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Getting More for Less: When Downsizing in Honors Yields Growth

JANET C. MYERS AND MARY JO FESTLE

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In an anonymous response to an honors senior survey on the question “How are you different now than when you first came to college?” one student reflected:

One of the biggest things is that I am much more confident in myself and in how I want to spend my life. . . . Also, the idea of Graduate school and the work involved no longer worries me. Instead, I am confident that I can succeed and am very excited to do so. This is largely due to writing for [Honors] classes, and most of all, my thesis experience.

. . . Overall, I have become a better person.

Another student wrote:

Before coming to Elon, I did not have a grasp on my academic passions. While here I discovered I have a great interest in issues of income inequality, especially in the case of Latin America, and I discovered graduate school would be the best path for me to continue pursuing my interests in solving problems in this area.

The outcomes described in these two student voices represent the best of what we hope for in an undergraduate education in an honors program: the pleasure in discovering one’s academic passions; the self-assurance that comes with identifying personal strengths and developing a sense of purpose; and the curiosity and confidence to seek out future opportunities to extend one’s learning whether in graduate school or elsewhere.

These students are representative of the first class of honors students to graduate in Elon University’s newly designed Honors Program, which was revamped to create a smaller, more structured program beginning in 2003–2004. After reviewing NCHC materials and the characteristics of other honors programs nationwide, a committee of Elon faculty, administrators,

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and students set out to design a new structure that would, as our new mission statement says, “prepare [students] to excel in graduate or professional pursuits as independent, hard-working, open-minded, lifelong learners and honorable community members.” To achieve these goals, we work to expand students’ minds by introducing them to new ideas; improve their critical thinking, research, and communication skills; provide an intellectual community inside and, to a lesser extent, outside the classroom; and challenge and support them in the highest possible academic achievements.

The most important and most obvious change to the Elon Honors Program entailed decreasing the size of the program. The new program accepts half as many students each year, striving for an incoming class each fall of forty versus eighty students. This reduction, in turn, has allowed our program to evolve in the following important, interrelated ways, all of which we see as strengthening the program considerably:

- the program offers a more structured, yet innovative curriculum;
- the program’s curriculum now includes an extensive thesis requirement;
- the program offers enhanced opportunities for students to extend learning beyond the classroom and become part of a strong intellectual community.

In forging these changes, we elected to measure growth not by the size of the program but by the degree to which the new program meets the goals of our mission statement. We believe the program’s new courses have created a more consistent challenge, that the thesis has resulted in significant individual learning and impressive academic achievement, and that greater attention to matters beyond the classroom has dramatically improved the development of a true intellectual community.

Reducing the size of the Elon Honors Program made it possible to enhance the coherence and academic rigor of its curriculum. In the old program, students were required to take any four honors courses at any time over the course of four years. These courses were basically “honorized” versions of existing courses, and, though many were excellent and they offered the advantage of flexibility, students nonetheless had divergent experiences of the program depending on the particular set of courses they took. Needing to offer courses for fewer students made it easier for the program to revise the curriculum into one that is more structured and that provides students with a more consistent classroom experience.

In the new program, students take one honors course per semester for their first two years at Elon, followed by one more course sometime during their third or fourth year. The table below summarizes the four-year honors curricular requirements, based on a four-hour curriculum in which students typically take sixteen hours per semester. Honors requirements constitute

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about 22% of an honors student's credit load over four years, and most fulfill the university's General Studies requirements.

Year	Fall Semester	Spring Semester
First Year	The Global Experience— Honors section	Discipline-Based Honors Seminar (in the liberal arts)
Second Year	Team-Taught Interdisciplinary Seminar I	Team-Taught Interdisciplinary Seminar II
Third Year	Thesis Preparation Workshops	Thesis Proposal General Studies Interdisciplinary Seminar (may be taken any semester in 3 rd or 4 th year)
Fourth Year	Thesis Research	Thesis Research and Defense

Courses in the Honors Program are taught by professors with a strong record of teaching who offer discipline-based or team-taught interdisciplinary seminars that are intentionally designed with honors learning outcomes in mind. All are *new* liberal arts courses that present concepts through multiple lenses, require reading beyond a textbook, encourage the development of research and writing skills, and promote good critical thinking. They are expected to stimulate sophisticated questions and teach students how to find and evaluate answers. They should have a great deal of student discussion and engagement, and they offer students a significant but reasonable challenge. While the courses differ from one another (and rotate), this attention to meeting Honors Program outcomes insures that students are exposed to a more uniform set of experiences, ideas, and skills.

