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## Introduction: The Demonstrable Value of Honors Education

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## Introduction: The Demonstrable Value of Honors Education

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In May of 2016, a small cadre of scholars was called to the campus of Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan, for the Honors Education Research Colloquium, a two-day meeting focusing on the future direction of research in honors education. The participants were assembled by Jerry Herron, who at the time was president of the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC), close on the heels of a decision by the NCHC Board of Directors in June of the previous year to make research—along with professional development and advocacy—one of three strategic priorities.

After a day of presentations, in turn, by each of the participants, the colloquium discussion turned on the second day to an enumeration of ways in which the goal of encouraging honors research might best be effected. That enumeration included such topics as bridging the gap between those scholars doing related educational research inside and outside of honors and the establishment of an infrastructure to facilitate data collection and other collaborative research across multiple NCHC member institutions. One of the

concepts that emerged most forcefully from those discussions was vocal consensus about the need for more, and more robust, research evidence addressing the question of whether honors education adds value—for a society that helps to support the educational enterprise, for faculty and others who work to provide honors programming, for the institutions that house honors programs and colleges, and, especially, for the students who participate in such programs.

Almost 100 years into the honors education experiment set in motion by Frank Aydelotte, there has been, of course, a great deal of research and writing about honors. In many ways, however, honors programs have for decades hummed along peacefully and without much notice from educational researchers or the watchful eyes of accreditors, and the notion that honors provides a better educational experience for high-ability and otherwise talented students has persisted largely as an unquestioned assumption.

But that situation is changing. In the past few decades, as modernity unceasingly fetishizes anything presented numerically—especially if it comes in the form of a ranking—and as “assessment” has transformed from a buzzword into a bureaucratic juggernaut, more and more honors directors have been pulled into an inexorable vortex that ends each summer with an annual report filled with numbers and attending stories of honors student successes. Indeed, many honors administrators now routinely present their student accomplishments, rates of graduation, and other student successes compared to those in the general student body as evidence of honors program success. Many honors programs can show that their honors students graduate at higher rates than non-honors students, do so faster, graduate with higher GPAs, are more likely to go on to graduate and professional school, and win prestigious national fellowships at higher rates.

While the data points and success stories in annual reports may have their place on campus, from a research perspective these approaches often have serious limitations. The problem is that we want to know about the honors experience, but we often are measuring student characteristics, and doing so selectively. Most honors students, however, are starting at a different place than those in the general student body because the admissions processes for honors

at most institutions are designed to maximize the probability that unusually smart, talented, and motivated students enter those programs. Thus, the evidence most often used to demonstrate the impact of honors programs is limited because it usually does not account for the differences that exist between honors and non-honors students at the moment of matriculation or point of entry into honors programs. That reality makes it difficult to establish a causal connection between the honors experience and student change—we often do not have a really good handle on where the students started in order to evaluate how much they have grown.

The problem at hand is one that has been of concern at least as far back as the very moment when NCHC emerged from the ashes of what had been, from 1957–1965, the Inter-University Committee on the Superior Student (ICSS). The same year that NCHC was founded, Joseph W. Cohen (1966) published his monograph titled *The Superior Student in American Higher Education* chronicling the history and issues surrounding the efforts of the ICSS to expand honors education in the United States, and in the final pages Cohen turns his attention to honors program evaluation. While experiments employing random assignment of subjects to experimental and control groups are something of a gold-standard in explanatory research, Cohen notes that “no experimental attempts to determine objectively how attainment and achievements of honors participants compared to those of non-honors students are recorded” (Cohen 1966:254). Indeed, while the design of such an experiment is not difficult to imagine, few would find acceptable any attempts at experimentation where some otherwise eligible students were denied entry into honors in the interests of demonstrating the unique effects of the program on student success.

