minor	YES	1
2	Senior	Biology, Pre-med	YES	2
3	Senior	International Affairs	NO	1
4	Senior	Interior Architecture and Industrial Design Double Major	YES	1
5	Senior	Health Sciences, Family Studies Minor	YES	1
6	Junior	Interior Architecture	NO	2
7	Senior	School of Media Arts and Design	NO	1
8	Junior	Nursing	YES	1
9	Senior	Finance and Economics	NO	2
10	Senior	International Affairs	NO	1
11	Sophomore	Finance and Economics	NO	1
12	Junior	History	YES	2
13	Junior	Communication Sciences and Disorders	YES	2
14	Senior	Communication and Justice Studies	YES	2
15	Senior	Geographic Science and Spanish	YES	2
16	Senior	Sociology	YES	2
17	Junior	Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication	YES	2
18	Senior	Music education	YES	3

The participants were interviewed after they responded to a mass email sent by the Honors Program director on our behalf. This resulted in a wide variety of study participants in terms of their major, year, and track. Each interview was audio recorded and later transcribed. The content of each interview was then broken into approximately 25 categories.

Table 1: Data Categories

Connectedness to Program	Honors electives	Honors General Education Courses	Value in Thesis <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job Interview • Graduate School 	Favorite Aspect of the Program
Senior Project	Advising	Honors Study Abroad	Follow Up After Dropping	References to other schools
Seminars	Diploma Distinction	Honors events	Workshops	Reason For Joining
Honors Options	Shenandoah Hall	Graduate School	Recommendations to Program	Tracks
Hillcrest	Early Registration	Technical Issues	Would You recommend the program to a future student?	Advice for Future Students

The information from these categories, shown in table 1 above, was combined together to create three major themes that contribute to JMU’s Honors Program Attrition, each which several sub-themes. The first major theme is Honors Class-Related Experiences. Sub-themes include: Honors General Education Classes, Honors Seminar Classes, Honors Options, Honors Professors, and Honors Study Abroad. The

second major theme is the Honors Thesis. Sub-themes include: Identifying Advisers, Variance in Value, and Thesis Workload. The final major theme is the Honors Program itself. Sub-themes include Program Flexibility, Honors Events, Student Recognition, and Program Communication. These themes and each of their sub-themes will be explained using interviews with JMU students and supportive scholarly research. After presenting this information, we will make recommendations for immediate and long-term changes that can benefit the program and ultimately lower the attrition rate.

MAJOR THEME 1: CLASS RELATED EXPERIENCES

Here we will discuss students' experiences with honors class offerings. Sub-Themes of this topic include: Honors General Education Classes, Honors Seminar Classes, Honors Options, Honors Professors, and Honors Study Abroad.

Sub-Theme 1: Honors General Education (Gen-Ed) Classes

Students can count honors general education courses toward their Gen-Ed requirements, major requirements, or elective credits. These classes cover the same essential content of the non-honors sections but include some elements of "honors study," including added emphasis on discussion, writing, and reading. These courses are meant to "encourage creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, and deeper intellectual inquiry" (Current Students Honors Page 2014). Honors Gen-Eds at James Madison are typically significantly smaller than regular classes. Prior research considers these small class sizes serve as a main incentive for students to stay in the program (Urdu 2012). Our interviewees confirmed and extended this research as class size was found to be the most beneficial part of honors classes for several reasons. First, these classes help students with their transition from high school to college, since they often take them during their freshman year. One student explains that the "high school" class size combined with college level thinking was a great combination:

"So it was nice that I kind of had that high school size classes also added on to the normal college size classes. And it was a different kind of thinking. It was like the college level thinking, but then you still had that high school level size of classes so you could really kind of work through it all together" (Participant 8).

Here we see the honors program positively affecting students, beginning at an early point in their education at JMU. Small classes also help form closer relationships between faculty and students. These relationships can be an additional incentive motivating students to stay in the program and take more honors classes. Participant 14 explained:

“It was fun to have a small class, they are more personal. They allowed everybody to participate and the teacher to get to know you and the way you work and the way you write and stuff like that.”

Along with this personal class atmosphere, students are able to embrace the material more in these classes because they are with other honors students. Participant 15 explained that her honors classmates seemed a lot more motivated and involved than students in her other classes:

“It's almost like in high school taking a regular level class versus an AP class, you're in there with the kids that are just sort of like, why? I guess I'll do my homework versus the kids that are like, 'Oh, my goodness did you read that part?' I feel like honors students specifically are not afraid to be openly excited about being into it, you know?”

Honors students' enthusiasm in their classes can make these Gen-Eds a more enriching experience with higher-level discussion and further exploration of topics. Additionally, Participant 5 noted that having all honors students in the class often made working together outside of class an easier task:

“I thought it was cool because a lot of people in my class lived in the dorm and so whenever we had group projects we would just meet in the study lounges or just like anywhere in the dorm. It was really convenient.”

With the support we found for honors Gen-Eds also comes some criticism. The JMU honors program claims that the Honors curriculum “is not harder courses with more work, but an increased opportunity to cultivate habits of critical thinking,

communication, creative expression and independent thought through smaller classes taught by exceptional faculty” (Current Students Honors Page 2014). Whether or not students agree with this statement may have an effect on program attrition. According to one student, honors class professors had:

“higher standards because you're an honors student which is what we were told they are not supposed to do and now like we're going to find extra homework, we're going to find extra readings, extra assignments” (Participant 13).

This student did go on to complete the rest of their honors requirements despite the fact that because of this extra work, she believes her honors Gen-Eds actually lowered her overall GPA:

“...cause I spent so much time instead of focusing on like my major and just other things I feel like maybe I should put more time into.”

Other students also expressed their struggle with these classes. Participant 18 explained that even for an honors student who has done well academically in the past, the classes seemed excessively difficult:

“I was so overwhelmed, like I couldn't keep up with her, like I was getting so lost and like -- you know we're honors students, like, you know, generally good at taking notes and paying attention. And I was just so lost and I've never felt that way before. And I was like, 'I don't think this is worth it.'”

Even with difficulties regarding her honors Gen-Ed experience, this student did complete the program because of her determination to complete her thesis and very positive experience with her seminars. However, other students who face these overwhelming feelings in their classes may be at higher risk for attrition.

Depending on their major, students' class schedules vary in flexibility. Some students sometimes found it difficult to find honors classes that fit into their schedule. Participant 8, who is currently completing her thesis, explained that she needed to fill her honors requirements at an accelerated pace:

“With honors or with nursing and honors you have to be completely done with all of your honors requirements by your junior year. So that means I was taking like two honors classes a semester, sometimes three. There is not really a whole lot of honors types of sciences classes, which I kind of think there should be.”

