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Contributions of Small Honors Programs: The Case of a Public Liberal Arts College

GEORGE SMEATON AND MARGARET WALSH
KEENE STATE COLLEGE

The Keene State College Honors Program began as the vision of a former college president to attract more high-achieving students to this particular public liberal arts college. In the fall of 2007, after the college had secured initial funding, a small cohort of twenty first-year students were selected for the honors program by admissions staff for their achievements and promise. The numbers were intentionally small, but the goals were ambitious for a rural college that serves a high percentage of first-generation college students (43%). The students selected for admission into honors would enroll in an honors-level writing course and live together in a “parliament” inside one of the residence halls designed to link living and learning experiences. As second-year students, they would complete a global engagement faculty-led course that would culminate in immersive travel outside the United States. They would also complete several electives and a senior seminar that met their integrative studies requirements outside their major field of study.

Students would receive honors advising, tickets to selected arts and theater events on campus, and priority course registration.

At the time of its inception, the idea of an honors program received mixed reviews from the faculty. Some were enthusiastic about the prospect of teaching these honors courses, and others opposed it in principle. Among the reasons for ambivalence were that channeling resources to students who came to the college having already demonstrated excellence could take away from average students who were yet to realize their potential. A decade later, the honors program continues to recruit, mentor, and graduate a small cohort of students. Students are now eligible to apply to enter the honors program in their second year, on the recommendation of faculty, a change that offers students a chance to find their stride in college before joining the program. Making this opportunity available to more students resulted in expanding the cohort size. While small merit scholarships were initially guaranteed to honors students, the program has shifted to increasing its financial support for needy students, particularly in the global engagement course, which increases the tuition burden on students who are traveling by several thousand dollars per student.

In 2017, after an external review and a change in leadership, the program was at a critical juncture as it began planning for the next decade. This study examines two issues that are important for assessing honors programs: (1) first-year to second-year student retention rates for high-achieving college students and (2) student engagement.

The importance of attracting and retaining high-achieving students at institutions of higher education cannot be overstated. Demographic shifts have made the recruitment of college-ready students particularly challenging in the New England region. As Williams (2017) reported, New England's total number of new high school graduates is projected to decline by 14 percent by 2032. Colleges and universities are competing for students, and admissions offices are filling students' mailboxes and email accounts with enticing amenities and tuition discounts. The governor of New Hampshire, for example, recently formed a committee of millennial

young adults to advise state leaders on issues facing them as they complete their education and prepare to enter the workplace (Associated Press 2017). While professional and career advising may ultimately be able to increase the number of workers and attract businesses, colleges may need to focus first on the retention of students through graduation.

Numerous articles featured in the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* have focused on honors student recruitment and retention. Kampfe, Chasek, and Falconer (2016) surveyed honors students at a state university and found that the two most important reasons students report for staying in their honors program are priority registration and the perceived prestige associated with honors membership. For students who were in their first two years, faculty-student connections, small high-quality classes, and a sense of a community were also significant factors. Goodstein and Szarek (2013) conducted a longitudinal study of retention and completion rates of honors students at a large public university. While students were very likely to continue from their first to second year—retention ranged from 88 to 90 percent—more than half of the students left later in the program, and completion rates ranged from 20 to 50 percent. The authors discussed efforts to improve program quality for students in midcareer, a time when undergraduates' commitment to honors may waver as they focus on their major studies. For example, students in their second year were encouraged to engage fully in honors opportunities by “opting in,” and these efforts appeared to increase completion rates. Michael K. Cundall (2013) argued that honors faculty need to show students that honors-level work is not synonymous with more of the same work but rather a new challenge. Close relationships forged in smaller classes with peers and professors allow honors students to do their best work.

Many honors programs are informed by best practices from organizations such as the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). In a 2008 report, George D. Kuh described the concept of high-impact educational practices for undergraduates (HIPs). Many of the effective teaching and learning strategies that

Kuh (2008) describes are course-based, such as first-year seminars, senior capstones, writing-intensive courses, and other intellectual experiences that consider core or big questions. Diversity, intercultural opportunities, and global learning offer students the chance to consider multiple viewpoints through study away, abroad, or in the local community. Supervised internships and faculty collaborating with students on research and service learning activities are also examples of HIPs. Kuh (2008) recommends encouraging all students to participate in at least two HIPs during their undergraduate career: one during their first year and one during their senior year. Although many majors and colleges have offered various forms of enrichment to students for years, the expansion of these opportunities has coincided with a better understanding of the value for the kind of deep learning that comes from reflection and benefits all students. Clearly, these efforts can contribute to improved retention and skill acquisition.