Yet there are other ways that researchers can capitalize on naturally occurring variation among honors and non-honors students to isolate the unique effects of honors program participation on student success and other meaningful outcomes such as civic mindedness, intellectual humility, or any variety of other outcomes that we might like for our students. Use of multivariate statistics and thoughtful research design that measures and statistically controls for relevant characteristics has become the bread and butter of research in the

social sciences, but such methods have been applied relatively rarely in research on honors education.

In response to the outcry at the Detroit research colloquium, in early 2017 we announced a call for proposals for new research exploring the value added of honors programs. That announcement can be found in the Appendix to this volume, and the collection herein is the result of that call for new research on the demonstrable value of honors education.

While many of the chapters rely on analytic methods that are more widely used in some fields than in others, authors have endeavored to include definitions and more explanation of statistical terms than one might typically find in a disciplinary journal where readers and writers share a common analytic frame and vocabulary. The collection begins with “Honors Value Added: Where We Came From, and What We Need to Know Next” by Hallie E. Savage, who provides an overview of the historical development of honors programs in the United States. In “History and Current Practices of Assessment to Demonstrate Value Added,” Patricia J. Smith then explores how the pursuit of evidence about value added in honors programs can be used within the program review process to inform change, and she points to the importance of collecting both quantitative and qualitative data in research investigating the benefits of honors education.

In “Proving the Value of Honors Education: The Right Data and the Right Messaging,” Bette L. Bottoms and Stacie L. McCloud then show how good data combined with simple yet compelling data summaries can be used on campus to illustrate the value that honors programs add for the larger institutions that house them, as well as for honors students in terms of classroom success and college completion. Bottoms and McCloud explain how other honors program directors can engage in local collaborations to bring similar kinds of evidence to bear on their own campuses even when they may not have training in sophisticated statistical and quantitative research methods. In the process, they provide a template that readers from fields outside of the social sciences may find more accessible, and in so doing they provide a comfortable launchpad that propels the volume forward to subsequent chapters.

The remainder of the collection features a variety of formal research contributions that make use of rigorous multivariate and other research methods designed to isolate the unique effects of honors program participation on student success, and thus to bolster the accumulation of evidence on the question of the value added from honors education. Dulce Diaz, Susan P. Farruggia, Meredith E. Wellman, and Bette L. Bottoms anchor the assemblage in a chapter that boldly claims, “Honors Education Has a Positive Effect on College Student Success.” Using data on over 20,000 students collected during the period 2006–2012 at a large public university, they found significant benefits to student success from participating in the university honors college. After controlling for various pre-matriculation variables, participation in the honors program was positively associated with first-term GPA, first-year credits earned, second-year retention, and graduation rates. Notably, they also found that those associations were stronger for underrepresented minority students on some success indicators, suggesting that honors education may help to address race and ethnicity achievement gaps that we witness elsewhere in higher education.

Katie Patton, David Coleman, and Lisa W. Kay’s “High-Impact Honors Practices” details how they utilized Astin’s “inputs-environment-outputs” (I-E-O) model to examine how the environment of the Eastern Kentucky University Honors Program affects student outcomes. Using data from almost 600 honors students and a comparable group of non-honors students with similar academic preparation, they found that honors students had higher retention and graduation rates than the comparable non-honors students. Moreover, they found that there were higher retention and graduation rates among those honors students who were more highly involved in the high-impact practices that are an important feature of the honors program.

In “GPA as a Product, Not a Measure, of Success in Honors,” Lorelle A. Meadows, Maura Hollister, Mary Raber, and Laura Kasson Fiss describe the unique features of the Pavlis Honors College at Michigan Technical University, where any student is free to join honors regardless of GPA. Unlike much of the other research that

focuses on outcomes such as retention and graduation rates, Meadows et al. used data from initial and final written reflections by 26 students in their first honors seminar to evaluate the development of “self-authorship,” fostering students’ authentic internal voices, as the outcome of interest. They found that the unique approach of their courses was associated with higher levels of self-authorship, and they report: “Self-authorship development has been shown to produce graduates who are better prepared to manage adversity and change, make meaningful decisions, benefit from their educational experiences, and learn deeply throughout their adult lives” (p. 143).