Because of a lack of honors science classes, she was unable to count most honors Gen-Eds toward her major, which was frustrating. Other students, however, felt the Gen-Ed choices were almost too science-based and had trouble fulfilling other needed cluster requirements with honors classes:

“I feel like the honors program is very science based, and I am not a science person, and I had already completed, you know, AP History and other classes, so I was looking for Humanities Gen Ed classes, and they really didn't offer that many. So whenever they would send out the list, and I'd look, I'd be like, ‘Oh Gosh, like, how am I going to get the credits?’”
(Participant 7)

Here we see the difficulty of scheduling becoming a source of anxiety for students. Participant 7 did not complete the program. It is impossible to please everyone with Gen-Ed topic selections, but administrators should be putting forth efforts to make sure that the program is accommodating as many majors as possible, as currently, there are students who feel that their major is somewhat ignored by the program, such as Participant 6, who did not complete her honors requirements:

“I really enjoyed the honors program. I think it's a great program. It has so many benefits. But it's just its geared towards certain majors. That's it”
(Participant 6).

Based on our interviews, we have made recommendations for program faculty to help solve this issue. Find them beginning on pg. 51.

Sub-Theme 2: Honors Seminar Classes

The purpose of JMU honors seminars is to “explore complex topics that deal with contemporary issues in society, multicultural and comparative studies, and advanced applications in business and the natural and social sciences.” The seminars are designed, “to be fairly flexible small classes that may reflect unique, sometimes experimental, styles of teaching” (Current Students Honors Page 2014). They are always interdisciplinary and have the option of being team-taught from different departments or disciplines. Required coursework can include extensive reading, creative writing, community involvement, guest speakers, and of course, discussions (Current Students Honors Page 2014). While the classes themselves are designed to be flexible, students believe there is a lack of flexibility in the scheduling of these classes, which can then affect their perceived value of them. Participant 18, who did complete the program, explains her difficulty finding an interesting seminar that fit her schedule:

“I just had issues finding ones that will fit in my schedule. That's an issue I've had with honors classes; a lot of them are just really not interesting to me, especially the seminars.”

When students are forced to take the seminars that do not interest them because of an inflexible schedule, they do not gain as much from the experience and sometimes view it as an additional burden:

“You have to fit them in as another class. Not only is it an additional class on top of the other ones you're taking but they typically want you to be more devoted and it's a lot of reading and a lot of that. If you can't find one that's a topic you like you're even more discouraged to take it because not

only is it an extra class but now it's just something that you're just getting through because you have to get them done. It's just like another thing off a checklist" (Participant 4).

Similar to honors Gen-Eds, it is impossible to please everyone with topic selection but the issues with scheduling of the seminar classes are something the current honors program should consider. Participant 10 explains that because only honors students take these seminars, they are competing with each other to register for them:

"If you have 6 options, if you're interested in 4 of them and 3 of them fit your schedule, you can't get into them, especially as a freshman or a sophomore. You end up taking something you're not really interested in..... there's a ton of ones I want to take so that was really cool, but when I was a freshman and sophomore and I had room in my schedule, I couldn't get into them."

Because of the frustration students have faced with the flexibility of scheduling seminars, Participant 12 notes that some students may tend to see them as a nuisance getting in the way of their major program. This was not an issue for him as he plans to complete the rest of his requirements, but he does reflect on what other students may be feeling:

"Let's say you have a major picked out and you also have two minors that you're interested in and you're trying to double major, these six credits could definitely get in the way of completing whatever program you're trying to complete."

To other students however, the seminars are great opportunities to explore new topics and have productive conversations without being overburdened with extra work. One student had a raving review of her seminar experience, which really encompasses what the honors program's goal is:

"We got to do very upper-level thinking and discussion and we got to really go into the topic, and we got to choose the research in an area that

interested us. But it wasn't a ton more work. You're surrounded by people that you can really have an intellectual conversation with about class stuff, and everyone kind of cares about it. In other classes that aren't in your major, it's hard to get a real conversation going" (Participant 18).

This participant did go on to complete her requirements and her experience in the seminar should try to be replicated for other students. Other students found it very valuable to take a class in something that might not normally interest them, which is an opportunity the seminars provided. One student explained that the course even had an effect on her outside of the classroom:

"It was a Shakespeare class, and I just have never really been into that ever. I really like being in a position where I had to discuss something that I normally would not be, like, really I'm not interested in. And I feel like it just had a well-rounding effect on my life" (Participant 15).

Similarly, Participant 2 responded:

"The seminar I took has probably been one of my favorite and most influential classes at JMU."

When students find the seminars interesting, not only does this help reduce attrition, as both of these students are completing their theses, but they can also realize the university's mission of helping students to become active and informed citizens.

Participant 13 explained the positive effect that her seminar had on her as well:

"[My seminar] got me motivated in doing a lot of things like in community and for being more of an active citizen and it just showed me a whole like area of interest that I didn't really have."

Sub-Theme 3: Honors Options

The third element of honors class-related experiences is the Honors Option. "The Honors option allows students to earn Honors credit for a non-Honors upper level course (200 or above) that is not regularly offered as an Honors course" (Current

Students Honors Page 2014). An honors student and a professor agree on an additional or extended assignment in a non-honors course that serves as the “honors” component. “It provides students the freedom to design a portion of their curriculum and is a great way for students to get to know their professors” (Current Students Honors Page 2014). But a struggle that honors students experience in multiple departments is a lack of willingness among faculty to participate in these honors options. Participant 10 noted:

“Professors are really, like, hesitant to do them. Not a lot of them offer. Some of them outright deny them.”

This student did not complete the program and not being able to easily complete an honors option was part of her reason for leaving. On a similar note, Participant 8 explained:

“Some of my professors, as far as like my science professors, really weren't interested in doing an honors option. So I ended up having to do an honors option with the class that I wasn't really that interested in...I think in some ways some professors just don't really know what they are...I think it took three professors to contact before I got one.”

This student did stay in the program. She also participated in an honors study abroad program, which may have given her an extra incentive to stay. Nonetheless, her honors option experience suggests an issue with departmental support and knowledge of honors program requirements.

From our interviews, it is clear that many students see great value in completing the honors option and had experiences that seemed to meet the goal of further understanding subject matter and working more with professors without being an extra burden. One student who is completing his requirements explained that while he

learned more, he was taking classes for his major so he did not feel it an extra burden on his workload:

“The projects did help me learn more and--because I was able to spend more time with the professor and talk more about the subject. I didn't feel like it was a massive change in the pace of my education 'cause I was still taking the same classes I would have taken anyway, same professors” (Participant 12).

Another student is also learning her curriculum on an enhanced level and has a stronger relationship with her professor because of using her honors option to help him write a textbook:

“I actually understand [the material] way more because I have this extra like thing that goes along with it. I really like the honor's option because I think that being in the honor's program allowed me to get to know my professors better” (Participant 16).

Participant 14 explained that she has been able to take what she's learned in class a step further and used the honors option to take her studies outside the classroom:

“It really helps me get interested in the class more in a way that I wanted to, you know, something that I wanted to learn about. I decided to do something different and volunteer somewhere.”

With her honors option, this student gained valuable real-world experience related to her major that she might not have been able to experience and get credit for otherwise. Each of these students is completing their honors requirements. This adds to current research on honors attrition that states an effective honors program should encourage learning through personal engagement and a sense of community (NCHC). Taking this learning outside the classroom has also been shown to create effective honors programs.

