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Sebastian Doll

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Honors Pathways and Curriculum Structure

Sebastian Doll

Advised by Dr. Linneman

HNRS 490

Introduction

When we envision a college student, we might imagine an eighteen-year-old graduating high school, driving off to the college with their parents, spending four years in a college town and then graduating. Especially today, there are many non-traditional college students that start college later in life, go back to finish their degree, or start at a community college to save money, belying the stereotypical idea of a college student. As we look towards the future, it is important that each academic department and program in a university works to serve students from all pathways and backgrounds—after all, universities are critical towards advancing upward mobility and social equality. Honors programs exist at many universities and colleges, and despite sometimes being perceived as elitist, Honors programs and colleges play a key role in trying new ideas, fostering intellectual curiosity, and offering unique opportunities for students¹.

¹ Ford, J., & Zubizarreta, J. (Eds.). (n.d.). *Breaking Barriers in Teaching and Learning*. National Collegiate Honors Council.

The curricular requirements of Honors program and colleges—some of which offer multiple sets of curricular requirements (or “tracks”)—shape who may decide to enroll in an honors college or program and what skills and knowledge the college or program provides. In shaping and structuring Honors curriculum, it is important to ask questions about the program and its goals for the students it directly serves and the broader academic community. Who does and who should Honors curricular requirements serve? What skills and foundations should Students benefit from and takeaway upon graduating? Which curricular requirements are critical to the Honors academy, and which might not need be required for all students? As these questions are critical in shaping the future of Honors, in this study I will explore these components of Honors programs and colleges, and how they connect to who Honors pathways serve.

Honors Curricular Requirements Background

There are several key building blocks of Honors courses and curriculum requirements, with a general focus on a broad, liberal arts-based foundations. As part of the curriculum, many Honors Colleges and Honors programs focus on requirements that are like university core requirements, allowing Honors to take the place of or supplement part of a University’s General Education Requirements. In many cases, the requirements may align more with those of Humanities or Social Sciences students as opposed to students in Engineering, Computer Science or other STEM programs; this may mean Honors is more appealing to students in those majors. Honors college requirements generally contain the following curricular requirements:

- First-Year Classes—Most Honors programs have a set of required first year courses, with the goal. Many of these courses align with University Core requirements, often for Humanities and/or Writing/English requirements. These courses have the goal of introducing students to the Honors academy and providing them a broad starting point before students dive deeper into specific content areas.
- Colloquium or Disciplinary Courses—These courses often have similar equivalents in majors or as general education electives, with the potential advantage of smaller class sizes and more rigorous discussion. By both fulfilling introductory requirements for major (or for certain GURS), these courses can be useful for students in completing their requirements and in expanding the Honors experience. Disciplinary courses could be in an array of areas ranging from Geology to Microeconomics to English to Gender Justice.
- Experiential Courses—Several of the colleges studied features experiential courses, many of which require them as part of Honors requirements. Experiential course can include internships, independent study/research programs, study abroad or similar experiences under the Honors program or Honors options. In some cases, experiential courses in other departments can be used for Honors credit (i.e., taking a study abroad course with the Environmental Science department)
- Capstone or Senior Thesis Courses—All of the Honors colleges and programs I reviewed required a capstone or senior thesis; this culminating part of the Honors experience, with some differences in each University, allows students to further explore a student-driven question or project, in collaboration with a faculty adviser, and present the results in their senior year

Context

Honors programs would not exist without an intentional pedagogical approach that informs the curriculum and structure of the program. When looking at how Honors Colleges and programs can be improved for non-traditional student, it is key to look at the goals and benefits of the program in designing the curriculum and tracks students can take. For many Honors programs, the first-year sequence of classes is a key foundation of the program. Some colleges, seeking more community and more interdisciplinary connections between courses, have experimented with “clusters”—which are sets of two to three interdisciplinary honors classes that all (or many) Honors first-years take. This idea has been shown to have both advantages and disadvantages; it can help build community among first-year students and foster interdisciplinary connections (a key part of many Honors programs), but it is also logistically unwieldy, not only for students but also for faculty. The article on the issue found that faculty generally had an increased workload in clusters courses. With that in mind, it might be useful to offer different options for these sequences and courses.

While Honors students might benefit from first-year sequences or clusters, it would be potentially challenging and unrealistic for transfer students to take a full first-year Honors sequence, given the other academic requirements they need to complete. But how can colleges provide the same community and experience to incoming students? Some colleges, such as James Madison University, require a low-credit orientation class specifically geared towards transfer students. By offering a more limited introductory sequence, they aim to orient and develop connections among incoming students, and also manage to provide flexibility for non-traditional students by focusing on disciplinary (colloquium), seminar and senior capstone

courses. Beyond the academic sense, developing programs that can include transfer students in the overall Honors experience can also be important—allowing Honors students to gain from new perspectives and a more diverse student body.