While high-impact practices may be designed for all undergraduate students, honors programs have been diligent about their efforts to integrate HIPs into the honors experience. Beginning in 1994, the National Collegiate Honors Council has published “Basic Characteristics” for fully developed honors programs and honors colleges, and they have been updated periodically in response to changes in student needs and higher education (NCHC [1994] 2010). Following the advice offered in the “Basic Characteristics,” honors courses in our program tend to have lower enrollment than other courses, and they are often spaces where innovations can be piloted for later use with a larger group of students. Ganesh and Smith (2017) used problem-based learning to enhance critical thinking and multidisciplinary learning in courses. They incorporated collaborative and reflective approaches into the course design, and the instructors saw results in students’ improvement in grades and overall mastery of the course material in health courses. Banks and Gutiérrez (2017) found ways to “stack” study abroad with undergraduate research for social science students, which enhanced their preparation for graduate school and professional pursuits.

Given the importance of identifying means to improve retention of an institution's high-achieving students and the need to involve them in HIPs, the present study had three objectives. First, the study assessed the overall impact of honors program participation on second-year retention. Second, it examined the effect of program participation on student engagement in HIPs. Third, through qualitative analysis of program documents, it examined honors program curriculum and instructional practices that may contribute to retention and student engagement.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

Specifically, the study examined three broad research questions and tested two distinct research hypotheses. We enumerate those hypotheses below within the larger context of the research questions that motivated the research.

Research Question 1:

What is the effect of honors program participation on second-year retention?

Hypothesis 1:

First-year honors program participants will have a higher retention rate than comparable non-honors first-year students who were awarded college-sponsored merit scholarships but who did not participate in the honors program.

Research Question 2:

How does honors program participation contribute to student participation in high-impact educational practices (HIPs)?

Hypothesis 2:

Honors program participants will be more likely than comparison group students to report "Done or in progress" in response to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (2011) items assessing involvement in HIPs.

Research Question 3:

Which of the enriching educational opportunities offered by the honors program have an impact on students?

Because this research question is exploratory and freewheeling, no hypothesis is proposed.

ANALYSES OF STUDENT RETENTION

We assessed the impact of honors program participation on retention by comparing second-year retention rates of program participants with rates obtained from a comparison group consisting of students who did not participate in the program but who had combined SAT scores that qualified them for honors program admission.

Method

Participants

We obtained archival retention data from a sample of 2,383 members of the incoming 2013–2015 fall cohorts of first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students. The sample consists of 984 men and 1,399 women. The sample includes 53 honors program participants and 401 comparison group members. Like honors participants, comparison group members had combined math and verbal SAT scores of at least 1,100, the minimum SAT score required for admission to the Keene State College Honors Program.

Variables Examined

We used archival institutional research data to test Hypotheses 1 and 2. Membership in either the honors or comparison group served as the predictor variable. In addition, as a means of testing the similarity of the two groups, we examined three variables identified through previous internal institutional research at Keene State College as key predictors of retention: total scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), first-generation college student status

(having no parents who completed an undergraduate degree), and Federal Pell Grant eligibility. The latter variable serves as a measure of socioeconomic status. We defined and measured our criterion variable, retention, as returning to the same college during the fall semester one year after matriculation. We did not include students who may have returned two or more years after matriculation.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

To assess the viability of the two predictor-variable groups, we compared the honors program group with the comparison group on a set of variables found to be predictive of retention at Keene State College. These included total SAT scores (i.e., math plus verbal), first-generation college status (having no parents who completed an undergraduate degree), and eligibility for a Federal Pell Grant. Table 1 presents a comparison of means for both honors and comparable non-honors students. Honors participants had slightly lower SAT scores, and they were somewhat less likely to be first-generation or Pell-eligible students, but these differences were not statistically significant (Table 1). Thus, there is no evidence of pre-existing group differences in these variables that could account for differences in retention of students in each group.