Faculty have responded enthusiastically to the call to design innovative new honors courses, and students report being challenged by courses that expose them to novel ideas, theories, and ways of looking at the world. Examples of first-year, discipline-based seminars include *Vulnerability and Resilience Across the Lifespan* (Psychology), *The Humanities and Love* (Art History), *Re-Reading the Nineteenth Century* (English), and *Self and Society in Modern America* (Sociology). Examples of interdisciplinary team-taught seminars have included *The Challenges of New Reproductive Technologies* (Biology and Religious Studies), *The Civil Rights Movement in Memory and Literature* (History and English), *Literary Journalism* (Sociology and Communications), *The Cold War in Press and Politics* (Communications and Political Science), *Exploring Consciousness* (Psychology and Religious

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Studies), and *Disability Past and Present* (History and Education). While some individual courses are more popular than others, in general student evaluations indicate they provide extensive, stimulating opportunities for class discussion and for the development of research and writing skills.

Student evaluations and other feedback suggest that there are multiple benefits to the new curriculum. Because the program admits a group of forty students per year, we can offer small classes (of about twenty) that help create a strong sense of intellectual community within each cohort of students. One faculty member, reflecting on her honors course at mid-semester, identified a spirit of collective engagement as an especially prominent, and positive, feature in her classroom:

They have been a good group overall and . . . are very high on social cohesion! I have never ever seen group evals where all members rated each other 100% effort. I believe they all contributed too. Amazing. There are some real shining stars in the class that make it a pleasure to discuss the material. And they LOVE each other.

This strong sense of community often extends beyond the classroom, with students reporting that they frequently continue discussions about provocative ideas after class, on the way to lunch, and in their dorms.

In addition to promoting intellectual community, the courses challenge students in a number of ways. (Indeed, 100% of students said their honors courses were challenging in a recent senior survey.) First, by taking both discipline-based and interdisciplinary courses, students learn that knowledge is not based solely in one discipline; like the professors who model this approach, they are challenged to make connections between ideas and approaches from one class to another. In end-of-semester evaluations, one student wrote, “The multiple approaches to understanding material were incredibly intriguing.” Another elaborated further on the provocative nature of the courses: “Really cool content + readings, mind-blowing discussions + new ideas, left me thinking about it after class all the time, really cool having discussion from these two different fields.” Students in both types of courses undertake challenging individual or group research projects suitable for the course topic. These projects in turn provide the necessary scaffolding to assure the Honors Program, the faculty mentors, and the students themselves that they will be well prepared to take on a more substantial project in their own field when they begin the capstone thesis in the third year. Although students, especially in the first year, are sometimes intimidated by the prospect of a substantial research project, most appreciate the experience they gain—sometimes only in hindsight—through these early challenges.

One noted, "I know many students were overwhelmed with our two major writing assignments, though I realize they were 'beneficial' in helping me prepare for the fast-approaching thesis."

Complementing the coursework, another component of the program that contributes to the coherence and academic rigor of the overall curriculum is the honors thesis project, which is perhaps the most dramatic innovation of Elon's smaller program. The senior honors thesis is a substantial independent capstone project undertaken with the assistance of a faculty mentor in which the student studies a carefully defined question or problem over the course of at least a year and a half. Prior to revamping our program, some honors students opted to perform undergraduate research, but scaling down the size of each class has allowed us to increase the level of challenge and support for such endeavors. Because Elon is a small university of about 5200 (primarily undergraduate) students, requiring eighty Honors students per cohort to undertake undergraduate research (at the same time other Elon students participated) would have put a serious strain on the faculty and might have been impossible. But with forty or fewer honors students in each cohort, there are enough mentors and we can expect more sustained and higher-quality faculty engagement with honors students. In addition, again because of the smaller numbers, the program has been able to gain an institutional commitment to compensate faculty mentors for their work at a very generous rate. In exchange, mentors work closely with individual students on a thesis for an extended period, from the initial stages of developing a topic and formulating a proposal, to creating an impressive product appropriate to the discipline, to presenting the work for an audience that typically extends beyond Elon.

While the final products our first graduating class of students created were impressive, often exceeding program expectations in terms of both length and quality, another benefit of the smaller cohort and more intensive mentoring was consistently evident in students' own written, end-of-semester reflections. In many ways, these reflections attest to the fact that students had gained a genuine understanding of what true research is, including the joys and setbacks that go along with it. One student summed up the importance of this benefit when she wrote that "participating in this research experience has given me insight into all the work that goes into each and every one of these scholarly journal articles that I have been reading over the past three years. Though I have not yet completed my project, I already have a greater respect for researchers." Students gained this kind of informed perspective on research first and foremost by learning the basics—by going through the steps that are necessary before doing a large project and by learning research skills that are applicable across disciplines. These included a complex array of skills that ranged from how to manage their time when there were no class

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meetings or tests telling them when to do what, to how to write for different audiences, to how to do hundreds of citations.