Sub-Theme 4: Honors Professors

The faculty teaching honors classes help shape students' experiences within the program. Successful honors professors tend to be teachers that encourage discussion in the structure of their classes and understand how much work is needed to provide a more enriching, but not necessarily harder class experience. Students generally had very positive things to say about their professors in both honors classes and seminars. However, a couple of students felt their professors put too much emphasis on discussion:

“Neither of the seminars was as professor-centered. Which some days I loved and some days I didn't because sometimes if you have a particular brilliant professor then like professor-centered classes are totally fine with me like sometimes it's just awesome to absorb their knowledge. But other times it was cool to hear what students have to say more” (Participant 16).

Another student explained her frustration and how it clouded her perception of the seminars as a whole:

“I found the professors interesting and what they have to say was very valuable knowledge, but I wish they could've spoken more on that instead of like leaving a lot of the discussion to us because we're not knowledgeable on these topics. We're like in the class to learn more about it. And the majority of honor students that I talked to, they say the same thing about seminars. They're just like, 'We just do it because we have to,' but they're not--they're not the best in the world” (Participant 17).

While both of these students are going to complete the program, students' perceived value of the class could be affected and therefore could affect attrition if they have issues with how their class is run.

Sub-Theme 5: Honors Study Abroad

The honors study abroad programs have immense support among students who are able to do them. Prior research on attrition does not mention study abroad as a factor of retention but at James Madison, it seems to be a strong draw. These programs last

for three weeks in the summer and can serve as a substitute for the two required seminars. Participant 8 saw incredible value in completing 6 credits in only three weeks:

“The amount of credits that we got for that short amount of time was completely worth it in my opinion.”

She went on to talk about the structure of her study abroad trip and how it enriched her learning without an overwhelming workload:

“It was definitely different than I think studying abroad with any other program. It wasn't even something that I really typically say I would ever be interested in, but I was interested in it just because we totally invested ourselves into this one topic...*they really prepared us so much to just immerse ourselves...Everything had a purpose. You weren't just doing things to do things* [emphasis added]. They really narrowed it down so that you would have the best experience you could possibly have, but at the same time learn as much as you possibly can.”

For this student, study abroad was an important factor. It provided a positive experience that helped offset her negative experience with her honors option. Students see many other benefits in doing the study abroad programs in addition to counting them for credits. One student explains how the honors program provided him with the opportunity to travel internationally for the first time:

“That was an opportunity I probably wouldn't have gotten to do if it weren't for the Honors Program. That was the first time I ever went abroad anywhere, I'm the least traveled person I know. So that was a huge deal and I was so excited for it and *it was an amazing experience that I always remember. Because of that I am very thankful for the Honors Program* [emphasis added]” (Participant 12).

Finally, Participant 9 reflected on his study abroad experience as the best part of his honors career:

“It was just super fun. Learned a ton and just been really broadening experience for me and everything. It was really the highlight of [my honors experience].”

Based on the majority of students' experiences, honors study abroad is a very positive and enriching experience for them. With the exception of Participant 9, all other students who reflected on their great experience are fulfilling their requirements. That being said, when Participant 9 did his study abroad, he was intending to fulfill his requirements but decided to pick up a second major later on and opted out of completing the thesis. Therefore, study abroad was not a factor that drove Participant 9 to leave the program. Through our examination of prior research, study abroad was not found to contribute to attrition; rather, it is a very strong benefit that builds value in the program.

MAJOR THEME 2: HONORS THESIS

The next major theme of Honors Program attrition is the senior thesis. “The Senior project is the culmination of a student’s academic experience at JMU...All Honors students, working with a faculty mentor and a faculty committee, earn six credit hours in Honors for work that culminates in a significant research project” (Current Students Honors Page 2014).

The project takes many forms. For a lot of majors, the result is a written paper “reflecting substantial scholarship and demonstrating outstanding research and writing skills.” For other majors, the thesis can be more creative and demonstrate “imagination and originality in addition to craftsmanship and professionalism in production” (Current Students Honors Page 2014). Students can graduate ‘With Distinction’ after completing their senior project, which will show on their transcript and diploma.

As expected, the senior thesis is very time-consuming. It requires an immense amount of research and critical thinking by giving students the opportunity to explore a topic of interest further than ever before. As we interviewed JMU students, we confirmed that completing the thesis is a major factor impacting attrition. Sub-themes include: Identifying Advisers, Variance in Value, and Thesis Workload.

Sub-Theme 1: Identifying Advisers

Earlier, we discussed a lack of openness of faculty to help students with honors options. Unfortunately, in some cases, this applies to the thesis as well. Many

students, including Participant 4, experienced difficulty finding professors who shared their interests and found it worthwhile to work with them:

“I struggled finding someone to help me within my program because most of them aren't solely committed to the Honors Program or believe that it is something you should carry through. One of the people I spoke to said that my graduating with honors isn't going to be something that stands out on my resume...*it was just hard trying to find someone that not only believed in me but was willing to help me for the next year and a half...[added emphasis].*”

This student did find a professor to agree to be her advisor and she is currently completing her thesis but she noted that it has been a very difficult process and sometimes it feels like her adviser would rather her quit the program because he doesn't think it's worth her time. Despite this, she has continued because after completing the other requirements, she is determined to graduate 'with distinction.'

A second student explained that multiple professors whom she asked to be her advisor declined because they were already working with graduate students. The advisor she has now doesn't have anything to do with her interests at all, but she believes she will still be successful (Participant 15). Another student told the story of when she approached a professor who she felt had expertise in her field:

“I kind of just went straight to this man who I never had a class with before. And I was like 'you don't know me, but will you dedicate all this time to helping me please?' (Participant 16)

Her strategy was actually successful as he agreed to help her and she is completing the thesis. But it is questionable how many students would be willing to do what she did and take such a risk. Other students had success asking professors they had previously taken a class with or used resources within their department to locate an

adviser. Participant 14 explained how her major advisor assisted her in finding a thesis adviser:

“I went and talked to my faculty adviser for communications and he gave me a list of a few professors...I left my chosen advisor with a topic in mind and stuff and then I went home that summer and did a lot for 499-A.”

This student was successful, along with Participant 17, who simply asked her major adviser to be her thesis adviser as well:

“It's kind of like killing two birds with one stone. I found it fairly easy to get in contact with those individuals.”

While the honors program does provide liaisons in each department who are meant to be advisers to students within that department both for their thesis and the honors program in general, their presence was not fully effective to some students, such as Participant 9, who did not complete the program:

“I just had email type of correspondence. I didn't actually get to meet the person, which was kind of a problem. So it really wasn't that prevalent really, the presence of the advisor. It would have definitely helped.”

Another student emphasized the distance she felt from an honors adviser when she was going to begin her thesis:

“You had an honors adviser I think first semester, but then the honors adviser was never really available during the transition between freshman year and then the thesis” (Participant 8).

Despite this criticism, some students, like Participant 12, did find their liaisons useful when finding advisers based on their areas of study and interests:

“He helped me better understand which professors in the department would be good for which topics based on their specialties. And he just clarified what I needed to be doing.”

These quotes illustrate an issue with students finding willing advisors for their theses and connecting with advisers through the honors program. This issue could contribute to attrition because while most students quoted here plan on completing the thesis, Participant 9 has dropped and explained that a stronger relationship with his honors advisor could have helped him.

