

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Chapters from NCHC Monographs Series

National Collegiate Honors Council

2019

Honors Value Added: Where We Came From, and What We Need to Know Next

Hallie E. Savage

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchcmonochap>



Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), [Higher Education Administration Commons](#), [Liberal Studies Commons](#), and the [Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons](#)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the National Collegiate Honors Council at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Chapters from NCHC Monographs Series by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Honors Value Added: Where We Came From, and What We Need to Know Next

HALLIE E. SAVAGE
CLARION UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

THE VALUE ADDED IMPERATIVE

The pressure is on, and growing greater when it comes to defining, disseminating, and defending the value of higher education generally and the reasons for funding it (Harnisch 2011). Complaints abound regarding the rising costs of higher education, and many legislators and the public are demanding accountability. Funding cuts are forcing many colleges and universities to prioritize and to evaluate what merits support and what does not. As a part of a large array of undergraduate programs, honors programs and honors colleges face increasingly greater pressure to justify their existence.

That said, honors programs and colleges are in a good position to make a case for the value that honors adds to institutional outcomes. Honors education is known nationally and internationally

for leadership in high-quality undergraduate programs. Honors faculty enjoy the opportunity to create unique and innovative learning environments, with academically talented undergraduate students as the immediate beneficiaries. Institutions benefit from recruitment of ambitious, motivated students who typically have higher retention and graduation rates when compared to those in the traditional student population. Yet despite these obvious institutional benefits, questions persist regarding the value that honors adds and how precisely that value is to be measured.

The term “value added” has emerged in higher education in reference to models that can be used to evaluate, monitor, and improve an institution (Kim and Lalancette 2013). Institutional outcomes have mainly focused on student performance measures such as scores on standardized tests or the percentage of students progressing to higher levels of education. Student performance can also be measured through group metrics such as retention and graduation rates. Our outcomes-based culture is driven by the need for assessments of value added that capture demonstrably the impact institutions have on improving student performance. An institution’s achievement on performance indicators may be significant for funding purposes—e.g., state appropriations—so that such measures become crucial to a school’s fiscal health.

The value of honors programs and colleges and, consequently, the contribution of honors to the institution are enthusiastically articulated by honors deans, directors, and college presidents. In 2015 the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* included a forum titled “The Value of Honors,” in which a cadre of higher education leaders described the benefits of honors programming and the contribution of such programming to institutions of higher education. As a president with a long tenure in higher education, E. Gordon Gee provided this view:

I have been around the block for the last thirty-plus years serving as president of five major institutions in the United States, and I can affirm that the increased value placed on an honors education is enriching entire universities and how they operate. (Gee 2015:177)

A host of other leaders affirmed Gee's point. The contributions of honors to the university-wide curriculum is characterized as a significant benefit, as Jake B. Schrum, President of Emory & Henry College, and Joe Lane, Director of the Honors Program, affirmed:

Our honors program has made it possible for us to raise the level of discussion in classes across the curriculum and has revealed opportunities for investing all of our students in projects that will widen their horizons and allow them to contribute to positive social change. (Schrum and Lane 2015:39)

These statements testify to the value honors contributes to undergraduate institutions. High-quality programs are those defined by the creation of communities of students, faculty, and administrators investing considerable time and effort building learning communities. Honors education insists on the construction and sustenance of the highest quality participation in teaching and learning. A useful perspective on the value honors adds to the institution can be gained from a review of the growth of honors programs and colleges within undergraduate institutions.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE HONORS TRAJECTORY WITHIN INSTITUTIONS

For over 200 years, honors programs and colleges have experienced phenomenal growth within undergraduate education. The earliest reports of the approach that has come to be defined as honors were of the “pass-honors” reconstruction of the grading structure at Oxford University in 1804. This grading process was intended to expand university-wide curricular focus and support independent student research (Standley 1993). In the early 1920s, the formal programmatic establishment of honors in the American university infrastructure occurred when Swarthmore College replaced traditional coursework with honors courses. The first formalized honors courses replaced upper-division course offerings and revealed early emphasis on writing, critical thinking, and capstone experiences (Guzy 2003).