An important outcome of the “less is more” approach to our program was that students were transformed in various ways by their thesis experiences. They became practitioners of their discipline—using its terminology with ease, using sophisticated methods and equipment, analyzing data perceptively, and writing like a political scientist, mathematician, or biologist. They also honed essential research skills like conducting interviews, coding psychological data from videotaped observations, writing survey questions, and making and using contacts in the accounting world. They increased their confidence that they can do these things independently. They realized that learning is a process, not just a limited time effort put forth for a class and grade.

These lessons that I have learned are a whole lot deeper and meaningful to life than I ever thought I would gain from working on a research paper. But I have found that this thesis is much more than a research paper, because when you put your effort and heart into a project combined with others, it takes on so much more significance.

When describing themselves while reflecting on the thesis process, students used adjectives including “excited,” “proud,” “confident,” “amazed,” and “absolutely thrilled.” Most found that the work was rewarding. Sixteen of nineteen surveyed said they were glad they had done a thesis. And when asked what they were most proud of in their entire undergraduate career, in stark contrast to students in the old program who rarely mentioned intellectual work, over half volunteered that it was their thesis.

And students had ample reason to be proud. Their projects were ambitious. One student traveled to Florida to interview (in Spanish) a hundred and one migrant farm workers and ran a number of different economic analyses on the data she obtained; others visited numerous historical archives, including some while spending a semester studying abroad; a mathematics student made a significant new finding; another opted to write her fifty-plus page thesis in Spanish as a “personal challenge.” There was also external validation of the quality of their work. While honors students are required to present their thesis research publicly somewhere, with the minimum standard being Elon’s own Student Undergraduate Research Forum, many took their work to regional or national audiences. Out of twenty-two students, eight were accepted to the National Conference on Undergraduate Research, and others presented at venues ranging from student conferences to regional and national discipline-based conferences. Examples included the Symposium for Young Neuroscientists and Professors of the Southeast (SYNAPSE), the Joint

Mathematics Meeting of the Mathematical Association of America, the Phi Alpha Theta (history honor society) Regional Conference of the Carolinas, and conferences for the Society for Applied Anthropology, Eastern Economics Association, Water Resources Research Institute, and Association for Research on Mothering.

Students also found the intensive mentoring relationship involved in a thesis to be enriching. Indeed, in an unusually unanimous response to a question in the senior survey, *every single one* of the students agreed with the statement, "I had a helpful thesis mentor." One student wrote:

One of the things I'm most pleased about is how well [my mentor] and I have worked together this semester. She has been extremely supportive of all that I've done. She tells me that she finds it gratifying to have a student who's passionate about what they're (sic) doing, and in that same way I find it gratifying to have a professor who so obviously appreciates the effort I'm putting in.

Another student attested to the intellectual stimulation and professional growth in a discipline that can occur as a result of such mentoring:

One of my favorite aspects of the thesis has been the weekly meetings to discuss the research we have read. Usually the discussions begin with the assigned material, but we almost always end up talking about a wide range of topics related to the field . . . I have been most pleased with the opportunity the honors thesis project gave me to form a one-on-one relationship with a professor in my major. This has been extremely helpful when going through the graduate application process.

Students appreciate the fact that faculty mentors are clearly welcoming them into the world of academia. As a result, many are considering continuing in intellectual communities after they leave Elon. Sixteen out of nineteen respondents on a senior survey administered in the spring indicated that they planned to attend graduate or professional school while seven had already been accepted into one or more graduate programs. Particularly at a small university, the intensive mentoring that fosters such interests is only possible by limiting the number of students who do undergraduate research projects of this scope.

The last benefit of decreasing the size of the Elon Honors Program is that we have been able to put more emphasis on learning outside the classroom and on building community. A number of students in the old program complained that they did not feel a part of the program. "There should be more interaction between Honors students," one noted, "something to help us bond

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as a group.” Greater community came about in part simply because of numbers. In cutting the number of students in half, it became easier for students to get to know one another, which is a prerequisite for building community. Some familiarity with one another’s ideas and interests happens naturally through the newly revised curriculum; although a multitude of factors determine which students take which of the two courses offered each semester, the odds are that they know everyone in their cohort fairly well by the end of the second year. Learning outside the classroom also results from the expectations that honors students attend at least five extra-curricular cultural or intellectual events each semester. Some honors courses integrate outside speakers and events into their courses, and the Honors Program encourages attendance with occasional discussions and incentives like prize drawings.

Greater attention to learning outside the classroom has also been enhanced significantly by putting more emphasis on honors learning communities. Adding a new housing alternative as part of the program’s restructuring meant that Honors Fellows now have the option of participating in one of two honors learning communities. In one of them, Honors occupies a floor of a residence hall that has thirty-one beds. That opportunity existed before the program’s restructuring, but the floor did not have a faculty advisor and in reality was merely a living space rather than an intentional community. In the other community, the recently built Honors Pavilion offers a nicely equipped, free-standing building that houses twenty-two students. Both learning communities include a student Resident Advisor and a faculty advisor who assist residents in setting goals, planning activities, and consciously thinking about what it means to be part of a community. In the Honors Pavilion, the faculty member lives on site, and there is also a lounge, a kitchen, and two classrooms, which are available for study, discussion, and film screenings after normal class hours. This arrangement of space intentionally blurs the lines between academics and other aspects of campus life.

