

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

National Collegiate Honors Council  
Monographs Series: Chapters

National Collegiate Honors Council

---

2023

## Honors Advising for Large Programs

Art L. Spisak

University of Iowa, art-spisak@uiowa.edu

Holly B. Yoder

University of Iowa, holly-yoder@uiowa.edu

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



Part of the Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons, Educational Methods Commons, Higher Education Commons, Higher Education Administration Commons, Liberal Studies Commons, and the Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons

---

Spisak, Art L. and Yoder, Holly B., "Honors Advising for Large Programs" (2023). *National Collegiate Honors Council Monographs Series: Chapters*. 110.  
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchcmonochap/110>

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

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Honors Advising for Large Programs

ART L. SPISAK AND HOLLY B. YODER

UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

This study was conducted within the Honors Program at the University of Iowa, which is the flagship public research university of the State of Iowa. Its Carnegie classification is Doctoral University with Highest Research Activity (R1), and it is a member of the Association of American Universities. Its current student population is about 21,600 undergraduates and about 9,600 graduate and professional students.

Serving students across all six of the university's undergraduate colleges, the University of Iowa Honors Program (UIHP) is a large program of over 2,599 students. First-year honors students at Iowa in the past several years had an average high school GPA of 4.12 and an average ACT of 31.3. In order to remain in the program, honors students must maintain a minimum 3.33 GPA, and they must complete 12 units of honors coursework by the end of their fourth semester in the program. Nearly all lower-level honors courses are also general education courses. Honors coursework accounts for

half of the 24 units required for graduation from the UIHP. The other 12 units of honors credit are earned through experiential learning opportunities, such as undergraduate research, departmental honors, study abroad, and internships. Students choose the experiences that best fit their career path and personal goals.

Prior to 2016, we had no dedicated honors-specific advising for our honors students. Instead, the university's academic advising center was responsible for advising first-year honors students on their UIHP requirements and on the requirements of their majors. As well intentioned and competent as they were, advisors from the university advising center did not always have the time for honors-specific advising amidst the advising they were doing for their students' majors, nor were they always well informed on all the benefits of honors classes and the requirements of the UIHP. Making honors-specific advising even more of a challenge, our students, upon attaining sophomore status, moved to their departments or colleges for their academic advising. Advisors in those units—sometimes faculty, sometimes staff—were typically even less informed about the benefits, opportunities, and requirements of the UIHP.

Because of our less-than-ideal advising situation and a correspondingly high number of students not completing their honors course requirements, in fall 2016, we implemented required honors-specific advising. We instituted advising that focused only on our students' honors requirements and opportunities. For advising in their major, students continued to use the university advising center in their first year and then moved to advisors in their colleges and departments in subsequent years. Since we did not have sufficient professional staff to advise our large honors student population, we implemented peer advising to supplement the work of our professional staff. We also anticipated that peer advisors would be more approachable and have more recent experience with the opportunities offered by the UIHP curriculum. We required that honors students first meet with honors peer advisors before seeking appointments with UIHP professional staff to address more complex situations, such as exceptions to UIHP requirements.

Because our honors student population is so large, we chose to focus our advising efforts specifically on those students who had yet to complete the honors coursework requirement of 12 units of honors coursework. The primary outcome we were aiming for at this level was, as Philip L. Frana (2023) notes in his essay for this monograph, “simply helping students to understand the honors curriculum” (p. 14). We required these students to meet with a peer advisor once per year. Even with this narrow focus, we immediately had to contend with a significant caseload. In October 2018, for example, almost 500 of the nearly 700 first-year honors students needed a peer advising appointment; 86 of 97 new transfer students needed an appointment; and several hundred continuing honors students who had not yet completed their 12 units of required honors coursework also needed peer advising.

To handle a caseload of this size, the program has annually recruited six to nine peer advisors from among advanced students who have served previously in other UIHP positions, such as honors student administrator, honors outreach ambassador, or honors summer orientation ambassador. Honors student administrators are paid student staff who serve as the first point of contact when students or other interested parties come to the program’s offices; they also answer email and telephone queries and carry out various administrative support tasks for the professional staff. Honors outreach ambassadors assist the professional staff with presentations to prospective students and their families; they earn honors academic credit for these duties. Honors summer orientation ambassadors function similarly: they serve as panelists and presenters talking about their honors experience, but they are hired and paid specifically to staff the university’s twelve summer orientations that run from late May through early July. We recruit primarily from these three groups in order to fill the peer advisor positions. Most peer advisors, therefore, come to the position with a significant amount of experience in representing the UIHP and in communicating with students about program requirements. Additionally, in hiring peer advisors, we also select students from representative majors, departments, and programs of study—engineering, pre-medicine,

business, political science or another social science, and English or other humanities majors. This coverage allows advisees to select a peer mentor based on shared interests. Peer advisors undergo an application process that includes an interview. Training is provided in weekly 45-minute staff meetings and in one-on-one practice sessions with professional staff or second-year peer advisors. Peer advisors typically work four to eight hours per week.