Test of Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1 states: “First-year honors program participants will have a higher retention rate than comparable non-honors first-year students who were awarded college-sponsored merit scholarships

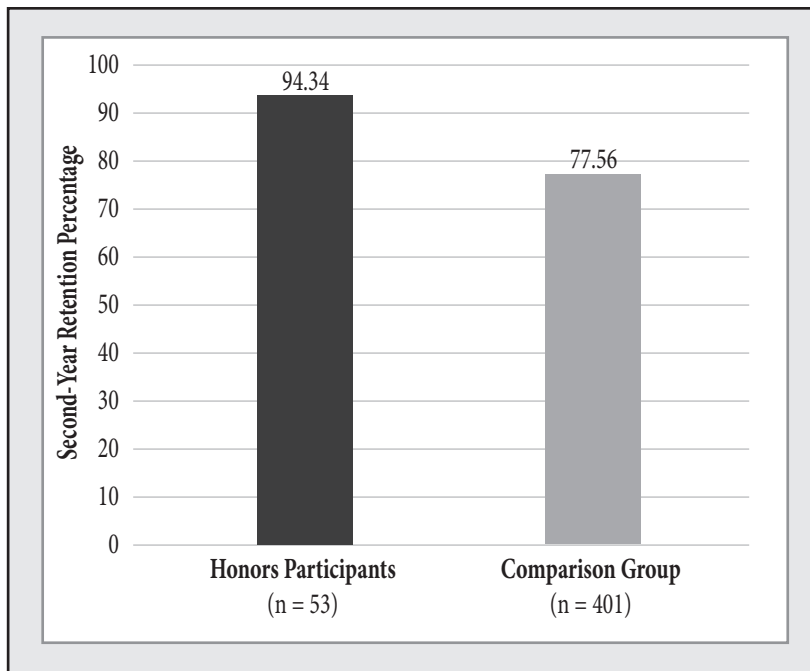
TABLE 1. BENCHMARK CHARACTERISTICS OF HONORS PARTICIPANTS AND COMPARISON GROUP

Variable	Honors Participants	Comparison Group	<i>p</i>
Mean SAT Total	1,164 (49)	1,169 (401)	.67
First Generation (%)	21.15 (52)	33.20 (401)	.08
Pell Eligible (%)	11.54 (52)	21.44 (401)	.10

Note: Numbers in parentheses are the number of cases. SAT total is the sum of math and verbal scores.

but who did not participate in the honors program.” We tested this hypothesis using the chi-square statistical test. Chi-square (χ^2) analysis compares outcome frequency distributions (e.g., the frequency of those retained and not retained) across two or more groups to rule out the possibility that frequency differences observed across conditions are not the result of a chance occurrence. Higher χ^2 values denote a lower probability (p) that frequency differences across groups can be attributed to chance. We used the $p \leq .05$ criterion for statistical significance commonly used in social science research. Figure 1 presents a graphic comparison of second-year retention for both groups. Among students in these two groups, those who began the year as members of the honors program were significantly more likely to be retained for a second year ($\chi^2 = 8.10$, $p = .004$). Over 94 percent of honors participants persisted to the second year, but only 81 percent did among the non-honors comparison group that

FIGURE 1. HONORS PARTICIPANTS AND COMPARISON GROUP SECOND-YEAR RETENTION RATES



Note: χ^2 of percentage difference = 8.10, $p = .004$.

consisted of students who received college-sponsored merit scholarships based on their high school GPA but who did not participate in our honors program.

As hypothesized, honors program participants were significantly more likely to be retained than were academically comparable non-honors students. Because this finding is based on pre-existing groups rather than random assignment to conditions, it is possible that pre-existing differences between the two groups in variables that were not examined in this study could account for this group difference. As noted above, however, the groups did not differ significantly in the three variables internal institutional research has identified as the best predictors of retention at Keene State College.