Sub-Theme 2: Variance in Value

Because the senior project demonstrates such advanced thinking and knowledge of the student's chosen topic, the program believes that students who complete this extensive piece of work tend to stand out as stronger candidates for graduate school and in their job search. They also experience the personal satisfaction of having completed such an impressive project. However, through our interviews, we found there is a variance in the value that students actually perceive in doing the thesis between internal and externally driven rewards. Some students felt that if they weren't planning to go to graduate school, the thesis was not worth their time:

“I'm not going to grad school right away so there wasn't a big internal push for me to do a thesis” (Participant 10).

This suggests that some students see graduate school admission as the only benefit of doing the thesis and therefore do not complete it if they have no desire to go to graduate school. Another student made a value vs cost decision when deciding if the thesis or a second major would help his future more:

“In the end I ended up dropping the honors because I didn't really see the benefit of applying to jobs. I thought it could help in grad school, but I felt the double major would help more” (Participant 9).

Neither of these students is completing a thesis. Another student explained how a low perceived value in the honors thesis could stem from a low perceived value of honors itself. This student explained that because the honors program has the GPA requirement and extra classes, it might be easier to just do a project within a student's major:

“Honestly, you could do a research project through your department as an Independent Study. You don't need to be in Honors” (Participant 5).

Here we have identified two problems 1) Graduate school admission is seen as the sole benefit of the thesis, which has created attrition among students who do not see graduate school in their future and 2) Students don't see the benefit the thesis can have on their job search and turn to alternative academic paths that they feel have more value.

A third problem we came across was that some students were not aware of how they would get to show off their project and be heard:

“I'd rather put all my energy into my senior project that actually is going to be heard. With the senior projects in honors, you don't even get to show them off, I don't think. I haven't heard of these opportunities. You just turn in a paper or you turn in a book of your stuff” (Participant 6).

This student did not complete a thesis. This indicates a lack of recognition, or lack of awareness of the recognition that students receive for completing the thesis. These three problems have had an effect on honors program attrition as they have impacted how students value the program as a whole. One student, Participant 11, explained that it's almost like the precedent is to drop and not complete the program.

“You're an outlier if you do it, like everybody drops it seems.”

There are many students who see great value in completing their theses. Participant 12 for example, is looking forward to the rewarding feeling of accomplishment after he has finished:

“I’m actually looking forward to my Honors thesis. I think I’ll feel really successful after I complete. I’ll feel really accomplished 'cause it will take so much effort and time and I’ll have this big massive thing that I get to say I wrote. And it will help me work with professors and learn from them.”

One student testified to this rewarding feeling as she described the moment she turned her senior thesis in:

“It was kind of unreal; they give you the like little medallion when you turn it in. I was like, “Oh my God!” But it’s definitely, my greatest accomplishment. It was the best feeling ever (Participant 18).

For these students, the personal sense of accomplishment was benefit enough for them to complete their projects. For other students, it was the opportunity to dive into a chosen topic of interest:

“You inevitably find some type of issue that you’re passionate about and you want to explore further” (Participant 16).

And for a few others, the flexibility of the format of the project made it very appealing:

“I love how the honors program is branched down to more creative projects as well. Like, you’re not just stuck with a strictly research-based data, you know, that sort of a project. Because I’m in more of a creative major, I want to have that freedom to produce something and in the long run I was going to benefit like my portfolio or something like that...” (Participant 17)

Despite these students’ positive experiences with the thesis, there is a variance in the value that students perceive about it. In order to reduce the negative mentality about the thesis, the honors program needs to highlight the additional benefits of completing it that don’t seem to cross students’ minds. The program also needs to

increase efforts to make recognition known so students will feel rewarded after completion. We will make some suggestions for this in the recommendations section.

Sub-Theme 3: Thesis Workload

A perception of an unmanageable thesis workload is another factor contributing to attrition. Many students feel like doing the thesis will keep them from enjoying themselves during their last year of college. Because some students view senior year as the “best year,” one student implied that many people might ask the question:

“How can it be the best year of your life when you're like in your apartment 24/7 writing a 100 page thesis like, you know, is that how I really want to finish up my college career?” (Participant 17)

While this student is planning to complete her thesis, Participant 11 plans to drop as he feels that his choice was either to do a thesis, or enjoy his senior year:

“I wanted to honestly just not kill myself my senior year and somewhat enjoy it.”

Students' belief they cannot do a thesis AND enjoy their senior year has led to attrition and so has the thought of not being able to balance the thesis with other coursework and extracurricular activities.

Participant 11 also noted:

“I didn't want to be writing a thesis with a full course load of finance and economics classes. I have leadership positions and do other stuff and just organizations I'm in.”

Participant 6, who also dropped the program, explained:

“I dropped because I basically had to do another senior project. With the workload I have now, I just can't see myself doing two really amazing projects.”

How can the honors program help increase students' confidence level in their ability to handle coursework, extra-curriculars, and a thesis? Other students may have some advice.

One student emphasized that the thesis is very intimidating as a freshman because it's unlike anything you've ever done before. But as you progress through school, you learn how to do what the thesis requires through your classes and by senior year, you're ready.

“By the time you got to your senior year you've done almost everything other than the actual research...” (Participant 14)

Other students agreed with her statement that when you reach your junior and senior year, the thesis does not seem as scary. You will be ready. Perhaps highlighting this idea early on to students this can help lower attrition with respect to the thesis specifically.

MAJOR THEME 3: HONORS PROGRAM

The final major theme of program attrition is related to the Honors Program itself. Sub-themes discussed by students include: Program Flexibility, Honors Events, Student Recognition, and Program Communication.

Sub-Theme 1: Program Flexibility:

Participant 8, a Nursing major, described the rigorousness of pursuing JMU's nursing program and honors:

“...with nursing and honors you have to be completely done [with] all of your honors requirements by your junior year. So that means I was taking like two honors classes a semester, sometimes three...”

She explained that it was difficult for her and other students to stay on track with the program's requirements. This student was able to manage and complete her class requirements, but others are in a tight spot:

“I know some of my nursing friends who have these couple credits that they need for honors. And they were like ‘what am I going to do?’”
(Participant 8)

Participant 8 further explained that in her opinion, there are not enough honors science classes offered, which would give these students an opportunity to count the class for their major. Because these students are juniors, they face the task of finishing these credits AND completing the thesis they will start next year. After taking multiple honors classes a semester, being obstructed by two credits frustrates students.

The JMU honors programs selects students who have achieved academic excellence in high school or their first semester of college, and who are well-rounded in

their extra-curricular activities. But according to Participant 10, who dropped the program:

“The honor's program doesn't reward hard-working students...it adds more work onto them.”

She describes the structure of the requirements as keeping her from taking more classes in subjects that actually interest her:

“As a typical honor's student, I'm going to pick up a minor. I'm going to take elective classes in things that stimulate me. I'm going to want to take harder classes or different classes. But with the honor's classes, either I don't feel like I can do them because I have this honor's option paper on top of classes that already may be required, multiple papers or projects or something, or I'm taking a seminar in something I don't really care about, or I'm picking up a random GENED. I've taken an average of 18 credits every semester with or without the honor's program because that's the kind of student I am.”