To aid advisees in selecting a peer advisor and in making an appointment, our program's website features profiles of each peer advisor as well as a direct link to the scheduling tool. Drop-in hours are also offered daily for students who do not have a preferred peer advisor. Professional advisors for other departments as well as the university's advising center also refer students to the honors peer advisors.

The scheduling method used has changed over the course of the first four years of the peer advising program's activity. In the first year, scheduling was done through the university's course management system, Iowa Courses Online (ICON). This system, however, required many steps and proved unsatisfactory. In the second and third years, we used a commercial product called Calendly. In fall 2019, the university's appointment scheduling tool became available. It allowed students to make appointments with their peer advisors in much the same way that they do with their professional academic advisors. We were able to track students' meetings with peer advisors using Swipe, an attendance tracking application that also enabled us to identify as well as contact students who had not yet seen a peer advisor.

Communication with students about the requirement to meet with a peer advisor comes in a variety of forms. Most frequently, if they are faithful readers of their emails, they see the peer advisor drop-in hours and a link to the peer advisor webpage published weekly in the *Honorable Messenger*, the UIHP's email listserv for communicating programming, opportunities, and deadlines to students. In addition, students who have yet to meet the peer advising requirement or who are nearing an important deadline receive an email inviting them to meet with a peer advisor. These emails are

sent out once per semester. Messaging frames peer advising as an opportunity to explore options, but it also lets students know that peer advising can help them to stay on track with their UIHP goals.

When the honors program first instituted peer advising in fall 2016, we required students to meet with a peer advisor once per semester until they completed the required 12 units of honors coursework. After the first year of peer advising, however, the honors program reduced the requirement to once per year at the recommendation of the peer advisors themselves. They felt that our students gained a good understanding of the honors coursework requirement with just one meeting. The requirement of meeting with a peer advisor once per year is enforced indirectly in the sense that students who fail to complete 12 units of honors coursework by the end of their fourth semester in the program lose membership in the UIHP. We do not currently remove students from the program simply for not having met with a peer advisor.

Another change to the peer advising program made after the pilot year was a name change; our peer advisors became peer mentors. Peer advisors realized that students were arriving at appointments with narrow expectations for the meeting focused almost exclusively on registration for classes. As Frana (2023) notes, understanding that honors education was about much more than classes and requirements, our peer advisors wanted to have wider-ranging conversations with advisees that would encompass experiential learning and the program's mission of self-discovery. The honors advising director was ambivalent about the name change, but, following consultation with program staff and administrators, we made the decision to change the name in order to signal to students that they could expect a richer interaction with their peer advisors-turned-mentors. Although the name changed, the purpose of the advising program remained the same.

In the years before the honors program implemented peer advising, student dissatisfaction with their honors advising was evident in responses from graduates of our program to a survey we conducted (Drake & Johnson, 2019). Responding to a question about suggested changes, one UIHP graduate offered: "Make

sure that students receive advising as early on as possible”; another wrote: “I felt as though I was almost on my own once I went into my major” (Drake & Johnson, 2019, pp. 20–21). A third response directly anticipates the system we implemented in 2016: “I wish I would have been forced to be more involved as an underclassman. I never felt the connection to honors like I did to my major, and I wish it would have been required to meet with an honors advisor/faculty/peer at some point to show me everything honors has to offer” (p. 62). Respondents who asked for more and better advising described feeling lost or abandoned by the program and expressed a need for more and better communication about curricular requirements and how to complete them. With the implementation of honors peer advising, calls for changes to advising tapered off.