ANALYSIS OF PARTICIPATION IN HIGH-IMPACT PRACTICES

A key goal of the Keene State College Honors Program is to supplement classroom learning with enriching high-impact educational practices (HIPs). Involvement in HIPs in one's first year has been found to be predictive of first-to-second-year retention (Kuh 2008). Therefore, the degree to which first-year honors students participate in HIPs may explain the program's positive impact on retaining highly prepared students for a second year. We used first-year NSSE data to determine if honors program participation results in differences in self-reported HIP involvement among first-year students.

Method

Participants

NSSE data from 19 first-year honors program participants (16 women and 3 men) were compared with responses from a comparison group of 102 first-year non-honors students (71 women and 31 men) who received college-sponsored merit scholarships based on their high school GPA. Data from Keene State College students who completed the NSSE in 2014 and 2016 were combined for this analysis to provide an acceptable sample size for the honors and comparison groups. The gender breakdown for the honors

program group is not representative of the typical breakdown for honors program participants, which typically ranges from 55% to 67% female. Although this discrepancy may represent a limitation to the discoveries obtained from the analyses of NSSE data, it is not likely to represent an alternative explanation of the findings because the female percentage of the honors and comparison groups did not significantly differ.

Measures

Administered to first-year and senior students, the National Survey of Student Engagement contains 42 self-report items that assess four clusters of linked behaviors, experiences, and beliefs referred to by the instrument's publishers as "engagement in activities that represent good educational practice" (Center for Postsecondary Research 2005:1). The engagement indicators include "academic challenge," "learning with peers," "experiences with faculty," and "campus environment." Involvement in each type of engagement area has been found to have numerous positive academic outcomes (Astin 1993; Center for Postsecondary Research 2005; Chickering and Gamson 1987; Love and Love 2005; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). Findings from numerous studies attest to the measure's reliability and validity (Kuh, Hayek, Zhao, and Carini 2002; Pascarella, Seifert, and Blaich 2010).

To address our second research question, we examined NSSE items pertaining to participation in HIPs among first-year student respondents. Specifically, NSSE asks participants whether they had participated or plan to participate in each of a set of seven HIPs, including internships/co-ops/field experiences, participation in a learning community, study abroad, and collaboration with a faculty member on a research project. In addition to providing data on each individual HIP, the survey output generates a global measure that reports the number of HIPs marked "Done or in progress."

Procedures

Names and contact information for first-year and senior students were submitted to NSSE during the spring semesters of 2014

and 2016. The Center for Postsecondary Research administered the survey to a sample drawn from each class. The data file generated from the completed surveys contained unique student identifiers that we matched with campus data identifying honors and non-honors students to generate two independent groups: first-year honors program participants and a comparison group consisting of students included in the college's President's List and Dean's List who were not honors program participants. All students in the honors and comparison groups obtained merit-based scholarships from the college. We used chi-square analyses of response frequency differences between the two groups to test hypothesis 2.

Results

Hypothesis 2 states: "Honors program participants will be more likely than comparison group students to report "Done or in progress" in response to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (2011) items assessing involvement in HIPs." We found support for Hypothesis 2 in both the learning community HIP item and the global HIP measure.