In addition to honors classes being an obstacle in her educational experience, Participant 10 explains that the structure of the program is so rigid that it can be very difficult to fit requirements into her schedule:

“It's not like you can even stack them up in all semesters. They make you stagger them. So, you have to do one honor's thing every semester. So, I can't even fit it around my schedule which is already cramped because of my extra-curricular activities and my academics.”

It is understandable that the program prefers students to spread out their classes, as to not overburden themselves, but as we can see, it can create problems for some students. Students often have trouble balancing classes with other activities they might pursue in college. For example, studying abroad provides students with a unique and broadening experience, but according to Participant 7, the structure of the honors program has difficulty accommodating such activities:

“I went abroad in the fall of junior year, and so I realized that I would have to come back and pretty much be on top of my thesis at that point which

wasn't going to happen unless I started early. I had to start thinking about it at like the end of sophomore year, and I was not prepared to do that, like I'd really just started my major classes, I didn't really know...what my interests were.”

Because the structure of the program required her to choose her thesis topic before she was confident in her interests, this student dropped the program.

One benefit that the honors program provides to reduce attrition is priority registration to students for their freshman and sophomore years. However, Participant 17 felt that having the registration for only the first two years was not enough and that honors students were not regarded as highly as other groups of students, such as athletes:

“I still was struggling to get into my classes this semester for my WRTC classes. There are upper level classes that are smaller and we are competing with a lot of people.”

She went on to explain that because honors students have such rigorous class schedules, comparable to an athlete’s practice schedule, this benefit should not only last all four years, but allow students to register at the same time as athletes:

“Because we're honor students, we have more classes that we need to take...I'm best friends with an athlete and they've registered way ahead of us because they have practice schedules they need to plan around but honor students have extracurricular activities and study schedules that can be just as rigorous as a practice schedule...We're just like academic athletes.”

Other students admit that while early registration is a nice benefit, it isn’t what helps them stay committed to completing their requirements:

“The early registration is like a nice perk but it's not something, that's not like a sole reason that I stayed in the program or picked the program or anything. I think it's nice to have that benefit” (Participant 4).

When asked about their thoughts on whether or not more people would stay in the program if they had this registration benefit all four years, one student explained that because of students' anxiety about the senior project, it may not be enough of an incentive:

“I think certain people just don't want to do the thesis. You know, some people see the value in it, like I want to do it. Other people are just afraid of it. That's the way it is. So maybe [extending the registration] will help people last another year but I don't know if it would make them last all the way” (Participant 12).

Similarly, Participant 10 noted:

“I don't know if people would really stay in even if they had early registration... the thesis is still a lot more added work that you wouldn't have before...”

In a way, we can attribute the early registration to attrition as we discovered the presence of “freeloaders,” students who stay in the program and enjoy its benefits, but then quit before doing the thesis. Though none of the students we spoke with considered themselves to be “freeloaders,” they were definitely aware of their presence:

“I do know some people who said, ‘Oh yeah I joined Honors because I wanted the early registration and to leaving Shenandoah but then they dropped it before senior year because this thesis sounded really scary’” (Participant 12).

Participant 18 revealed:

“I always hear that people like reap the benefits up until the thesis and then quit [emphasis added]...But I wasn't going to do that.”

We will discuss a possible solution to this issue that would re-structure the program in the “Recommendations” section.

Sub-Theme 2: Honors Events

To try to build a stronger community, the honors program holds both social and academic events. Social events include parties and other activities like “March Madness” basketball brackets, and Relay for Life. Academic events include weekly workshops offered to students who are working on their thesis. Here they can meet other students who are pursuing honors and get to know faculty that can assist them. Attendance at these events tends to be fairly low, especially with upperclassmen. Why is event attendance so low? The first reason we came across was that whether a student lives on or off campus has an effect:

“I know they plan programs but I think living off campus has big impact on that as well” (Participant 5).

“I went to some of the things when I was in Shenandoah but since moving off campus I've become more invested in my own program and moving forward I can't relate to anyone else in my own program. The only thing right now that ties me to the program is my senior project” (Participant 4).

With the senior project being the main connection to the program for some students, this could be an attrition issue because the percentage of students who actually complete their thesis is very low and there's nothing else keeping these students in the community. However, there were students who did find the value in these events, especially academic workshops. Participant 15 explains that after attending a workshop, she was disappointed she hadn't gone sooner:

“I didn't keep in contact with the actual Honors Program much about the thesis...I've got all those e-mails, there are a lot of things, and I went to one actually two weeks ago. It was incredibly helpful and kind of made me angry at myself that I hadn't been to more earlier.”

She is not the only student who is aware of the program's efforts to build a stronger community. Participant 12 explained that students who want it can find connection and

community with these events, but it is voluntary and some students might not return the effort:

“The Honors Program does put together a lot of community things. And I've seen the emails, I'm aware that they are trying to bring everyone together. So, I think it's a voluntary thing. If you want to be a part of the community, you can.”

Participants 4 and 5, while they are completing their theses, admitted that living off campus has taken a toll on their overall involvement in the program. For some students, this could lead to attrition. While some students see the value in attending these events and recognize the program's efforts, the attendance issue needs to be addressed. We will make a suggestion to help with this problem in the “Recommendations” section.

Sub-Theme 3: Student Recognition

Out of all the students who are a part of the program, how many feel like they are recognized individually for both their triumphs and struggles? A lack of recognition can be the cause of a student's attrition as stated by Participant 3, who quit the honors program rather early:

“They never cared much about what I was doing and how I was doing...I had no motivation to continue from myself or the people at the honors program.”

Recognition is especially important as students begin their thesis process, often viewed as a daunting task. Participant 7 described that she felt like a face in the crowd until it was time to start her thesis and didn't appreciate the sudden pressure:

“I felt like they didn't start approaching me as an individual until I started my thesis. No one knew who I was in the honors program, and yet I was a good student and I did all the credits, and then I got there, and all of a

sudden there was all this pressure on me from people I didn't know and I was like, 'Well, I've been here the whole time.'

This student did not end up finishing her honors requirements and seemed to share the same sentiment as Participant 16 who explained that there doesn't seem to be much individual accountability for quitting the program and not pursuing the thesis. While this student is planning on completing her requirements, she notes that:

"If I was to work with a professor, it's like we have this relationship and I don't want this professor to think that I'm like a quitter. But if you're quitting the honor's program, like you're quitting to some face upstairs, it's not like you're letting anyone down. *You're not going to have anyone wondering why you in particular didn't want to do this* [emphasis added]."

Participant 5 expressed a similar sentiment when she stated, "It's easy to give up. There's nothing, no one is pushing you to stay in the Honors Program."

Why do students feel they don't have a relationship with anyone in the program? This is a very important question because it can play in to an issue brought up by Participant 11 on pg. 29 that some students feel the current precedent is to drop the program and a minority of students actually finish. We will explore this idea as we analyze students' thoughts on honors program communication.