It has been our experience that building community and traditions within these learning communities takes time and can depend a great deal on the personalities involved, but reducing the size of the program has helped make these efforts more successful, if the reporting of students and faculty advisors, the choices of students to continue living with one another, and the numbers of activities (both planned and spontaneous) serve as evidence. Students from the Honors floor reported with pride that they functioned best as a community: eating meals together and regularly taking over the local coffee shop; studying together in the hallway; creating T-shirts for themselves; winning a competition against other learning communities; performing a service project; maintaining active committees; celebrating each other’s birthdays; and attending plays and lectures together. Students in the free-standing William

R. Kenan Jr. Honors Pavilion (affectionately nicknamed the “Billy House”) were also very close, frequently referring to their community as a family. In his housing application, one current resident hoping to remain in the house for another year wrote that he was a bit skeptical before he moved in as a freshman, having seen the Facebook group that claimed, “The Billy House is the Best Place to Live Ever!” But soon he was convinced. “During my first semester, I went through the same orientation, took the same core courses, and traversed the same campus as every other freshman; however, I was one of only a handful with a family waiting at home each night,” he reported. “I understand that the term ‘family’ is about as cliché as it gets, yet I believe that it is the single most appropriate word to describe the community within the honors pavilion.”

While one could argue that such strong bonds may be common within any learning community, the honors communities seem to be especially successful at integrating the personal and the intellectual. The comments of another Billy House resident ably illustrate how students’ personal and academic lives are interwoven:

The family dynamic of Billy House is amazing. Every person in the community is a unique individual, and these personal differences are recognized. We each have our own lives . . . but at the end of the day we are a family. These are the people I share my meals with; the ones who take care of me when I am sick; the ones with whom I can go to Cook-Out at 3 a.m. and end up in a deep philosophical conversation about morality. I look to the people in Billy House for guidance when deciding where to eat, registering for classes, making plans for the weekend and exploring my study abroad options.

The way this student’s description interweaves aspects of daily life with distinctively academic concerns such as philosophical discussions or academic planning begins to suggest how a learning community might function to integrate these elements. Another student reinforces this unique balancing of personal and academic pursuits: “We all focus on academics and so the atmosphere of the learning community is calmer and quieter than other dorms . . . It really is like a family where we care about how the other is doing. We want to see one another succeed and that’s a connection that’s rare to find anywhere else.” We feel certain that the learning communities succeed in meeting the goal of facilitating the discussion of ideas outside the classroom and strengthening bonds between the students. We suspect this sense of community is beneficial not only because it helps personal comfort and development but also because it contributes to students’ intellectual engagement and confidence.

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The new Elon Honors Program is not perfect. Some students complain about a lack of choice in the new curriculum; some of the new courses are more successful than others; some students are intimidated by the challenge the thesis presents; and some students still drop out because the program is not right for them. But from our point of view, it is a significant improvement over the old program. In general, honors students in the new program have been challenged and engaged. The more structured curriculum, higher expectations for undergraduate research associated with the thesis, and greater attention to learning outside the classroom have led to intellectual challenge, personal development, and community just as envisioned in our mission statement. Current Elon Honors Program students have gone further in their intellectual achievements than previous honors students. They have done so in part because of the increased and more effective support of the university, individual faculty, the Honors Program, and one another.

And evidence from university admissions suggests that Elon's Honors program *is* growing, not in the traditional sense of increased size but in enhanced reputation. One unintentional effect of decreasing the size of the program has been that the program has become more competitive, as reflected in higher averages for SAT scores, high school grades, and class rank for each incoming class in recent years. Although the university made a substantial new financial investment in the thesis as part of the program's restructuring, this shift in selectivity came about without having to significantly supplement scholarship resources since cutting the program in half meant that these resources had effectively increased. So for the Elon University Honors Program, less has meant more. While we have focused here primarily on the opportunities the new program provides to students, honors at Elon has also offered benefits for faculty, administrators, and the institution. Faculty affiliated with the new program profit from opportunities to design and teach innovative new honors courses or to mentor talented, motivated students on the thesis. Administrators and indeed the institution as a whole benefit from sheltering an increasingly selective honors program that will help to shape highly successful graduates whose achievements will in turn reflect well upon Elon. But ultimately, we are most pleased with how our choice to downsize has meant more for our students: in terms of more growth, more learning, and more achievement.

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