Participation in Learning Communities

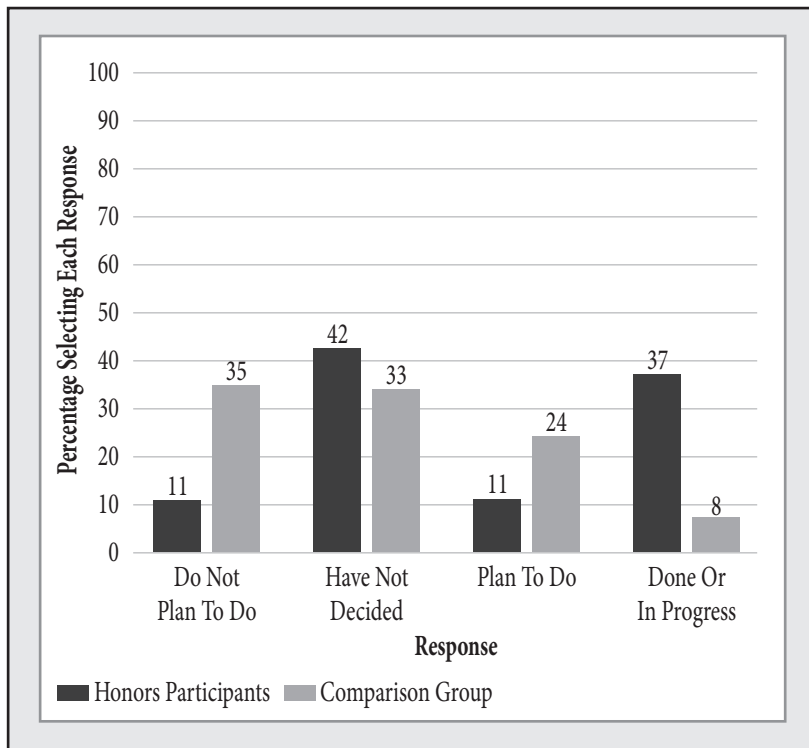
Figure 2 presents results for first-year students for the NSSE item asking about learning communities. Honors program participants were more likely than comparison group members to report that they plan to participate in a learning community or have already participated in one ($\chi^2 = 13.86$, $df = 3$, $p \leq .01$). Among honors participants, 48 percent selected "Plan to do" or "Done or in progress" for this HIP; in contrast, only 32 percent of comparison group members did so (Figure 2).

Global Measure of HIP Participation

Figure 3 presents results for a global measure of high-impact practices done or in progress by the end of the first year of college. For the combined HIP measure, there was an even greater difference between the honors student and comparison groups ($\chi^2 = 15.43$, df

= 3, $p \leq .001$). Among honors participants, 73 percent achieved the goal of one first-year HIP, which was recommended by Kuh (2008), but only half as many in the comparison group (37%) did so. In addition to participating in learning communities, first-year students reported other HIPs as done or in progress; these included working with a faculty member on a research project (13%), internships (7%), formal leadership in a student organization or group (6%), and study abroad (3%).

FIGURE 2. PERCENTAGES FOR FIRST-YEAR HONORS PARTICIPANTS AND COMPARISON GROUPS OF RESPONSES REPORTING EXPERIENCE WITH LEARNING COMMUNITIES



Source: National Survey of Student Engagement for Keene State College (2014 and 2016).

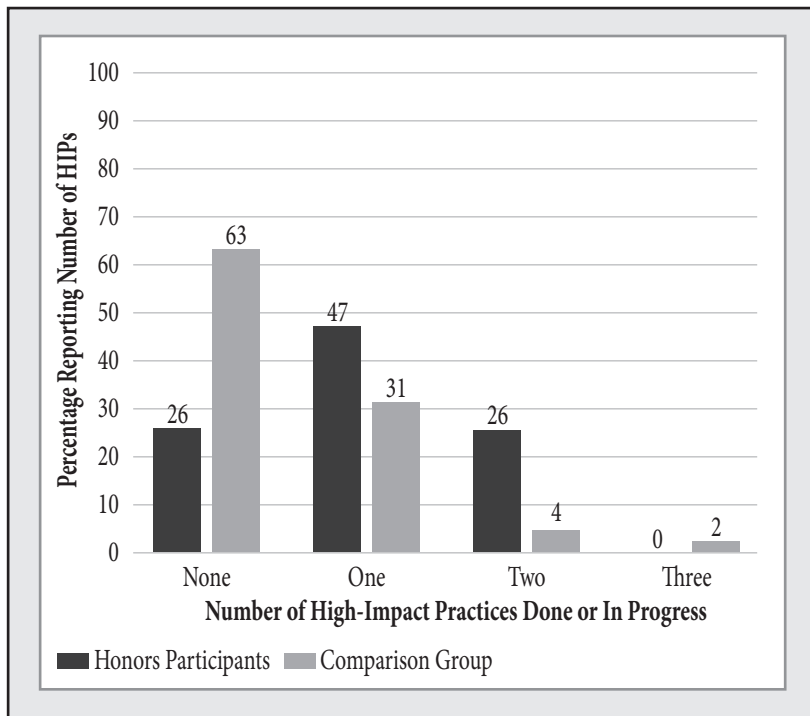
Note: $\chi^2 = 13.86$, $df = 3$, $p \leq .01$.