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, in March 2020, our peer mentoring went online just as other advising in the university did, and it continued online for all of the following academic year before transitioning to a hybrid model at the start of fall 2021. We offered virtual and in-person appointments and virtual and in-person drop-in availability. At the beginning of fall 2020, while still in virtual mode, we implemented a new strategy for outreach to mentees. Rather than relying on mass emails from the advising director or announcements in the program’s weekly news bulletin, *Honorable Messenger*, each peer mentor was assigned two separate caseloads, one of first-year students and a second of other honors students beyond their first year. We based assignments in part on matching majors and colleges. The advising director or different peer mentors created template emails that peer mentors adapted to their own communication style and then sent out to their assigned mentees. These communications went out roughly every three weeks, inviting mentees to make an appointment, take advantage of drop-in hours, reply with questions, or attend group advising and other honors events. A reminder that peer mentoring was required once per year until completion of the 12-unit coursework requirement was included in most messages to first-year mentees while messages to their other honors mentees, who were not first-year students, encouraged them to explore experiential learning with

their peer mentors and to check in to make sure they were on track with their UIHP requirements.

## RELATED RESEARCH

Many studies of paraprofessional staff members, peer educators, or peer mentors, as they are variously termed, have indicated that they play a beneficial role in the success of students. (See Minor, 2007, for numerous references.) Although multiple definitions exist for a peer educator, such a person can generally be defined as a student helping other students. More comprehensively, “Peer educators are students who have been selected, trained, and designated by a campus authority to offer educational services to their peers” (Newton & Ender, 2010, p. 6). Peer educators can serve in many different ways, including in the broadest capacity as resident assistants or, with a narrower focus, as tutors in a specific subject. Our peer educators have a narrow focus: they are second-, third-, and fourth-year honors students trained in our program’s curriculum to assist their fellow honors students in fulfilling the program’s curricular requirements.

Although there are relatively few empirical studies on peer advising, numerous studies exist on peer educators in general. Vernon G. Zunker and William F. Brown’s (1966) study is a good example of the general perception of peer educators in the literature, a perception that has persisted in the decades since. The study, done at Southwest Texas State College, employed test, questionnaire, and scholarship data to evaluate the effectiveness of counseling given to first-year students by professional counselors compared to the counseling given by peer counselors. Both the professional and student counselors received identical training, used the same guidance materials, and followed identical processes, and both were provided equivalent counseling facilities. The specific purpose of the study was to compare the effectiveness of student counselors to that of certified counselors in providing “academic adjustment guidance to beginning college freshmen” (Zunker & Brown, p. 739). The authors considered how well counselors conveyed information on study skills, the impact of the counseling on academic achievement (via



first-semester GPA), and how well students accepted their counselors. The authors found that the student counselors were as effective as professional counselors on all metrics. Moreover, student counselors performed significantly better in variables used to measure the outcomes of counseling, such as retention of information, acceptance of counseling, improved study habits, and first-semester GPA. Zunker and Brown qualified their results, however, by noting that their research “should not . . . be construed to suggest that student-counseling student procedures can be employed to replace the work of professional counselors” (p. 743).

According to Wesley R. Habley (1979, 1984) and subsequent studies, peer advisors score higher than faculty on the interpersonal dimension of the advising relationship (Murry, 1972; Brown & Myers, 1975); peer advisors are equal to faculty advisors in imparting information (Brown & Myers, 1975; Upcraft, 1971); and students advised by peer advisors do no worse on measures of academic success than students advised by faculty (Brown & Myers, 1975; Zultowski & Catron 1976). Habley (1984) also notes four main advantages of using peer advisors:

1. their greater availability and accessibility compared to faculty;
2. their flexibility in shifting hours so that they are available during peak advising periods;
3. their ability to recognize more readily than do faculty the problems and challenges that students face and, then, to convey that information to the advising program's staff; and
4. the fresh perspective and enthusiasm that they bring to the role, which helps to prevent an advising program from becoming closed, stagnant, and ineffective. (38–39)

Several studies also note the benefits that peer advisors themselves gain from the advising experience (Habley, 1979, 1984; Diambra & Cole-Zakrzewski, 2002; Griffin, DiFulvio, and Gerber, 2015).

Although most studies on peer advising present positive results, they also note the disadvantages of using peers. For example, Habley

(1979, 1984) notes that two of the most pervasive disadvantages of peer advisors are, first, continuity—peer advisors are with the program, generally, for no more than two years—and, second, peer advisors' lack of objectivity—they themselves are students and may be tempted to advise students away from challenging classes or professors. Most studies also recommend the use of peer advisors but with the caveat that such programs should only be supplemental to faculty and/or professional advising (Barman & Benson, 1981; Brown & Myers, 1975; Goldberg, 1981; Zultowski & Catron, 1976).