Why Honors

Going back to the root of Honors, one must ask—but why Honors? One can start by looking at the personal side, in which a student evaluates all the benefits Honors might offer them. Honors programs offer smaller class sizes, more face-to-face time with faculty and advisers, and a thriving social and intellectual community. Honors programs also often provide unique opportunities, whether it is undergraduate research, study abroad programs, or even just Dog Days. Looking specifically at transfer students, as well as other non-traditional students, Honors classes and participation may be even more critical. The transition from a community college or other institution to a university can be challenging, and Honors programs can certainly help aid in the transition, especially in offering a smaller, more intimate learning community. Meanwhile, Honors programs help connect students with academic resources and a broader intellectual community, while also having the potential to foster and develop communities outside of the academy. In the academic sense, participation in Honors—and a marker of succeeding in the program, whether a minor or designation on the transcript—can be helpful for entering graduate school as well as future employers. In addition to the benefits, students must also look at the cost, which is measured (for most programs) not in dollars but in the requirements and hoops a students must jump through. Only then can a student ask whether or not they should apply and, if accepted, join Honors.

But beyond the students it directly impacts and serves, ideally Honors programs also seek to grow institutions and to create hubs for intellectual growth and development. Honors students play a significant role in research and education, and Honors program can be a laboratory for new teaching methods or ideas. Honors students and colleges ultimately play a critical role in institutional development and culture and done successfully, Honors can multiply its benefits to a larger community and institution². Honors students also are more likely to be involved in clubs and leadership on college campuses, benefitting the institutions and increasing the involvement in college life. All in all, Honors should exist as part of a greater institution rather than as a separate entity, even if Honors is considered its own college.

The benefits of Honors college are wide-ranging and unparalleled in many ways. The exact “benefits” will vary based on the college or programs, but some standard benefits include the smaller class sizes previously mentioned, discussion and seminar-based classes, unique classes that may not be offered to other students, and other events and opportunities. These benefits not only help foster an environment of intellectual discussion and curiosity for those in the Honors program, but they also extend more faculty and community opportunities, as well as easier access to faculty advising, to students in these programs. Beyond the academic components, Honors students have been shown to have greater participation in clubs, leadership opportunities, and even collegiate sports³. This can be incredibly helpful for

² Mariz, G. (2021). Unpublished manuscript

³ Mariz, G. (2021). Unpublished manuscript

students' future after college—whether it's applying to graduate schools or going straight into the job market.

Equity and Diversity

Equity and diversity are critical to universities and academia. The U.S. is a rapidly diversifying and changing nation. It is important that our colleges and universities reflect the future of America, and this includes Honors colleges and programs. Honors colleges and programs should aim not only to recruit and retain, but to help thrive, a diverse group of scholars. Honors scholars should be the brightest, most curious and most driven—whether that shows in a 4.0 GPA and stellar academic recommendations, in a compelling set of experiences and knowledge they bring to a university, a cause they pioneered and make an impact, a club and area of interest they have demonstrated significant accomplishment in or something else-- and represent the University they attend as well as the wider community. Transfer students are a key part of the diversity and equity piece, not only because they can compose a major part of a university's enrollment, but they are more likely to be first-generation and more likely to be a Pell Grant recipient (a measure of economic diversity at colleges and universities). At Western Washington University, about 38.4 % of transfer students are first-generation, while 28.6% are

Pell Grant eligible. This compares to only about 28% of first-year students being first generation, and about 24% being Pell Grant eligible⁴.

Recruiting and retaining diverse student is not only key to the university mission, but it is also beneficial for other students to learn new perspectives and ideas. Non-traditional students can bring new and different outlooks on important topics, something that is key to Honors. A student who was a parent before going back to college, for example, could bring new perspectives and take conversations to a new level in Honors courses and programs. In asking these important questions about Honors, it is key that we look at and evaluate the benefits of diversifying the students within Honors colleges and programs, and work not only recruit and enroll students from diverse backgrounds, but to ensure our pathways and structure are setup in a way that sets them up for success and to gain from the courses and experience they partake in.

Running Start and Transfer

How the courses requirements of Honors colleges and programs fit into the plans and course selection of Running Start and Transfer students is complicated. First-year classes, while interesting, often duplicate General Education Requirements. One must examine the goal of Honors program, and what they hope to achieve, to better understand how important requiring these first-year courses are. These courses can add a significant credit requirement to these

⁴ Western Washington University. (n.d.). Office of Institutional Effectiveness. Retrieved June 14, 2022, from <https://oie.wvu.edu/factbook/>

students, especially for more credit-intensive majors. On the other hand, it can also be an important foundation to an Honors college, helping to provide a broad overview of a subject and the greater Honors academic program. It can also be important socially and for networking. Some colleges waive these outright for Honor Students with a Direct Transfer Agreement (DTA) degree, while others simply allow students to petition (request) replacing or waiving the course. Other colleges offer a different “track” for non-traditional students that is less credit-intensive, and often does not require the first-year sequences.

Disciplinary classes and colloquia, which often have options that can fulfill major requirements, fill a similar niche. They can offer a unique experience, in providing an Honors community while allowing student to take or explore a class in a specific disciplinary area. If a transfer or Running Start student comes in with limited experience in a major (or minor), strong, small-enrollment introductory classes can be useful for them. On the other hand, it can be challenging for some students, adding an extra requirement for students who have already taken introductory courses in their major/minor, which may make the Honors program less appealing to enroll in for these non-traditional students.