Results are for those responding to a question prompt asking about “Learning Community or Some Other Formal Program Where Groups of Students Take Two or More Classes Together.” There were 19 honors participants, and there were 83 students in the comparison group.

Discussion

Honors and comparison group differences in response frequencies for NSSE items provide some evidence that honors program participation may increase student involvement in HIPs. When compared with comparison group responses, honors participants were more likely to participate in learning communities and other HIPs during their first year of college. In addition to providing a means for explaining the program's impact on retention, Kuh's (2008) research on HIPs also suggests that such practices can increase graduation rates. It is possible, however, that students with an interest in participating in HIPs may also be interested in and qualified for the honors program. Therefore, additional research

FIGURE 3. NUMBER OF HIGH-IMPACT PRACTICES "DONE OR IN PROGRESS" FOR HONORS STUDENTS AND THE COMPARISON GROUP



Source: National Survey of Student Engagement for Keene State College (2014 and 2016).

Notes: $\chi^2 = 15.43$, $df = 3$, $p \leq .001$. There were 19 honors students, and there were 83 students in the comparison group.

is needed that surveys incoming honors and high-achieving non-honors students regarding their intention to take part in each of the HIPs examined in the NSSE. Responses to such measures could then be entered into a logistic regression equation to determine if honors participation accounts for a significant portion of HIP variance when controlled for pre-existing intent to participate. Additional research that follows honors students and similarly prepared non-honors students until they reach graduation is also needed. A longer time frame would also enable researchers to determine if this HIP effect persists until college graduation.

IMPACT OF THE HONORS PROGRAM ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Finally, we used qualitative data to explore further the ways in which the honors program encourages student engagement. We tested the hypotheses above using quantitative data on student retention and involvement in HIPs. A limitation to this methodology is that the findings do not provide evidence that outcome differences between participants and non-participants are directly attributable to the courses and policies of the college's honors program. The retention and HIP differences could stem from differences in courses taken outside the program or in extracurricular involvement. In this final section, we used qualitative analysis of program documents to study how honors program curriculum and instructional practices may specifically contribute to retention and student engagement. The Keene State Honors Program is characterized by several benefits as well as required components, including a first-year honors course, extracurricular events, priority registration, and a common residential living community. This portion of the study looks at how faculty and students contribute to an experience that may strengthen relationships among participants in their first two years.

Method

We conducted a qualitative review of honors program documents from 2013, 2014, and 2015. These documents included

honors council meeting minutes, honors course syllabi, open-ended responses to questions on student satisfaction surveys, documentation of honors student activities, and events publicized on our campus website. We received approval from the campus Institutional Review Board to read and review these documents. From this review, we identified several components of the program that may shed light on higher retention and stronger student involvement for honors students early in their college experience.

Results

Research Question 3 asks: “Which of the enriching educational opportunities offered by the honors program have an impact on students?” Qualitative data allowed us to explore the answer to this question.

First-Year Honors Course and Honors Housing

In June 2013, the incoming program director invited faculty to attend a workshop to discuss their experiences teaching in the honors programs and their plans for the coming year. As Schuman (2006) advised in his handbook for honors program directors, honors programs need the very best faculty who will work with students effectively (see 27–28). When asked why they teach in honors, the professors said that they developed partnerships with the students, which created a more democratic classroom. They spent less time dictating rules and more time collaborating. The faculty also reported that they wanted to recapture the feeling of working with academically motivated students, to travel with students, to develop and enhance their research trajectory, to teach innovative material, to try new teaching and learning strategies, and to connect students to opportunities that they thought would benefit them.

Faculty spent considerable time discussing what should be common experiences in the honors course electives. The topics that the group discussed were using active learning strategies, assigning comprehensive readings, allowing students to show class leadership with presentations throughout the semester, engaging in critical

dialogues, and making clear behavioral expectations for both students and faculty.

