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Emphasizing Co-Curricular Experiences to Address Increasing Honors Enrollment and Diminishing Resources

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Abstract: A program giving equal emphasis to honors coursework and targeted co-curricular experience provides one solution for a public university facing both increases in enrollment and decreases in financial resources. Undergraduate research, study abroad, and campus leadership provide high-impact experiences to students for honors credit. Measurable outcomes are presented.

Keywords: co-curricular activities; student engagement; high-impact practices; interdisciplinarity

Like many honors programs, ours faces an increasing number of highly engaged students seeking admission while simultaneously we face a push to maintain quality with diminishing resources. To address these concerns, we have modified our honors program to blend curricular and co-curricular opportunities into an outcome-driven honors experience.

In its earlier conception, honors students were required to take seven honors courses in order to complete our program. Honors-only courses are sections of university-required general education courses taught by various departments across campus. As honors sections, the courses have smaller class sizes, an increased emphasis on student-centered pedagogy, and a focus on interdisciplinary connections among various content areas.

As our honors program doubled in size to around 200 students in the middle 2000s and as the student-to-faculty ratio grew campus-wide, offering enough honors sections became a challenge. To address this concern, the

program initially developed an outcome-based approach, described by B. E. Wilson in *Honors in Practice* (2012), that allowed students to substitute certain co-curricular experiences, such as undergraduate research, study abroad, and leadership on campus, for up to three of the required honors courses. In this way, while students still satisfy their university general education requirements by taking non-honors sections of courses, they can work toward completion of their honors requirements by engaging in high-impact practices that result in an equally robust honors experience.

Moving forward into 2019, honors now has over 500 students with a projected enrollment in three years of over 700 students. At the same time, our state system of education was recently ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* (6 August 2019) as last among all of the states' systems of higher education, largely due to funding concerns and increased college costs. In order to maximize our fiscal efficiency and pass on as little of the cost as possible to students, our institution is very sensitive to FTE numbers in departments and the opportunity costs of running smaller honors sections of courses compared with larger, non-honors sections of courses. High enrollment in honors, coupled with maximum fiscal efficiency across the institution, has required a further shift away from a model of honors education that emphasizes a seven-course curriculum toward a balanced approach that blends coursework with targeted co-curricular experiences in order to ensure that honors students continue to be exposed to a robust honors education.

To accomplish this task, honors began by defining our six measurable outcomes. Our list of co-curricular experiences was then expanded to link the outcomes of those experiences to our honors outcomes and to match current opportunities at our university. While students can still earn honors credit by engaging in undergraduate research, study abroad, and leadership on campus, now experiences with community-engaged learning, service learning, global learning, and creative works are also eligible honors experiences. Additionally, students now have the option, much like a contract course, to propose that a co-curricular experience count for honors credit after justifying the activity as an honors experience by linking it to an outcome, showing an appropriate depth of engagement, indicating interdisciplinary connections, and highlighting how the experience will have positive impacts.

Honors sections of courses were also given honors credit values to make them equivalent to co-curricular experiences as an equally valid pathway to completion of honors whereas previously the co-curricular experiences seemed lesser because they were substituting for coursework. To complete

the honors program, students are now required to be involved in an equal balance of honors courses and co-curricular experiences, and both are equally valued as high-impact, interdisciplinary learning opportunities.

The resulting system has reduced the fiscal burden on departments that offer honors courses while still ensuring that we are able to maintain our most impactful honors course experiences. Additionally, our system now emphasizes our honors students' heavy involvement in co-curricular experiences and allows our students to approach that engagement through an honors framework that focuses on measurable outcomes. Most importantly, this balanced approach allows our institution to offer a robust honors experience to an increasingly large honors student body in a public university that faces extraordinary pressures to cut costs at every opportunity.

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