Seminars, a key part of the philosophy for Honors programs/colleges, generally add extra requirements for all students, beyond major or core requirements. Seminars offer the chance to home in on a topic in an intimate environment, with courses that often focus on specific topics. Since seminars are interdisciplinary, they usually are not duplicative of courses a student has already taken and are a key component of most Honors programs and colleges. Many Honors programs and colleges, if they do not waive disciplinary or first-year requirements for non-traditional students, will allow students to request replacing these courses with a

seminar. This can be a useful option for transfer students, since it allows them to explore a variety of topics without being duplicative or similar. Since these courses have significant intellectual rigor and allow exploring topics that might be outside a standard course catalog, they can be valuable and important to Honors curricula.

Capstones or a senior thesis are also a key part of many Honors programs and colleges. Capstones, though students may opt to take a higher number of credits, generally only require a minimum of two or three credits to complete, though students often have the option to take more credits or take classes prior to their capstone in preparation for the project. Capstone are required in all Honors colleges and programs to all types of students, with the idea that this culminates the Honors experiences and shows both independent learning as well as intellectual growth.

Curricular Pathway Patterns

For all the commonalities we see in Honors programs regarding their structure of their curriculum, the goals and visions they aim to achieve, and the scholars they support and build, there are significant differences in the curricular requirements and different tracks (if there is more than one) that each Honors College or program offers. To better understand these differences—credits for an Honors minor range from 29 to 60 quarter credits, and policies for transfer students vary greatly—I created a table based on Honors websites as well as conversations with Honors leadership. This serves to help us better visualize the differences in the programs and the different tracks offered to Honors students at different colleges and universities.

There are several different types and structures of tracks offered by schools, each with its own philosophy. While these categorizations provide a general understanding, it is important to recognize each category is not exhaustive. Within each category, there are differences in the exact curriculum requirements and which requirements can be fulfilled by college classes, or by AB/IB classes (and test scores) in some cases. The first pattern we recognized is **multiple tracks**. Secondly, we'll explore Core Curriculum tracks. Lastly, some places offer both a Core Curriculum and other tracks.

Multiple Tracks in Honors Curricula

Several colleges and universities offer several different tracks for students, offering two or three different tracks to fill different student needs and niches. The terminology for this varies, with some universities using terms such as a minor, capstone, and Honors with distinction, but essentially these tracks offer a shorter, less intensive option aimed at transfer students or, in many cases, Running Start students who come in with an associate degree or a significant number of transfer credits. While the highest track, such as an Honors Minor, comes with the highest signifier, students can benefit from the Honors experience in all track and usually will receive some type of Honors designation on their transcript and their diploma upon graduation.

The smallest path, often starting with only 15-25 quarter credits, offers a relatively feasible add-on to a major for a transfer student. These programs aim to expose students to an in-depth Honors curriculum while also allowing for more flexibility and a lower number of credit requirements. Usually containing seminar and senior thesis courses., some colleges also require

all students (including transfer) to complete an orientation or introduction to Honors. Colleges will then also offer a higher-level path, as well as a medium-level path as an option. These programs are more comprehensive, often requiring 35 to 45 quarter credits and generally aim to supplement part (but not all) of the core curriculum at a college.

Many colleges that previously only offered one track now offer multiple tracks with more flexibility, with the goal of diversifying their applicant and broadening the type of students enrolled in their Honors College/Program. These pathways can be critical to transfer students, as more strict requirements would often be hard or even impossible to complete in addition to major(s) and/or minor(s) that students need to be complete. While an Honors Distinction or designation may not look quite the same on the diploma as a minor, these programs nonetheless have the potential to expose students to an in-depth Honors curriculum, which will often include seminar courses, disciplinary or colloquium courses, and a capstone or research project.

Adding onto the offering of multiple tracks, some colleges also offer Multiple Tracks with a Core Curriculum. These colleges, often larger Honors colleges, offers a Core Curriculum (generally for an Honors minor) and offer other tracks to Honors students. In a sense, these colleges try to offer the best of best worlds: a comprehensive and in-depth curriculum that can substitute for GERS, and less intense tracks aimed at being easier to complete for transfer or running start students.

Core Curriculum

For several colleges, Honors exists as a stand-alone college, completely replacing, or significantly substituting for, the university core requirements. Where colleges such as Western Washington University offer an Honors program that may substitute for part of the university Core Requirements (also called “General University Requirements”, or GURS, at many places), students in these colleges will take almost all of their core requirements with a cohort of fellow Honors students. In some colleges, part of these core requirement may mean students end up taking regular classes and opt in for a “Honors” option where they complete a general education course while doing extra work as part of a contract with the professor. In other colleges, such as University of Oregon, students will take their classes only with other students in the Honors cohort.