In the fall of their first academic year, honors program students lived together and experienced the honors curriculum as a cohesive group. All Keene State students, including those in honors, must complete an introductory integrative studies course focused on thinking and writing in either the fall or spring semester. Keene State College designed this course as part of a general education requirement that included writing in stages, peer review, and individual conferences with the professor. The honors version of the course is offered only in the fall, and has had a profound impact in shaping students' identity as honors-level learners because they take it at the beginning of their college experience. Moreover, the honors students have been living in honors housing together, making it easier for them to talk about their coursework outside of class and enhancing social connections among students. In essence, combining the course with a living-learning experience provided a ready-made mechanism for students who were seeking ways to connect on an intellectual level with other students outside of the classroom. That the resident assistant, typically an upper-level honors student, plans extracurricular events to bring students together for a faculty panel, speaker, or theater performance enhances the experience of students living, working, and studying together.

In 2013, for example, the theme for the introductory course focused on readings and discussions of how young people encounter adulthood. The syllabus described assignments that students would complete as they worked toward writing a substantial research paper focused on a creative and multifaceted analysis of the transition to adulthood. Examples of topics that students wrote about included the meaning of maturity and responsibility, rites of passage in indigenous societies, emotional intelligence, and emotional literacy.

In the spring of their first year, many students enrolled in more than one honors course in order to accelerate progress toward fulfilling their honors program requirements. Often they were encouraged and mentored by professors during small group

advising sessions. They also were likely to have individual conversations with their honors resident assistant and the program director before enrolling in classes. Honors students benefitted from both general and focused advising in their first year.

Syllabi of elective honors courses in the sciences, social sciences, arts, and humanities were specifically designed to encourage experimentation with new subject areas. For example, in a single semester Keene State offered first- and second-year honors students elective courses in astronomy, immigration, and intercultural communication. The syllabi contained language that conveyed common outcomes to students: their goal would be to demonstrate “an ability to transcend boundaries between experiential and classroom learning” and “an ability to reflect upon and take responsibility for their continuing intellectual development.” Professors constructed their own courses as they wished. There was no official template that honors courses were required to follow; however, the written materials students received from honors professors conveyed a seriousness of purpose, a lengthy reading list, and a strong statement about classroom comportment and expected work ethic. During meetings of the Honors Council, a faculty body that provides oversight of the program, faculty members regularly addressed this important question: “What makes a course an honors course?” Each year the director issues a call to faculty members to join the Honors Council. The director also meets with prospective instructors who self-select to discuss how they might reframe an existing course or design a new experimental course for the honors program.

Learning Communities

The concept of learning communities is a HIP that closely follows the philosophy and mission of colleges and universities with traditional-age students who live on campus. Bringing aspects of students’ social and academic lives together on a residential campus is one strategy to improve retention and success while enhancing the overall college experience.

When the honors program was first designed at this institution, attention was given to the overall experience of the students,

especially since faculty tended not to know the details of what goes on during the evenings and weekends beyond a general awareness of student parties and hall activities that occasionally include faculty participation. In the early years of the honors program, the living and learning component was embedded into an existing residential program that created “parliaments” or specific areas in residence halls where students would choose to live together based on a common interest that could be academic, such as women’s and gender studies, or service-based, such as Habitat for Humanity. These communities were supported by programming and events that were largely planned by students, and their success was perceived as uneven and dependent on the energy and motivation of the particular students involved in a given group. The “honors parliament” was distinctive because this choice of residence and room assignment was made for students after they applied and were accepted into the honors program. All first-year honors students were expected to be part of the honors parliament. Occasionally, students would request an exception to the residential component. Sometimes, an honors student who met a new friend during orientation or an athlete who would prefer to live with a teammate would ask to live somewhere other than the honors house. These requests were generally not granted. Exceptions were made only for commuter students who opted to live at home during the first year. It is likely that some students did not join the honors program because of this requirement. Overall, however, the living experience of first-year students created the space for long-lasting friendships to flourish among students with common interests and goals.

One improvement that brought stability and consistent programming to the honors parliaments was having an upper-class member of the honors program serve as a resident assistant. Resident assistants also coordinate events such as outings to the theater followed by a panel discussion that includes honors faculty or evenings with the global education office staff, who share information and answer questions in the residence halls about study abroad opportunities prior to the application deadlines. The resident assistants help students deal with the travails and challenges of living in a residence hall and taking challenging honors courses.

In other words, resident assistants exercise their creativity and expertise in young adult development to bring together groups of students for a common purpose.