In 1924, Joseph W. Cohen, a philosopher, arrived at the University of Colorado to begin his tenure. Cohen reported later that he was angered “by the inertia I witnessed before the deep problems of quality in a state institution confronted by numbers, by routine, by the recalcitrance of legislatures” (Cohen 1966:viii). Cohen observed that students with high grades lacked knowledge and preparation, and he believed that university faculty should be empowered to produce intellectuals. Further, he was convinced that public education could equal the best offered at elite institutions, that these schools did not have a monopoly of faculty or student intellect. Based on these philosophical underpinnings, Cohen established an honors program that served as a model for others that followed.

Formal honors program development in American higher education accelerated following World War II. Programs were established with the intent of raising the academic standards for undergraduate education. A desire for rigorous standards for all education resulted from national competition for global leadership, i.e., Sputniks 1 and 2, as well as large increases in new student enrollment (Andrews 2011). Andrews provides an enriching description of how these societal forces influenced the formalization of honors and improving educational quality. The oldest view of program quality is one that suggests that coherent and rigorous curriculum requirements are at the core of high-quality programs. Administrators and faculty in honors leadership united in their dedication to high-quality programs and formed the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC).

The first NCHC conference was held at the University of Kansas on October 22–24, 1966, with a program structured around five invited presenters and a student panel. Of the five papers, two presentations were on the motivation of honors students in colloquia and courses. Walter Weir (1966), then director of the honors program at the University of Colorado, described honors students in this way:

our honors students come to us highly motivated to succeed, to climb the ladder of affluence and success. They tend to have more intellectual curiosity than most students,

to be quicker and more industrious; but their most fundamental trait is their ability to get good grades. (p. 45)

This description was supported by Dean James Olsen (1966) from Kent State University, who focused on the “intrinsic” and “extrinsic” needs of honors students. His research was intended to assess the worth and effectiveness of honors courses as well as other features of the Kent State Honors College. Over a span of six years, honors students were asked to describe an ideal honors course in comparison to existing courses within their honors college. The assumption was made that students with attributes defined by admissions criteria (intrinsic qualities inherent in the student performance) would achieve success in a prescribed learning environment (as defined by extrinsic qualities within the learning context). Olsen (1966) concluded the following from his research:

if honors students are to be motivated and to be satisfied in honors courses, very careful attention must be given to the instructors and the methods of instruction employed . . . [;] what is necessary is to recognize that the students are not completely self-generative and that the primary consideration is the instructor and his methods. (p. 56)

Considered collectively, these early studies suggest that honors programs and colleges may predict outcomes (e.g., academic performance, program completion rate) based on intrinsic criteria or performance measures; however, an essential characteristic not easily measured is motivation and persistence in problem solving. Honors learning environments were, and continue to be, developed to facilitate, motivate, and nurture a drive for academic challenge.

In 1967, the National Collegiate Honors Council Annual Conference was jointly hosted by Catholic University, Georgetown University, Howard University, the University of Maryland, and the U.S. Office of Education in Washington, DC. With the proliferation in honors programs and colleges, the honors conference agenda increased its focus on honors/non-honors comparisons. One group of research presentations at the 1967 meeting categorized gifted

superior performance as a “domain” in areas of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Vernon Williams (1967) presented a pilot study at the University of Nebraska that compared honors seniors with high-ability non-honors seniors in agriculture. This pilot study dealt with student-faculty engagement, appreciation of the scientific and professional nature of agriculture, student involvement in academic endeavors, and rational thinking about occupational development. Williams concluded that the honors students in agriculture had more interaction with faculty, felt more positively about their interaction, and were more involved with academic work when compared with the high-ability students who did not participate in the honors program. These early honors educators acknowledged that students and faculty work collaboratively to create the honors learning community.