These programs can be useful as they offer smaller, more in-depth classes for the entire core curriculum as opposed to only taking part of the curriculum in a Honors Program. While they have a significantly higher number of credits required (generally 45-60 quarter credits), if they fulfill the General Education Requirements, it may end up being the same number of credits as a student would usually take. More courses could also help students get a broader Honors experience, as well as allowing students to connect and get to know their fellow Honors students, due to the nature of taking so many courses with other Honors students. These programs, since they only offer one options for fulfilling Honors Requirements, may be less accessible or more challenging to complete for transfer or Running Start students. To mitigate this issue, some Honors Colleges with this model will let transfer students (and sometimes high school students entering with AP or IB credit as well) use their credits to fulfill some of the

requirements. Typically, these programs allow students to waive some of the disciplinary (or colloquia) or replace those courses with upper-division seminars. While this may make it somewhat easier to graduate on time, it is nonetheless still often more challenging for transfer students or Running Start who have already completed all or most of the University Core Requirements.

College Profile Table

College	Curriculum Type	Top Track	Mid Track	Entry Track
CWU	Core + Multiple tracks	Core Curriculum (50 credits)	Minor (34)	Upper Division (15)
EWU	Standard Honors	27 Credits		
Gonzaga	Core Curriculum	48 Credits		
UO	Core Curriculum	60 Credits (Minor)		
MSU	Multiple tracks	Highest Distinction (42 Credits)	Distinction (30 Credits)	Academic Achievement (24 Credits)
JMU	Standard Honors	37 Credits (Honors Scholar Designation)		
WWU	Multiple tracks	Minor (29+ Credits)	Distinction (14+ Credits)	

WSU	Core Curriculum	49+ Credits		
Whatcom CC	Community College Honors	6+ Credits		

Methods

With the goal of surveying and studying a wide, but diverse, range of colleges, I created a list of eight public and private university Honors colleges and programs, with the goal of studying colleges that were similar to Western but had different characteristics that could serve to contrast with it as well as to gain new perspectives. The list was started based on the Western Washington Honors College Comparison Table, which was used for previous comparison purposes by the WWU Honors College. Using the list as a starting point, I aimed to include colleges from different regions, to include at least one private college or university, and to include several colleges within Washington, which would likely also serve some Running Start students (Running Start/dual enrollment courses is relatively unique to the Pacific Northwest). The colleges sampled included the following: Central Washington University, Eastern Washington University, Gonzaga University, James Madison University, Washington State University, University of Oregon, Montana State University, California State San Bernardino, and Cal Polytech SLO. In addition, I also added on a community college, Whatcom College, to better understand the roots for many of the transfer students on which I focus in this study.

Contact

I started by looking at each college's website to better understand the context and requirements for each individual program. I then attempted to contact each University by connecting with the Honors Director/designee and asking if I could schedule a conversation to learn more about Honors at their institution, and to aid in my research. I contacted eight Universities in total and ended up managing to talk to them on Zoom/Teams or have a conversation via email with five (WSU, CWU, Gonzaga, James Madison, UO) of them. For most of the colleges, I met with the Director or Dean of the Honors College; for several, I met with an Associate Director who specialized in outreach or student recruitment, and their curricular requirements. By talking to the people leading the programs, I was able to gain a deeper perspective and better understand the different Honors pathways as well as the rationale for the curricular requirements and structure of Honors at each institution.

In addition to talking to Honors programs at universities, I also reached out to two community college honors coordinators, aiming to get a perspective of the other side of transfers. I was able to talk to the Honors Program Coordinator at Whatcom College, which was helpful to look at how their content and program is run, as well as how partnerships with community college might be created. In looking at the coursework and learning in a community college setting, we can better unravel how universities can best support transfer students in their curricular requirements. Despite differences in mission and student body, many of the principles and foundations of Honors programs and colleges are the same regardless of the institution—the community college I looked at had a goal of fostering intellectual curiosity,

interdisciplinary learning, and most of them had both seminar courses and the option to do student-led projects with a faculty adviser.

Washington State University

Washington State University has a large, comprehensive Honors College. Washington State University has a comprehensive curriculum with one track and the same requirements in place for all students⁵—regardless of if they are a transfer student, Running Start Student, or traditional college freshmen. In deciding to have the same requirements, Washington State University thought it was important to fulfill a wide breath of coursework and ensure every student get exposed to the Honor experience, rather than just checking off boxes. Washington State University does accept some community college classes (as well as some AP/IB classes) to fulfill the 200-level Honors requirements, allowing those students to lighten the load. Since Running Start students haven't been exposed to the. Washington State University has a relatively small number of transfers, with some of the transfer coming in through community colleges that it partners with, including Walla Walla College, and Spokane Falls College (which has a shared campus with WSU). These colleges have their own Honors Programs and have an agreement in place with Washington University allowing for a more “seamless” transfer to the Washington State University Honors College and offer students a guaranteed scholarship as part of the agreement.