Art L. Spisak, Robert F. Kirby, and Emily M. Johnson present evidence of value added from a slightly different vantage in “Adding Value through Honors at the University of Iowa.” Using data from over 3,000 students at the University of Iowa, they compared honors students who lived in honors housing and/or participated in an honors pre-semester credit-bearing class with similar honors peers who did not opt for those experiences. Results indicate that students who elected to participate in a pre-semester honors class and live in honors housing were more engaged in the honors program and, moreover, had greater academic success as measured by outcomes such as cumulative GPA at the end of the first year and completion of honors requirements. The comparison—not of honors with non-honors but of students with varying levels of engagement within the honors program—suggests that it may be exposure to specific features of an honors program that adds value to the educational experience.

Robert D. Brown, Jonathan Winburn, and Douglass Sullivan-González then discuss evidence of value added both for individual honors students and for the institution in “The Value Added of Honors Programs in Recruitment, Retention, and Student Success.” They used survey data from over 500 honors students to evaluate the ways in which the honors college adds value at the institutional level to the University of Mississippi. They found that the enhanced academic environment resulted in a significant recruitment impact for the university that also helps to mitigate against brain drain whereby the best students leave the state to pursue schooling elsewhere. In a

supplemental analysis, they used a matched pairs approach for over 1,500 honors students and comparable non-honors students and found further evidence that honors programs contribute to higher student GPAs and greater retention in each subsequent year of the students' college careers.

Jane B. Honeycutt contributes an important aspect to the collection by exploring the value added of honors at two-year institutions in "Community College Honors Benefits." She compared outcomes for 95 honors program participants at Northeast State Community College in Tennessee with those for 357 academically matched peers who did not participate in honors. She used a propensity score matching process to control for confounding variables such as high school GPA, ACT score, parental income, and several other important background characteristics. Honeycutt found that honors program participants, compared to non-honors students, earned significantly higher grades in their English Composition II course, earned significantly higher GPAs, and were significantly more likely to graduate.

The final research article in this collection comes from George Smeaton and Margaret Walsh at Keene State College. Their essay, "Contributions of Small Honors Programs," presents data from approximately 100 honors students and a comparable group of students who received merit-based scholarships but did not participate in honors. Like other authors in this collection, they found that honors students had higher retention rates and greater involvement in high-impact educational practices, but they also present qualitative data that suggest that specific program features, such as an honors living-learning community and an emphasis on experiential learning, contributed to those improved outcomes.

In the final essay, co-editor Jerry Herron and his collaborator D. Carl Freeman ask, "What Next?" They provide a synthesis of the cumulative contributions of the collection as well as offering suggestions for future research directions.

We believe that together the contributions in this collection provide important answers and compelling evidence that honors programming does contribute something above and beyond what honors students themselves bring to the educational experience. This



research also presents a useful cross section of research methods that we hope will inspire future research efforts in this area of inquiry. Moreover, we hope that the cover image from Vincent van Gogh's *Olive Orchard* will provide a visual reminder of the power and beauty that are possible when conscientious stewards provide the right conditions for growth.

The results presented in this volume are a forceful answer to the question of whether honors adds value, and the evidence indicates that the answer to the question is yes. Using a variety of different methods and exploring a variety of different outcomes across a diversity of institutions and institution types, honors programming adds demonstrable value for the students who participate. While it is true that those students tend to start college in a stronger position in terms of academic preparation—as indicated by factors such as college entrance tests and high school GPA—meaningful evidence demonstrates that honors programs propel those students further than they would have gone without those programs. Yet research evidence is rarely unambiguous, and results are often qualified by the parameters of sampling designs and other methodological choices. Readers must discern for themselves just how demonstrable the evidence is and what directions future research should take, and so I encourage readers to investigate for themselves in the pages that follow.

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