Sub-Theme 4: Poor Communication:

From what we have observed, students are experiencing a lack of communication with honors program faculty. Here are statements from just a few students:

"I've never really met anyone in the honor's program. I didn't know that like anything existed upstairs [in Hillcrest] until I got to do honor's option..."
(Participant 16)

“I don't know any adult from there” (Participant 13).

“Honesty I didn't even know who to email from the honors program. Who do I email? Who's in charge of this?” (Participant 7)

These quotes suggest that many students don't have a face to relate with the honors program. Students who have interacted with honors faculty have had very positive experiences, but agree that there is a lack of communication between them and the rest of the students and that it's important to bridge this gap. Participant 17 explained that:

“They're very helpful when you reach out to them, but at the same time I think they have this idealized version of what the honors program is. I think they believe there's this whole community of just like honors people out there and we all hang out together... *I just feel completely out of touch with these people who are kind of helping to shape my future* [emphasis added].”

Participant 12 noted that when he had gone into the Hillcrest offices to turn in paperwork, the staff was very welcoming, knowledgeable, and aware of his needs:

“...so I thought they were doing a great job with forming that connection between students.”

While this comment is positive, it is important to note that this student only experienced this connection when he entered the honors building. There is still a communication issue when addressing the program as a whole.

The JMU honors program also has issues with its communication regarding the senior thesis. The overall theme of students' feelings about the program's current communication regarding the thesis can be summed up with one junior nursing major's statement:

“I have no idea what I'm supposed to be doing, when I'm supposed to be doing it” (Participant 8).

This illustrates a simple communication issue with what the honors programs expects of students for the thesis process and when they expect it and it was a common theme that students were confused and nervous when they came to the thesis.

Participant 5 described the thesis as:

“...a big cloud waiting for you...I felt pretty unprepared for the senior project, honestly...I understood the program in general, and I knew that there was some project like looming ahead but I didn't know exactly what it entailed.”

Participant 18 pointed out which specific aspect of the thesis process gave her the most trouble:

“Right before I started the whole theses was the point that where I almost quit. I didn't quite get the whole concept, nobody had really explained it to me...I was fine with starting the project on my own, I didn't need somebody to help me with that but I didn't know that I was supposed to register for the class.”

Participant 14 expressed these same feelings and the difficulty of connecting with the program both during the thesis and throughout her honors experience.

“I thought that these three parts of the project (499A, B, and C), were just-- what we did on our own--I didn't know about the registering for the classes. I was fine with doing it on my own but I didn't know... there's not somebody saying, 'well, you're getting to this point so you should be working on this.' I'm not saying there should be somebody holding your hand along the way, but it is very tough to have a connected personal experience with the program as a whole.”

From both students we see a communication issue regarding registration for the thesis component classes. Students explained that they believe they are capable of doing the thesis on their own but technical issues like this make the process difficult. This can be solved with a simple email reminder to students that they are responsible for getting these classes added to their schedule.

Another important factor to look at is how honors program requirements line up with those of specific disciplines and whether or not the honors program is communicating its requirements effectively regarding the thesis. Participant 16 explained that she also needed to write a thesis proposal for her major, but it required a different minimum GPA, which caused her uncertainty when trying to complete this step in the thesis process for honors. She noted that:

“... a lot of the things can be confusing like finding someone to help you with your thesis, when you need to start, what GPA you need to have...A lot of that stuff was really confusing especially between the honor's program and the disciplines.”

This could suggest a communication issue between the honors program and other colleges as students are getting confused, being given contradicting answers regarding their thesis. Despite comments of confusion and frustration, some students found the honors program's communication regarding the thesis to be effective. Participant 17 stated:

“I think honors program does a really good job of giving the resources you need to get started on a project and the expectations are set from the get go... I think the information is there. It's accessible. It's possible for people to understand the project and understand the expectations for the project.”

While this is encouraging, it is not consistent among many other students who we have quoted saying they encountered confusion and frustration when beginning their thesis. These communication issues need to be resolved and we will make suggestions in the “Recommendations” section.

**Condensed Comparison of Quotations from Students who Stayed and Left the
Program:**

MAJOR THEME: HONORS CLASS-RELATED EXPERIENCES Sub-Theme 1: Honors Gen-Ed Classes	Stayers	Leavers
Scheduling of Gen-Ed Classes	<p>“With nursing and honors you have to be completely done with all of your honors requirements by your junior year. So that means I was taking like two honors classes a semester, sometimes three. There is not really a whole lot of honors types of sciences classes, which I kind of think there should be” (Participant 8).</p>	<p>“I feel like the honors program is very science based, and I am not a science person, and I was looking for Humanities Gen Ed classes, and they really didn't offer that many. So whenever they would send out the list, and I'd look, I'd be like, ‘Oh Gosh, like, how am I going to get the credits?’” (Participant 7).</p>
Sub-Theme 2: Honors Seminar Classes		
Seminar Scheduling	<p>“Not only is it an additional class on top of the other ones you're taking but they typically want you to be more devoted and it's</p>	<p>“If you have 6 options, if you're interested in 4 of them and 3 of them fit your schedule, you can't get into them, especially as a</p>

	<p>a lot of reading. If you can't find one that's a topic you like you're even more discouraged to take it because not only is it an extra class but now it's just something that you're just getting through because you have to get them done. It's just like another thing off a checklist” (Participant 4).</p>	<p>freshman or a sophomore. You end up taking something you're not really interested in... there's a ton of ones I want to take so that was really cool, but when I was a freshman and sophomore and I had room in my schedule, I couldn't get into them” (Participant 10).</p>
<p>Sub-Theme 3: Honors Option</p>		
<p>Lack of Openness of Faculty</p>	<p>“Some of my professors, as far as like my science professors, really weren't interested in doing an honors option. So I ended up having to do an honors option with the class that I wasn't really that interested in...I think in some ways some professors just don't really know</p>	<p>“Professors are really, like, hesitant to do them. Not a lot of them offer. Some of them outright deny them” (Participant 10).</p>

	<p>what they are...I think it took three professors to contact before I got one” (Participant 8).</p>	
<p>Value of Honors Options</p>	<p>“I actually understand [the material] way more because I have this extra like thing that goes along with it. I really like the honor's option because I think that being in the honor's program allowed me to get to know my professors better” (Participant 16).</p>	<p>“Honors options are not a valuable tool. It's not a valuable experience to go through. It's an extra project, presentation, or paper. So, <i>you're just adding more work. It's not a deeper, more enriching experience</i> [emphasis added]” (Participant 10).</p>
<p>Sub-Theme 4: Honors Professors</p>	<p>“I wish they could've spoken more instead of like leaving a lot of the discussion to us because we're not knowledgeable on these topics. We're like in the class to learn more about it. And the majority of honor</p>	

	<p>students that I talked to, they say the same thing about seminars. They're just like, 'We just do it because we have to,' but they're not-- they're not the best in the world'" (Participant 17).</p>	
<p>Sub-Theme 5: Honors Study Abroad</p>	<p>"That was an opportunity I probably wouldn't have gotten to do if it weren't for the Honors Program. That was the first time I ever went abroad anywhere, so that was a huge deal and I was so excited for it and <i>it was an amazing experience that I always remember.</i></p> <p><i>Because of that I am very thankful for the Honors Program [emphasis added]"</i></p>	<p>"They offer the study abroad option, you could get your seminars done, but not everyone can either get into that program or afford that program" (Participant 10).</p>