⁵ Washington State University. (n.d.). The Honors College. Retrieved June 14, 2022, from <https://honors.wsu.edu/>

COVID-19 Pandemic Transfer Background

One important angle, as we continue to look at the future of higher education, is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on community college transfers and students coming in⁶. The number of transfer students has been lower at Washington State University, and many other universities, as the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic have impacted finances, mental health and enrollment in student populations. Curricular requirements and structures will need to look at the changes the COVID-19 pandemic has caused for students, as well as the disproportionate impact it has on certain communities. Taking a closer look, Whatcom College saw a significant drop in Honors enrollment during the pandemic (from about 120-130 students a year to around 60-65 a year), likely in large part due to limited in-person classes and interactions that can be critical for recruiting and encouraging students to join Honors. When there is a smaller pool of students at the community college level, we can expect to have lower numbers of transfers into Honors. Considering the pandemic's impacts, and the events of the past two years, will be critical as we look to recover and make changes to academia that prioritize students, wellness and equity. Looking directly at Western Washington University, we saw a general decline in transfer students over the past 2 years. The decline has been particularly pronounced at the community college level, with Western Washington University seeing a drop in the percent of transfer students coming from community and technical

⁶ Carioca, M. D. F., Stahl, W., & Khalil, N. (2021, July 12). *How the Pandemic Has Changed Us—and Higher Education*. Harvard Business Publishing Education. Retrieved June 14, 2022, from <https://hbsp.harvard.edu/inspiring-minds/how-the-pandemic-has-changed-us-and-higher-education>

institutions (80% to 70%). There are certainly many reasons to explain this trend, but a significant factor may be the economic and family situations of people in community college who may have limited incomes and resources.

Central Washington University

Central Washington University's Douglas Honors College (DHC) stands out by offering not two but three Honors tracks for students⁷. CWU's approach to Honors is centered on the diverse student population it serves, a population that has a significant number of transfer students and that is majority first-generation, with the goal of offering access and flexibility to students. Students entering the Honors College have the options of three different tracks, which include the "Core Curriculum" (fifty quarter credits), the Minor (thirty-five quarter credits), and lastly the Upper Division track (which is fifteen credits). By offering so many different tracks, Central's Honors college aims to make it accessible and appealing to non-traditional students who might already have a transfer degree or a high number of credits, making it more feasible for those students. This is also potentially helpful for students with intensive majors (for example, Engineering or Computer Science), who might find it challenging to complete the entire program in only two or three years. Although it aims to serve all populations, it still might be challenging for some students to be able to complete as well as their major requirements if they arrive with ninety or more quarter credits. The Honors

⁷ Central Washington University. (n.d.). *Welcome to the Douglas Honors College*. Welcome to the Douglas Honors College | Central Washington University. Retrieved June 14, 2022, from <https://www.cwu.edu/douglas-honors/>

program at CWU aims to recruit and retain a diverse range of students and has made a point of promoting the Douglas Honors College to all students and families during visit and admission days. By partnering with families and inviting them to be part of the Douglas Honors College, CWU aims to diversify the DHC and ensure it reflects the student body.

James Madison University

James Madison University, the only East Coast university I studied, offers one track for students and has also established partnerships with several Virginia community colleges. Their Track II track is 24 semester credits (about 36 quarter credits) and includes Honors Seminars, Electives, and a Capstone Project⁸. Electives include seminars, Honors-specific sections of courses (i.e., Honors English 102 or Honors Biology 101), Honors-designated courses, and Honors option courses. Something somewhat unique that they offer is an “Honors Option”, allowing students to regular, general education courses as “Honors Electives” by completing extra work or more in-depth assignments. This allows for more flexibility, though some might view it as simply more work rather than more discussion or in-depth thinking. To support all students, JMU Honors provides advising and support to students as well as an Orientation class specifically geared towards transfer students. JMU also has an experiential/diversity requirement, which aim to honor all students’ experiences and can be any number of courses that meet the requirement. James Madison University has made the decision to offer one track so students could have a full experience, and to streamline the pathways for students.

8

University of Oregon

University of Oregon has one of the larger Honors Colleges in the Pacific Northwest enrolling approximately 1600 students in the Clark Honors College. As opposed to other colleges and universities where the Honors College has the same tuition—or (in the case of Gonzaga) even offers students selected to participate a scholarship—University of Oregon charges “differential tuition” for Honors, with the rationale that the benefits such as smaller class sizes, faculty advising, and special events and opportunities increase costs to the University and the costs should be put back to the students. University of Oregon has the most comprehensive curriculum of the institutions studied, with a total of 62 quarter credits required for the Honors, replacing the Standard Core Curriculum (or “GERS”).

Having a wide range of Honors courses, from in-depth seminars to numerous courses in a variety of subjects areas and allowing students to complete their entire core curriculum in Honors, certainly can have substantial benefits and goes beyond what many other Honors colleges or programs offers. The Clark Honors is also notable in the opportunities it offers students, including funded internships, research experiences with professors, and other benefits. The Clark Honors College has several unique programs, including a Prisoner exchange program that helps student expand their horizons and learn about incarceration and social justice, several unique marine research opportunities, and a unique style of seminar (called “Calderwood Seminars”).

Though it is still more rigid in many ways than other Universities, the University of Oregon has made changes to increase flexibility and pathways in the Clark Honors College.

There are now more course options allowing students to take courses on their own schedule (previously), and AP/IB or transfer courses may substitute for some of the course requirements. Although the number of transfers from other institutions (such as community colleges) is still relatively small, they have been encouraged by significant increases in “lateral transfers” (students), thanks to the increase in flexibility to the requirements and structure of the college⁹.