Four empirical studies on peer advisors merit more detailed attention owing to their focus on how peer advising is implemented. M. Lee Upcraft (1971) studied peer advising at the Justin Morrill College at Michigan State University. Because faculty advising was ineffective for freshmen and sophomores, the college decided to use undergraduates to assist in the advising program. Ten academic assistants—students with an exceptional academic record and second-year standing or above—were chosen and hired to assist with advising. Their role was similar to that of faculty advisors: they recommended courses and instructors, helped with enrollment and scheduling, advised students in academic distress, and were available for informal personal counseling.

At the end of the first year, the college evaluated the academic assistant advising program. As part of the evaluation, the entire freshman class was surveyed, with approximately half the students responding. Half of those respondents had taken advantage of the peer advising but only to seek mandatory approval for their schedules. Students who did use the academic assistants, though, were generally satisfied. Areas that generated negative results were “the development of individual potentials, abilities, and interests” (Upcraft, 1971, pp. 829–30). Nearly three quarters of the first-year students who responded recommended that the program continue; thus, the academic assistants became the primary official resource for students seeking help in the college.

Murry (1972) compared the effectiveness of student advising to that by faculty at Kansas State University. Murry's objective was to determine whether upper-level students could “perform routine

advising functions as well as could experienced faculty members” (p. 562). To gauge effectiveness, he used a survey that was designed to measure advisee satisfaction; he also tracked the frequency and length of advising sessions, student success as measured by GPA, semester academic loads, and retention. The results of his study suggested that upper-level students who are given supervision and relatively minimal training are indeed capable of advising their peers. In the case of his own study, peer advisors appeared to be at least equal to faculty advisors, and they were frequently superior to them in advising outcomes.

At Idaho State University, Brown and Myers (1975) compared the academic progress of students advised by students to that of students advised by faculty while controlling for academic potential as assessed by high school grade point average. The study attempted to identify what characteristics of advisors predicted academic success; it also tried to identify frequent criticisms of peer advisors and the advising system. Student advisors were volunteer upper-level students with a minimum GPA of 2.5. They were selected through an interview process that considered their reasons for wanting to become advisors and their concept of what advising entailed. Student advisors had the same role as faculty advisors: acquainting students with general university requirements and requirements for majors; serving as a referral source for the various services that the university offered; helping students to plan their schedules and courses of study; helping with academic (and sometimes personal) problems; and being a general source of help and information.

To evaluate the effectiveness of student advisors, Brown and Myers (1975) used two measures of academic success: advisees’ first-year college GPA and their dropout rate for the first semester. They found that students advised by their peers had no significant difference in GPA compared to students advised by faculty, but they did have lower drop rates than students advised by faculty advisees (5.2% versus 11.6%). Additionally, Brown and Myers (1975) found that students had more positive attitudes toward their peer advisors than toward faculty advisors. Thus, in general, the study supports the use of students as curriculum advisors. Yet, the authors found

strong support for the conclusion that liking a student advisor does not—at least over the short term—correlate with the effectiveness of the advisor as measured by advisee academic achievement. For that reason, the authors are cautious in their conclusions, noting that their data suggest that peer advising when compared to faculty advising has little short-term impact on academic achievement, but they also call for a more inclusive, longitudinal study to generate more conclusive results. They also note that offering a variety of advising programs is preferable to supporting any single advising program.

A fourth empirical study on peer advisors, which was done by Zultowski and Catron (1976) at Wake Forest University, also compares the effectiveness of peer advising with faculty advising. As their measures of effectiveness, the authors used questionnaires that asked advisees to evaluate their advisors on qualities such as availability, effectiveness, and interpersonal skills; first-term advisee GPA; and the frequency of peer advising interactions compared to faculty advising interactions. The results of the study indicated that peer advisors may be effective, but in a different capacity than faculty advisors. Specifically, peer advisors seemed to supply subjective and experiential information, whereas faculty advisors were better able to provide factual academic information.

All four data-driven studies qualify their findings on peer advising in various ways. They conclude that peer advising may be effective under certain conditions or in certain ways, but they do not offer assurance that peer advising in general will be effective at any given institution.