	(Participant 12).	
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MAJOR THEME: HONORS THESIS	Stayers	Leavers
Sub-Theme 1: Identifying Advisors	One of the people I spoke to said that my graduating with honors isn't going to be something that stands out on my resume... <i>it was just hard trying to find someone that not only believed in me but was willing to help me for the next year and a half...[added emphasis]</i> (Participant 4).	“I just had email type of correspondence. I didn't actually get to meet the person, which was kind of a problem. So it really wasn't that prevalent really, the presence of the advisor. It would have definitely helped” (Participant 9).
Sub-Theme 2: Variance in Value	“It was kind of unreal; they give you the like little medallion when you turn it in. I was like, "Oh my God!" But it's definitely, my greatest accomplishment. It was the best feeling ever (Participant 18).	“You're an outlier if you do it, like everybody drops it seems” (Participant 11).
Sub-Theme 3: Thesis Workload	“By the time you got to your senior year you've done almost everything other than the actual research...” (Participant 14)	“I wanted to honestly just not kill myself my senior year and somewhat enjoy it (Participant 11).

MAJOR THEME: HONORS PROGRAM	Stayers	Leavers
Sub-Theme 1: Program Flexibility	“...with nursing and honors you have to be completely done all of your honors requirements by your junior year. So that means I was taking like two honors classes a semester, sometimes three...” (Participant 8).	“The honor's program doesn't reward hard-working students...it adds more work onto them” (Participant 10).
Sub-Theme 2: Honors Events	“I went to some of the things when I was in Shenandoah but since moving off campus I've become more invested in my own program and moving forward I can't relate to anyone else in my own program. The only thing right now that ties me to the program is my senior project” (Participant 4).	“I never really got involved with program things. I would always get the emails, but I would just ignore it because I didn't have time for it” (Participant 6).
Sub-Theme 3: Student recognition	“It's easy to give up. There's nothing, no one is pushing you to stay in the Honors Program” (Participant 5).	“They never cared much about what I was doing and how I was doing...I had no motivation to continue from myself or the people at the honors program” (Participant 3).
Sub-Theme 4: Program Communication	“...a big cloud waiting for you...I felt pretty unprepared for the	“Honesty I didn't even know who to email from the

	senior project, honestly...I understood the program in general, and I knew that there was some project like looming ahead but I didn't know exactly what it entailed" (Participant 5).	honors program. Who do I email? Who's in charge of this?" (Participant 7)
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RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Greater Emphasis on Writing

Issue addressed: *Perceived Value of thesis*

One student commented that a lot of work samples she used for applications for internships and other presentations came from her honors classes. She suggested that the honors program should place a lot of emphasis on writing because it's something that JMU as a whole doesn't really bring to the table.

“I think a lot of majors do not focus on writing papers, and that's something that the honors program should maybe focus on in the future, you know, tell people like, "If you want to be a good writer, you know, be in the honors program," because I didn't really have any papers to show to people until I was in those classes” (Participant 7).

This focus on writing could increase the perceived value of participating in the program through the thesis, which would decrease attrition. This would also give the honors program a competitive advantage compared with other programs that may not emphasize writing.

Recommendation 2: Seminar Survey

Issue Addressed: *Seminar Scheduling*

To assist with the scheduling of Honors seminars and Gen-Eds, it would help students if they had more options that they were interested in. Participant 4 suggests that a survey of students' interests could help make this happen:

“I wish there would have been more seminars offered or that they would have taken a survey to see maybe what people were interested in and maybe gauged around that.”

If students have more seminars they are interested in taking, there is a better chance one of these will fit their schedule. This resolves the scheduling frustration issue many students have been facing.

Recommendation 3: Thesis Participants: Where are they now?

Issues Addressed: *Value in doing thesis, program communication regarding thesis, perceptions of thesis workload.*

One of the issues we've discussed concerns a perceived low value of completing the senior thesis. Students did have some suggestions for helping to resolve the issue. First, students believed providing proof of past students' success after completing the thesis may inspire others to follow. This could include visits from alumni, video testimonials, and presentations by professors in different fields on how the thesis can help students succeed after graduation. This can be valuable for students in both their freshman year when they first learn about the thesis, and junior year when they are set to start:

"I'm pretty sure there is proof out there that people have benefited from completing the Honors Program because, you know, you got to say you did all this extra work and it gives you something to talk about on an interview being able to say that you did this big project...like let's say a sophomore in college. I think if you get an alum who is deemed successful or, you know, just doing something cool in their field, someone who others maybe want to be like in a couple of years. If we get them in and we label it as, you know, so and so graduated with Honors and is here to explain why Honors helped her reach her dreams the year after she graduated" (Participant 12).

"Maybe if they like put testimonials of people who did their thesis and then, you know, show how they used it...And I definitely think that if they have professors come, if they a student come, and they have video testimonials. I think that it would help especially maybe introduce it to the

freshmen. And then, you know, show it again to people who are considering doing the thesis as juniors” (Participant 16).

Hearing from alumni and professors may also help give students a clearer idea of what the workload is like and show them that it is possible balance the thesis with schoolwork, extra-curriculars, and a social life. In addition to seeing the possibilities for success by completing the thesis, one student wished there could be specific benefits, exclusively for those students doing the thesis for provide more immediate incentives for them:

“Maybe there could be specific benefits, just first, upper class students who are pursuing the project that maybe they could think of benefits that you get once you reach that level. So, it's kind of there's like a seniority to the system or to the process. So, like people when they are freshmen they see like, ‘Oh, that senior is working on his project. He's got like all these benefits’” (Participant 17).

Recommendation 4: Well-Advertised thesis presentation opportunity
Issues addressed: *low perceived value and lack of recognition for doing thesis.*

Participant 6 explained that she was unaware of any opportunity to present her senior thesis after completion and this was one of the reasons she did not see much value in doing it. When we asked Participant 14 about how to create a higher perceived value of the thesis, she suggested, “A reception at the end of the year but that you could do as a kind of congratulations for finishing everything.”

The program does put on a symposium for seniors to create a poster and present their work, but there seems to be a lack of awareness among students of this opportunity. The program should make more efforts to advertise this symposium as not just a way to show off their finished product, but to be rewarded for all of their hard work.

Recommendation 5: Accelerated Gen-Ed program

Issues Addressed: *Inflexible program structure, thesis workload, incentive to commit to honors.*

Participant 10 commented that the honors program as a whole just creates added work for students, instead of a more enriched environment. We asked her what changes she would like to see. She suggested an accelerated Gen-Ed program for honors students and brought up some interesting points. First, she explained that Gen-Ed classes are valuable to provide students with a well-rounded education. She also noted that honors students are already being perceived as more well-rounded students than others, as seen on their application to the program. Therefore, they should be treated differently than non-honors students coming in. For example, if an honors student took AP-level classes in high school, taking them again in college isn't helping them to learn more:

“It's important that no matter what your major is that you have a well-rounded education, but I also feel like students who were honors, who were honors-types of students who did well in high school or well in the beginning of their college or however, whenever they get in, they, it should show, like, you are a well-rounded student. You took AP, you know, college-level classes in all these subjects in high school. If I took Pre-Calc in high school, you shouldn't make me do that just for the sake of a well-rounded education.”