Gonzaga University

Gonzaga University has a strong Honors program that aims to provide a strong liberal-arts based curriculum that stretches across different disciplines and goes back to the Jesuit values Gonzaga is based on—including “an active commitment to social justice”, and “interdisciplinary approaches to critical questions, collaboration, and academic excellence”¹⁰. The Honors curriculum at Gonzaga is centered around a 4-year experience that includes a First-Year Experience, Colloquium courses, and of course a capstone to finish up the experience. Honors at Gonzaga includes relatively significant benefits including a high credit-load waiver (up to 25 credits without extra tuition charges), a scholarship and of course opportunities to engage with professors, conduct research and attend events.

⁹ Clark Honors College. (n.d.). *Robert D. Clark honors college*. University of Oregon. Retrieved June 14, 2022, from <https://honors.uoregon.edu/>

¹⁰ *Honors program*. Gonzaga University. (n.d.). Retrieved June 14, 2022, from <https://www.gonzaga.edu/academics/undergraduate/honors-program>

The benefits and experiences offered at the Gonzaga Honors program are impressive, but it is designed and structured to accommodate a four-year sequence. Based on the structure of the curriculum, which is designed around a rigid schedule structured quarter to quarter, it would not be considered possible to complete the curriculum in two years or less. The experience, and building, that Honors aims for is certainly admirable, and one might consider that these pathways exist in the context of a mostly traditional college student population that Gonzaga serves. Gonzaga also includes “Honors-designated courses”, which are specially designed courses that are faculty-designed and work to meet Honors outcomes. While some of the course seats are reserved for Honors students, those courses are not exclusively for Honors students. All in all, Gonzaga has a strong, close-knit Honors college with a set of requirements that is designed around traditional college freshmen. They have started working to include curricular requirements that would make it easier for transfer students to graduate in two years, but that’s not yet easily possible at this time.

Whatcom College

As previously mentioned, I sought to connect with two Puget Sound community colleges to get a better sense of what Honors is like at the community college level, and to envision how we can design pathways that better serve students coming from community colleges. I spoke with the Whatcom College Honors Coordinator, Professor Tony Will, via zoom. We had a very insightful conversation, where I was able to get a deeper perspective about Honors in community colleges. Although each community college has a different Honors program (and many do not have Honors altogether), there are similarities in the requirements and the potential to use those courses towards university Honors requirements.

Whatcom College Honors has faced several important decisions about the path and future of their Honors program. Around 2010 they had conversations about bringing in “American Honors”, a company that provided support for curriculum and planning for Honors—essentially contracting Honors programming and advising to a national company. Previously, several other community colleges in Washington decided to work with “American Honors. Whatcom College decided to continue running its Honors program independently, with the thinking that they’d have more flexibility and control over the Honors curriculum and content if they managed it themselves. American Honors also often lead to a Honors program that encompassed the entire curriculum (i.e., students would take all their classes as Honors), which would be challenging to fund and implement given their cohort sizes.

Many of the goals of Honors at Whatcom College have parallels to Western Washington University Honors College and Honors at other institutions. The Whatcom College Honors program emphasizes interdisciplinary learning, in-depth learning, and small seminars, and gives Honors students the option of designing their own project in collaboration with a professor or faculty member¹¹. Courses vary from quarter to quarter, but all of them are designed by faculty and reviewed by the Honors Coordinator, similar to Western’s process. In some cases, faculty will propose repeating the same seminar in future quarters, or on other cases they will propose an entirely new course. To complete the Honors designation, students must either complete

¹¹ *Whatcom Community College*. Honors Program. (n.d.). Retrieved June 14, 2022, from <https://www.whatcom.edu/academics/learning-options/honors-program>

two seminars or complete one seminar and one student-led project with a faculty adviser and must also receive at least a 3.5 GPA during their time in community college.

In looking at the course requirements, I considered how they might fit into Honors pathways at universities. All the seminars, although they fulfill a variety of different subjects, had similar goals and aims to Honors courses at universities. Seminars ranged greatly, just like those at Western Washington university, and have included courses such as “History of Rock n Roll”, the “Science of Happiness”, and “The Steinfeld Show”, among many other unique courses. Similar to colloquia at Western, each course (although with the same course number) is eligible for credit towards a distribution area, so that a Psychology-related seminar would gain the student credit for Social Sciences and so forth. Given the similar breadth and depth of courses, universities could certainly consider granting credit towards colloquia or potentially even seminar requirements based on courses taken in a rigorous community college Honors program.