Establishing strong connections among honors students, staff, and faculty in the first year of the program was beneficial. Prior to spring and fall registration, for example, the honors director and sometimes honors faculty members would visit the common space for individual or group advising meetings. These efforts paid off in helping to remind students of the courses available, encouraging students to speak with each other, and allowing the honors director to hear student concerns and recommendations for future courses. Given the small size of this honors program, this one-on-one communication was valuable, yet it required a great deal of effort on the part of the director to respond to individual scheduling needs. These encounters and activities helped to build an allegiance to the program capable of withstanding the heavy demands and workload that students faced as they progressed through their upper-level courses, embarked on internships, embraced study abroad, and pursued research opportunities. Academic enrichment opportunities and residential life in higher education need not be mutually exclusive. On our campus and many others, these types of learning experiences were wisely extended to non-honors and honors students alike, creating close, supportive relationships that improve retention and graduation rates for the entire student body.

Discussion

The Keene State College Honors Program purposefully integrates HIPs and best practices into its honors curriculum through both the design of its courses and its living-learning community component. Honors courses at Keene were designed specifically for this group of high-performing students. Experiential learning was integrated with traditional classroom instruction, and students were encouraged to accept personal responsibility for their education. In addition, through establishing learning communities where students reside together, students were able to apply outcomes from extracurricular activities to classroom curriculum, which results in

a richer overall academic experience. Although this arrangement did not eliminate the possibility that non-honors experiences could account for differences observed between participants and non-participants, it did provide evidence consistent with the idea that program elements directly contribute to increased retention and HIP participation.

Although Research Question 3 focused on aspects of the honors program and not on the experiences of the general student body or a comparison group of high-achieving students, drawing some inferences about the student experience on a college campus made up of several thousand undergraduate students is possible. While most of the general student body enrolled in introductory “Thinking and Writing” and “Quantitative Literacy” courses, the sequencing of first-year courses was not intentional, nor were advisors able to match courses to students’ needs until very recently. In contrast, the honors program has become a model for the entire campus. Beginning in 2016, a new student residence was opened that was designated for living and learning communities. All students were extended opportunities to select rooms in this dedicated space and to enroll in courses based on academic interests and themes. No evaluation of this model has been completed; however, as this model becomes established, opportunities to measure its impact on students’ persistence throughout their college careers and its effects on the larger campus environment will certainly be pursued.

GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study examined outcomes associated with participation in an honors program at a small public liberal arts college. Among the most noteworthy of the outcomes examined was a significant increase in retention. Honors students were more likely to be retained for a second year than were comparable non-honors students. A second major finding was greater involvement in HIPs among honors participants than that reported by comparable non-honors students. Given Kuh’s (2008) finding that HIP participation contributes to retention, greater HIP participation among honors

students may have contributed to the higher retention observed among honors students.

Nevertheless, because the quantitative component of this study did not utilize random assignment and a controlled experimental design, it is possible that differences between honors and non-honors students in coursework, extracurricular involvement, or some other factor could account for HIP and retention differences between the two groups. Although eliminating that possibility was beyond the scope of this study, the qualitative analysis of the program documents identified aspects of the curriculum and the learning community experience that promote HIPs, thus providing evidence that at least a component of the group differences in the outcome measures can be attributed to programmatic elements.

Additional research on the outcomes of participation in a small honors program is needed to build upon the findings of the present study. Four specific approaches could yield important findings. First, because Kuh's (2008) research on HIPs indicates that they contribute to both retention and graduation rates, parsing graduation data from honors and comparison students would be worthwhile. Second, another means of determining if program courses directly contribute to HIP participation would be to collect data from honors participants that assess their work in honors and non-honors courses. Third, the separate effects of living in a residential learning community and of the honors courses taken by first-year student participants could be examined by comparing the retention and HIP participation of three groups of students: honors students, comparison students living in a different learning community at the college, and comparison students not living in a learning community. The findings of the present study provide evidence of favorable outcomes from participation in the honors program and from specific honors program components. Although additional research is needed on the mechanisms underlying such outcomes, the current findings indicate that providing an honors program for high-performing students will yield benefits for the students who participate in it. Further, by increasing the retention of such students, honors programs will benefit the colleges and universities that support them.

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