She expanded her idea relating to the Gen-Ed clusters that students at JMU are required to take. Currently, students are required to take at least one class per cluster. She suggests giving honors students more freedom and flexibility in choosing Gen-Ed courses:

“Say instead of, you have to take a class in each section, pick a section. Or, like, for the math and science. Rather than having to take a math, a science and a lab, pick 1. Like, pick a science, like either do a science with

a lab or a science without or math...I'm a good student and you know I'm a good student, don't make me take classes that I have no interest in. They're just going to drag my GPA down."

Drawing from this student's proposal, we have come up with a suggestion for an accelerated Gen-Ed program as well. We saw through our interviews that students don't feel a lot of accountability to the honors program. To a lot of students, the program is not viewed as a firm commitment, but rather, something to exploit until the benefits run out. Our suggestion would create a stronger sense of commitment among students by putting more at stake for them.

When honors students come in as track I or track II, they are exempt from a number of Gen-Ed courses and are able to start taking classes for their major earlier in their career. This allows them room in their schedule to pick up a minor, or complete all of their major requirements sooner. By their junior year, students have enjoyed an accelerated program that is less stressful because they didn't spend their first couple of semesters catching up on Gen-Eds and they are ready to start the thesis. This way, their workload for those semesters will not be as high, as they theoretically won't be taking as many higher level classes. They will feel a sense of accountability to complete the thesis because the honors program granted them the partial Gen-Ed exemption their freshman year. Now, what if in their junior year students decide honors isn't for them and they don't want to do the thesis after all? Because they are breaking this commitment, they will be required to make up all or a percentage of the Gen-Ed courses which they were previously exempt from. This is a strong incentive for students to stick with the thesis, yet it still gives them the freedom to choose. This is a large change to

implement and it faces obstacles like hour requirements for JMU's Gen-Ed program but it is something that could help tremendously to alleviate program attrition.

Recommendation 5: Mandatory Events

Issues Addressed: *Low event attendance, communication between the program and students.*

We discussed low attendance of honors program events and off-campus living, and other priorities as key issues. We asked students about how to increase attendance at both social and academic events. One student explained that she felt she had too much autonomy in the program, especially when it was time to start the thesis. She suggested making certain academic events mandatory to keep it more structured, as well as specific honors advisers for students:

“I almost had too much free reign over what I could do. It needs to be more structured, and I think that having mandatory meetings and having an honors advisor would make you more accountable and would make you get more structured. Being like, ‘Okay, you know, here's this person, and they're going to help you. This is where you direct your answers’” (Participant 7).

When we brought up making events mandatory to another student she said she wasn't sure how effective it would be, but made another suggestion:

“...instead of having like this mandatory event because people are always going to be like, ‘Oh, but we'll be out of town.’ If you have X amount of events and then say like, ‘If you want to still be a part of this program, then you have to go to one workshop and one social event a semester’, or just like something like that” (Participant 15).

Similar to requiring attendance of honors events, one student mentioned a “point system” used on her club sports team that could be adjusted for the honors program:

“If honor students got points to show up to social events or show up to seminars that they hold, that would be kind of an incentive to stay with it and become more involved” (Participant 14).

Students would be required to make a certain number of points to remain in good standing with the program and students who attend more events, could receive some kind of prize. Policies like this take the honors program into the direction of being considered more of a student organization. This could help build a stronger sense of community among honors students, which was an issue for attrition:

“I think of it as a program not an organization, you know, it's an individual thing whereas student ambassadors and any team that you're on is a team effort, it's your own kind of community that you create or [get] involved in. And I think, you know, there are just a lot more relationships and friendships created in those organizations rather than in this one unfortunately” (Participant 14)

This student had another idea for building a stronger community for students in different tracks. For example, she suggested track I students doing something to welcome track II members:

“when they have new members come into student ambassadors, I've few friends that are in there, they'd go and show up to their house and like, you got in, you know, and they get everybody excited” (Participant 14).

Making the honors program more of a campus organization rather than a program can help students form more relationships and see more value in committing to the program and therefore reduce attrition.

Recommendation 6: Stronger connection with students and their disciplines

Issues addressed: *Program communication, accommodating smaller majors.*

As stated previously, Participant 7 suggested assigning students an honors adviser, along with their adviser for their major. This would help the honors program to

maintain a stronger presence in students' schedules and create more of a personal relationship between them and a person from the program. During meetings with these honors advisors, students can be reminded of program requirements and the layout of the senior thesis so they are not as intimidated by it their junior year.

Building on this, we discussed communication issues between the honors program and other departments. We know there are students who feel the honors program is geared toward certain, more popular majors. Participant 4, an Interior Architecture and Industrial Design Major, wishes there was more support for the honors program from faculty members in her discipline:

“My program is probably one of the smallest on campus, but if the Honors Program could just reach out and maybe find faculty that are interested or give them some sort of incentive to help these students that are willing to put in this extra work and this extra time and have a faculty member that's supporting them I think that would foster a little bit more collaboration and encourage these students including myself that are kind of debating stopping their participation in the Honors Program because of their senior project.”

Incentives for faculty would assist students with current issues identifying thesis advisers, as well as provide for more representation of smaller majors in the program.

Recommendation 7: More open communication with higher faculty

Issues Addressed: *Program communication, student recognition.*

Poor communication between the honors program and its students is evident to many students. Participant 17 suggested more events with the higher faculty of the honors program:

“Like bridging the gap between administration and the students kind of like how President Alger does with his like breakfast--I think it was like last

semester. Even though he's like inaccessible pretty much because he's like the President of our university, he appears accessible because he makes a point of like having breakfast with the students and walking around campus. As I've talked to people, they say, you know, as you progress further in the program, you kind of get more independent. I wish we could have an event with Dr. Falk. Like more of like the head people of the honors program.”

More opportunities to meet with higher faculty within the honors program can help students to build stronger connections with the program itself and reduce attrition.

Recommendation 8: Freshman class about thesis

Issues Addressed: *Communication regarding thesis*

Multiple students had suggestions for improving the honors program’s communication with students regarding the thesis. One suggestion is to introduce a class for students to take freshman year, similar to 499A, where they begin learning about the project and what their options are:

“I think like even doing something before 499A, like a one-credit class just to start to think about it, where they show you different ideas or like something like that” (Participant 8).

“I think it would be cool if they had a 499 A class, something similar to that for freshmen” (Participant 5).

Similarly, Participant 10 suggested assigning faculty thesis mentors to students within their major early on. Though they may not actually end up being their thesis adviser, students can form relationships with these faculty members that will help them further along in the process:

“So say it's like by second semester freshmen year and you get it at the end of your freshman year. Because even if you don't start working on it for another year, that's still someone that you're meeting with maybe twice

a semester or once a semester, being like, what are you thinking about? What are you talking about in your classes? You have a relationship so when you're trying to start the project, you don't have to go searching for somebody, you've already been talking about projects, it's already part of your schedule" (Participant 10).

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