Analysis

At its core, Honors curricular requirements go back to the questions about who Honors programs and colleges should serve, and what they should aim to achieve. The answer to the latter questions is complicated—what makes an Honors program an Honors program? Even

with similar numbers of credits, the types of requirements vary from college to college, making it challenging to pin down what it is key to the Honors academy and community. Certainly, a key theme we find in Honors is challenging oneself and taking on more responsibility for learning. We can see this in the many classes that emphasize student-centered learning in the form of leading discussion or doing presentations daily. Honors students, ideally, should come prepared with strong writing skills. With this in mind, many programs require a capstone project or independent thesis (similar to the one I am presenting), and this is a key component of the learning in the Honors community. Likewise, both foundation and seminar classes are often seen as key to the Honors program, in building the basics of the humanities, and in allowing students to make interdisciplinary communities in a class that focuses on a specialized, in-depth topic. On the important topic of foundational classes (essentially, the introductory humanities course that Honors students will generally take in the first year), some programs do provide options that waive the requirement. Western Washington University waives first-year classes for DTA transfer students (who can receive Honors Distinction as opposed to the Honor Interdisciplinary Studies Minor).

The answer to the former question—of whom Honors can and should serve—is also complicated. If an Honors program is to serve all academically advanced students, then it is clearly important to ensure that transfer and other non-traditional students can be included and be successful in Honors Programs and Colleges. While ideally Honors programs should aim to serve all intellectually advanced and curious students who come into the doors of a university, one could make the case that some students would benefit more than others from Honors programs, and that it might be less realistic for Honors to be able to serve all pathways

and tracks of students equally. With limited budgets and sometimes competing program goals, Honors leaders must weigh the costs and benefits of any policy change or program goal. Unfortunately, as it relates to transfer and other non-traditional students, it is hard to compute the benefits as most Honors colleges and programs have relatively minuscule transfer enrollments. Part of academia is exploration and innovation, and making mistakes, and it is certainly worth consider the effort to make Honors pathways more accessible and seamless to complete for non-traditional students.

It is also complicated to determine what marks success, and to determine what makes an Honors experience valuable and meaningful to a student. If a student does not receive an Honors minor—or even Honors distinction on their diploma—but they enjoyed close relationships with faculty and both learned and grew from their Honors experience, were they successful? For some students, completing an Honors minor or set of requirements may not be feasible or realistic, but they may still enjoy the coursework and gain from the Honors community. While earning a degree or designation can certainly serve as a marker or signal of success, from a purely academic perspective (viewing Honors as about learning), there is not necessarily a need to get something concrete and on paper out of the experience.

Honors Tracks: Background

Colleges diverge quite clearly in respect to which tracks offer. Where colleges like Western Washington University and Central Washington University offer lower-credit tracks, colleges such as Washington State University and the University of Oregon have made the

intentional decision not to offer multiple tracks. Instead, they emphasize the importance of a thorough and complete Honors curriculum. Effectively, they believe a more limited curriculum would not do justice to Honors and would not lead to the same Honors experience they desire to provide. Classes and coursework are certainly important to Honors, but one must also remember the components of Honors outside the classroom— “the honors experience extends far beyond the classroom, including membership in clubs” (cite manuscript) , making the case that experiences outside of the class—whether it’s events or Office Hours with a professor or community building in the Honors Center—are also important.

Quiet clearly, there is a case to be made for having a comprehensive Honors Curriculum. After all, if an Honors program is to be an entire college, it might make sense that a significant number of a student’s credits—and college experience—is taken in the Honors Academy. From a curricular perspective, it is important for many Honors programs and colleges to have a program that last four years, and programs generally aim to have each year and each course taken build off each other. By having a four-year, relatively intensive curriculum of classes, these institutions aim to leave no stone untouched—leaving learners with a broad and in-depth base of knowledge and a significant amount of their time spent in Honors Classes. Taking University of North Carolina, Wilmington as an example, the Honors experiences starts off with a variety of different seminars during the freshman year, and then goes into second-year interdisciplinary seminars. Rounding out the college experience at UNC-Wilmington is core classes, and then finally a senior thesis—requiring all seniors to complete a rigorous defense of

their thesis¹². These programs, while they certainly could be re-designed to better accommodate and fulfill other needs, are set on a four-year system and thus designed for traditional, first-year freshman as opposed to other types of students. But one must ask

Complicating these decisions and question is that the results, in terms of the number of transfer/non-traditional students, are not always clearly aligned with the tracks and flexibility offered by Honors Colleges and programs. Western Washington and Central Washington University, for example, offer a relatively accessible track for transfer students, yet their enrollment of transfer students is relatively small. While changing a program's curriculum, or other aspects of a program, to increase enrollment is certainly well-intentioned, Honors Colleges and Programs must grapple with the fact that enrollment may not increase immediately or by as much as they intend after making changes to pathways with the intention of better serving non-traditional students. Universities and colleges, however, are not just about numbers and figures—leaders must look at the long-term goals of an institution, and how well the students presently attending are served and set up thrive and be successful. While these changes may not make an impact overnight, they can still be setup with the goal of long-term success and an increasingly diverse pool of scholars in Honors.

Recommendations

With the aim of increasing representation and diversity among non-traditional students, and better serving all Honors students, I have drawn up several recommendations for Honors colleges and programs to consider, based on the background research done, conversations with

¹² Mariz, G. (2021). Unpublished manuscript

Honors leaders and Western's own Honors College. These recommendations serve not so much as an end or final solution to the challenges in for Honors colleges in providing curricular pathways that serve non-traditional students, but as a starting point to continue these conversations and to conduct more research. These solutions are tailored specifically to Western Washington University, from the perspective of our very own Honors College, but are also valuable insight for other Honors programs and colleges.