Over the next several decades, honors education emphasized innovative curricular development undergirded by critical thinking and active engagement in community-based learning approaches such as City-as-Text™ (Long 2015). The institutional benefit broadened, and honors came to be viewed as a laboratory that influenced the traditional curricula and elevated the rigor of the undergraduate experience across campus. Furthermore, student performance outcomes such as grade point averages, test performance, and a proclivity for academic challenge positively impacted the institutional profiles and the academic atmosphere of the institution generally. The proliferation of honors programs and colleges was followed by a slower rate of growth (Smith and Scott 2016). This trend in the 1970s and 1980s is most likely correlated with the end of expansion in higher education and severe budget restrictions.

Schools continued to develop honors programs, and some were transformed into honors colleges. Program quality—how to enhance it and how to evaluate it—became an important priority for honors educators. As forces external to higher education pressed for accountability, many institutions began to look more critically at their programs to decide which should receive continued funding. In 2005, the editor of the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* accepted the challenge to elucidate the definition

of honors, and the journal invited manuscripts for a special forum dedicated to this pivotal question: “What is Honors?”:

While it is hard to find any single characteristic that distinguishes honors from non-honors students, teachers, or courses, and while honors programs/colleges across the country are far more different from each other than are, for instance, English departments or service learning programs, we do share one trait with passion and, I daresay, universal agreement: our belief in the vitality and necessity of outstanding undergraduate education. (Long 2005:9)

In other words, honors educators are characterized by a drive to challenge students beyond the traditional requirements, regardless of the discipline. Honors educators continued to evaluate commonalities and what was frequently termed “academic excellence.” In pursuit of this goal, the NCHC Board of Directors eventually approved an official definition of honors:

Honors education is characterized by in-class and extra-curricular activities that are measurably broader, deeper, or more complex than comparable learning experiences typically found at institutions of higher education. (NCHC 2013)

Historically, honors communities are the product of faculty and administrators actively designing and implementing tangible program requirements that substantially enhance the quality of student learning. Considered from a university-wide perspective, honors plays an institutional leadership role for curricular development and pedagogical approaches that influence high-quality learning outcomes.

THE INHERENT VALUE OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Active student engagement is a hallmark of high-quality programs (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). Research has documented that student learning and development are enhanced when students become actively involved in out-of-class activities with peers and

faculty mentors (Kuh 1993; Kuh, Schuh, and Whitt 1991). From its inception, active student engagement in forums and presentations was recognized as a core value of NCHC conferences. Diverse and engaged students remain vital to the development and sustenance of honors programs and their engagement across campus.

Given the role of honors education in nurturing student success and its positive contribution to institutional performance measures, further research is needed to explore student engagement both quantitatively and qualitatively. Generally, research has sought to determine intrinsic variables (i.e., student characteristics) and their role in predicting academic success. These research designs are complicated by student diversity across different types of institutions and involvement in a wide variety of programmatic requirements. It is equally complicated to design studies that describe the inherent passion or propensity for academic challenge.

Conceptualizations of honors students emphasize the role of drive or persistence for academic challenge. That is, students of similar abilities can be characterized by their persistence in performing a task and/or the drive to achieve it. Literature in elementary and secondary gifted education, for example, underscores the important role of motivation in academic performance. Renzulli (1986) investigated task commitment as a central component of giftedness along with above-average ability and creativity. Terman and Oden (1959) noted that the most successful of their subjects could be distinguished from less successful subjects of equal ability by their task persistence. Therefore, measures of motivation and task persistence may be revealing for undergraduate honors education. That is, graduates of honors programs are often distinguished by their acceptance of challenge and drive to achieve beyond the minimal academic requirements. Clinkenbeard (1996), for example, cited studies that compared subgroups of the gifted on motivation type or style. Students with a high proclivity for academic success when compared to peers with average motivation have been studied longitudinally. Students who are highly motivated may perform differently, in distinctive ways, from those who lack motivation but who are similarly identified as innately intelligent. These investigations, then, would

seem to be applicable to undergraduate honors education; that is, results would describe motivational processes that affect student performance outcomes. Qualitatively, honors students infuse academic excellence into university-wide classrooms by demonstrating a passion for challenge, curiosity, and diligence.