Offering Introductory/Mentoring Programs

As I heard from several programs, it is key to orient and introduce incoming students to Honors programs. Students, although all coming in with high intellect and a high level of curiosity, come from different backgrounds and have different experiences with education—which means navigating a new environment and adapting to it can be challenging. While many colleges offer Honors prologue, mentoring programs, and Honors Introductory courses, few of these programs aim or target non-traditional students. Non-traditional students often come in with more college experience by the way of having spent two years at a community college—some may even have experience in Honors communities at colleges or universities—but it is nonetheless useful to build connections and introduce students to their new academic community.

One strong example of this can be seen in James Madison University (JMU). JMU has each transfer student enroll in an orientation course that is specifically designed for transfer students. By building connections with faculty and setting up students for success, they can better retain students within Honors. The possibilities here can be endless and wouldn't

necessarily need to take up more credits or space on a student's limited schedule. As Honors exists outside the classroom as much as it does in the classroom, these programs don't necessarily need to be courses—they can be mentoring opportunities, events or prologues aimed at transfer students, or simply advisory meetings and programs. By providing support and building connections, these programs can empower students to thrive in Honors and also help encourage new non-traditional students to apply and join Honors.

Flexibility for Honors Requirements

The requirements and rules for transferring college credit are challenging enough, but Honors Colleges add a level of confusion and complexity to that process. From the perspective of Honors Colleges, it is challenging to determine what level of rigor and depth transferred classes have; many classes may not be similar enough or meet the standards of the Honors program/college. Some Honors Colleges/programs also emphasize the importance of completing requirements within the Honors College, and thus limit which courses can be substitute by classes transferred in. Ultimately, though, figuring out all the requirements and different policies is confusing and can be overwhelming for students, and it would help if there was an easier and more clear way of figuring out what courses would transfer or be waived and what pathways students would take in Honors.

There is no simple solution to these issues. While clarity and clear policies are important, colleges must also ensure they set certain standards of academic rigor, and that they ensure students are well-prepared for the curricular requirements, and that they ensure students come out of their undergraduate education with a strong set of skills and

knowledgeable. Honors advisers may want to verify that courses taken at a previous institutions meet the same standards for rigor, depth and discussion, which may mean evaluating the course description or syllabi. So that all students are aware, it is important that colleges adopt clear and concise policies that are easily visible on websites and in information packets. In some cases, colleges may also want to allow more flexible policies for transfer students—for example, colleges might review previous coursework to see if it met similar standards for rigor and breadth—so that students are more easily able to finish their degree and so that programs seem more appealing to non-traditional students. Above all, it should be relatively clear and easy to understand for students who are applying to see what pathway they would take and what courses would qualify for credit. In situations where it would need to be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, having a set of instructions and advising appointment upon entering Honors would be helpful in allowing students to be able to know their course requirements and pathway from day one of Honors.

Establishing Agreements with Community and Technical Colleges

Key to retaining and supporting transfer Honors students is the very pipeline they come from—which is mainly community and technical colleges. Offering a framework to expand upon, several colleges including Washington State University have established partnerships with other state Community and Technical colleges that provided guaranteed admissions (with a GPA minimum), scholarships and often waive some of the Honors requirements. This can be incredibly helpful for both transfer students and Honors programs and colleges by providing them a clear pathway and set of curriculum requirements, rather than managing each situation on a case-by-case basis.

One of the most valuable benefits of these partnerships would be being able to accept courses taken at a community college for Honors credit. As of right now, most colleges either have transfer students take a less-intensive track or substitute upper-division seminars for transfer courses. A partnership would ensure the courses taken in a community or technical college would have a similar level of rigor to Honors courses at the university and could allow those courses to qualify for Honors credit. Thus, transferring students could use their previously taken courses as credit and build open those classes in Honors.

Even when those situations might be accommodated on an individual basis, a clear partnership would make sure transfer students were aware of their options for continuing their Honors pathway at their next institution and understood that their previous Honors courses would allow them to jump ahead in the Honors program or college, and also help encourage them to continue participating in the Honors experience. By building these partnerships, Honors colleges and the programs would have the potential to diversify the population they serve and include more non-traditional students. Having transfer students would benefit Honors colleges by having a pool of students they knew were capable of handling a rigorous curriculum and add to the overall diversity.

As one example of a potential partnerships—keeping in mind the partnership in place would vary based on each individual Honors program or college structure—Washington State University has established strong partnerships with several community colleges including Spokane College, and even Whatcom College (which is significantly further away than the other colleges with partnerships). While enrollment has declined due to the COVID-19 pandemic and other trends within higher education, students came from these colleges composing a

significant amount of the transfer enrollment in the Lincoln Honors College. These partnerships include guaranteed admissions with certain minimum requirements (and a minimum GPA), a guaranteed scholarship and may also include slightly different pathways. Using a partnership in a similar way, a university could provide a clear pathway and waive some of the requirements to make for a seamless path to success in Honors.