HONORS AS ADDED VALUE TO INSTITUTIONAL OUTCOMES

Investigations have been designed to describe the value-added impact of honors by comparing honors with non-honors student outcomes. Cosgrove (2004) studied the academic performance, retention, and degree-completion rates of three groups of students: those who completed the honors program, students who participated in the honors program but did not complete the program, and students who qualified for honors but were not enrolled in honors. The student data were gathered across institutions in the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education. The study controlled for the effects of student, institutional, and honors program characteristics. To examine the retention and degree completion rates, the research was gathered longitudinally over a five-year period. Results of this study revealed that honors program completers had the highest academic performance and graduation rates and the shortest time to degree compared with non-honors peers, including those partially exposed to honors. Support from other inter-institutional investigations is needed to describe the value of honors for diverse types of institutions and for a range of qualitative variables such as motivation and variation in characteristics such as gender, race, and other forms of diversity.

Studies were also designed to explore prediction of honors program completion. Evidence is building that high school grade point average (GPA) is the most significant predictor of honors program completion (McKay 2009; Savage, Raehsler, and Fiedor 2014). Grade point average appears, then, to be an important factor for admissions standards. As an institutional performance indicator, program completion rate makes a significant contribution to quantitative performance indicators tied to institutional success such as retention and graduation rates.

Other research has examined the impact of honors over the course of program participation. Hébert and McBee (2007) studied the qualitative enrichment of honors education over an entire undergraduate program of study. The results identified key social and intellectual bonding through the honors program that supported the unique needs of students. Other research was designed to answer questions such as whether students who participate in an honors program have higher retention and graduation rates in comparison to similar nonparticipants. Results revealed that participation in honors related to retention differences over time. Although data collection was limited for examining four-year graduation rates, Slavin, Coladarci, and Pratt (2008) hypothesized that if retention rates continued to increase over time, they would ultimately positively influence graduation rates. Collectively, these group performance studies provide quantitative support for how honors programs and colleges positively influence institutional performance outcomes. A scarcity of data, however, exists on the qualitative impact honors provides for the institution, evident in the presidential testimonies mentioned earlier. Such quality measures might include how honors transforms both the learning environments when it serves as a curricular laboratory for the campus and the quality of student engagement in classrooms across the curriculum through the honors students' passion for academic challenge.

Academically talented high school students are matriculating to universities based on their desire for academic quality at competitive prices. The institution's challenge is to engage faculty with these students in rigorous learning experiences that prepare students for professional and personal success and responsible citizenship in cost-effective ways. Honors education, viewed from an outcomes-based perspective, recognizes the need for measures of value added that capture the causal influence of institutions on their students. The very existence of honors programs and colleges is dependent on research that documents value in the face of internal competition for institutional resources. What measures are selected, when the measures are best applied, and detailed demographic descriptions

are probably best considered in the context of a national discussion among researchers, honors professionals, and organizations such as NCHC. Discussion might also include more widespread use of an honors designation in institutional student databases. An honors designation, if universally applied in institutional data management systems, can readily capture outcome measures such as program completion rates and graduation rates. An honors designation can also reveal outcomes observed only once, such as persistence or graduation. Future research is needed to address these issues in a more systematic way to quantify and qualify the value of honors programs and colleges for higher education institutions.

The research found in this monograph moves us forward toward achieving our research goals. The future of honors education is dependent on more robust research such as that emerging from the NCHC research colloquium that took place at Wayne State University. Such projects elucidate the value of honors education and are essential if honors programs and colleges are to survive and mature. In turn, universities and colleges benefit, quantitatively and qualitatively, from investments in honors communities.

REFERENCES

- Andrews, Larry. 2011. "The Wisdom of Our Elders: Honors Discussion in *The Superior Student*, 1958–65." *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* 12(2):17–46.
- Clinkenbeard, Pamela R. 1996. "Research on Motivation and the Gifted: Implications for Identification, Programming, and Evaluation." *Gifted Child Quarterly* 40(4):220–28.
- Cohen, Joseph W., ed. 1966. *The Superior Student in American Higher Education*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Cosgrove, John. 2004. "The Impact of Honors Programs on Undergraduate Academic Performance, Retention, and Graduation." *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* 5(2):45–53.

- Gee, E. Gordon, and Kenneth P. Blemings. 2015. "Access, Not Exclusion: Honors at a Public Institution." *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* 16(2):177–80.
- Guzy, Annmarie. 2003. *Honors Composition: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Practices*. Monographs in Honors Education. National Collegiate Honors Council.
- Harnisch, Thomas L. 2011. "Performance-Based Funding: A Re-Emerging Strategy in Public Higher Education Financing." Policy Brief, American Association of State Colleges and Universities, Washington, DC. Retrieved May 27, 2018 <<http://www.aascu.org/policy/publications/policy-matters>>.
- Hébert, Thomas P., and Matthew T. McBee. 2007. "The Impact of an Undergraduate Honors Program on Gifted University Students." *Gifted Child Quarterly* 51(2):136–51.
- Kim, Hoon Ho, and Diane Lalancette. 2013. "Literature Review on the Value Added Measurement in Higher Education." Feasibility Study, The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Paris, France. Retrieved May 27, 2018 <<http://www.oecd.org/education/skills-beyond-school/Litterature%20Review%20VAM.pdf>>.
- Kuh, George D. 1993. "In Their Own Words: What Students Learn Outside the Classroom." *American Educational Research Journal* 30 (Summer):277–304.
- Kuh, George D., John H. Schuh, and Elizabeth J. Whitt. 1991. *Involving Colleges: Successful Approaches to Fostering Student Learning and Development Outside the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Long, Ada. 2005. "Editor's Introduction." *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* 6(2):9–15.
- Long, Ada. 2015. "Editor's Introduction." *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* 16(2):xiii–xxii.
- McKay, Kyle. 2009. "Predicting Retention in Honors Programs." *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* 10(1):77–87.

- National Collegiate Honors Council. 2013. "Definition of Honors Education." Retrieved August 14, 2018 <<https://www.nchc.org/directors-faculty/definition-of-honors-education>>.
- Olsen, James. 1966. "Motivating Students in Honors Courses." Pp. 49–57 in the *Proceedings of the First Annual Meeting of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS.
- Pascarella, Ernest, and Patrick Terenzini. 2005. *How College Affects Students: A Third Decade of Research*. Vol. 2. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Renzulli, Joseph. 1986. "The Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness: A Developmental Model for Creative Productivity." Pp. 53–92 in *Conceptions of Giftedness*, edited by R. J. Sternberg and J. E. Davidson. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Savage, Hallie, Rod Raehsler, and Joseph Fiedor. 2014. "An Empirical Analysis of Factors Affecting Honors Program Completion Rates." *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* 15(1):115–28.
- Schrum, Jake B., and Joe Lane. 2015. "Transformation from Within." *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* 16(2):35–39.
- Slavin, Charlie, Theodore Coladarci, and Phillip A. Pratt. 2008. "Is Student Participation in an Honors Program Related to Retention and Graduation Rates?" *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* 9(2):59–69. Retrieved May 27, 2018 <<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchcjournal/66>>.
- Smith, Patricia J., and Rick Scott. 2016. "Growth and Evolution of Collegiate Honors Education in the United States." Pp. 13–42 in *Present Successes and Future Challenges in Honors Education*, edited by R. W. Glover and K. M. O'Flaherty. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Standley, Ricky. 1993. "Part One: Origins of Honors Education." *National Honors Report* Fall 1993:27–28.

Terman, Lewis, and Melita Oden. 1959. *Genetic Studies of Genius*. Vol. 5, *The Gifted Group at Midlife*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Weir, Walter. 1966. "Motivating Honors Students in Colloquia." Pp. 45–48 in the *Proceedings of the First Annual Meeting of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS.

Williams, Vernon. 1967. "An Evaluation of the Honors Program in Agriculture." Pp. 121–24 in the *Proceedings of the Second Meeting of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, Washington, DC, October 20–22.

Address correspondence to Hallie Savage at
hlesavage@gmail.com.