## **CURRENT STUDY**

This study compares the academic success of honors students who have met with honors peer mentors with that of honors students who have only used the university advising center and faculty and staff outside of the UIHP for their honors advising. In our overall programmatic assessment of UIHP students, we use completion of the 24-unit University Honors curriculum as the measure of success. In order to remain in and complete the program, honors

students must maintain a minimum 3.33 GPA, and they must complete 12 units of honors coursework by the end of their fourth semester in the program. As a halfway marker, we use completion of the 12-unit honors coursework requirement, which serves as a directly related, early indicator of success. Because the advising program focuses almost exclusively on students who are in the early stages of their journey toward completing the UIHP requirements, our study uses this early measure of student success. Specifically, we examine data showing the 12-unit completion rates of honors students after four semesters in the program. Using this measure, we compare students who experienced some form of peer mentoring with those who were advised only by the university's academic advising center and by professional staff or faculty in the colleges and departments. For the purposes of this study, we count any of the following types of contact as peer mentoring: one-on-one advising by appointment, drop-in advising, group advising as an orientation to the program early in the fall or spring semester, advising sessions in residence halls, and attendance at an honors experiential learning fair.

Beyond using the rate of completion of the required 12 units of honors coursework within four semesters as a measure of the effectiveness of peer mentoring, we also surveyed students who had some type of peer mentoring experience as described above. To assess the effects of peer mentoring, we used nine Likert-scaled questions. (These questions are shown in Table 3.) We also asked two open-ended questions that required a written response: one question on how peer mentoring contributed to the mentee's honors experience and another on ways to improve peer mentoring.

## RESULTS

In our tracking of completion rates, the four years for which we have complete data (i.e., four semesters of data for each student) show a marked difference in completion rates between students who met with an honors peer mentor versus those who received their honors advising elsewhere. (See Table 1.) Specifically, students who had some form of peer mentoring experience in the

2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019 cohorts completed the 12-unit honors coursework requirement at, on average, two times the rate (76% completed vs. 36% non-completed) as those who received their advising only from the university advising center and professional staff and faculty in the colleges and departments.

In spring 2020, the University of Iowa Honors Program went virtual in accordance with the university's response to the pandemic. Peer mentoring continued online through fall 2020 and spring 2021. We offered a hybrid format from fall 2021 to spring 2023 with most students continuing to prefer virtual meetings and email correspondence to the one-on-one peer mentoring that characterized the pre-pandemic program. An additional innovation in fall 2021 was that some peer mentors began conducting most of their advising through group meetings, a shift that will require further study to measure its effectiveness against the traditional one-on-one method of delivery.

Table 2 presents preliminary data on the 2020 cohort (i.e., two semesters of data). It shows the number and percentage of students who, after two semesters, have already completed the 12-unit coursework requirement as well as those who are halfway through their honors coursework (6 or more units). Students who had contact with peer mentors once again have a higher rate (about 1.6

**TABLE 1. COMPARISON OF COMPLETION RATES OF STUDENTS ADVISED BY PEERS ACROSS 2016–2019 COHORTS**

Cohort Year	Met with Peer Mentor	Number of Students	Completed 12+ Units Honors	Percentage Completion
2016	Yes	646	496	76.78%
2016	No	113	30	26.55%
2017	Yes	539	390	72.36%
2017	No	144	44	30.56%
2018	Yes	285	187	66.61%
2018	No	449	209	46.54%
2019	Yes	442	312	70.58%
2019	No	270	103	38.14%

times higher) of completion of the honors coursework requirement than students who received their advising elsewhere, although the effect is not as pronounced over two semesters.

The data from all cohorts, however, suggest that honors peer mentoring improved students' completion rate of the honors coursework requirement. These results accord with results from other studies that used some form of student success, such as GPA and completion rate, as a measure of the effectiveness of peer advising (Brown & Myers, 1975; Zultowski & Catron 1976). Other factors, of course, influenced the students' completion rate; we discuss them below.

To determine the effectiveness of our peer mentors, we also surveyed students who had received some form of peer mentoring. We sent an electronic survey to over 2,000 students, and, although the response rate was lower than desired (about 9%), we gained insight from the responses, which, in turn, corroborated what we observed with regard to the effect of peer mentoring on our students' course completion rate. Table 3 shows responses from 167 students. The Likert scaling is typical: 7-point, with 1 as Strongly Disagree and 7 as Strongly Agree.

The mean response for all nine questions was above the mid-point (Neither agree nor disagree) and, hence, positive, with moderate to low standard deviation for each question. Peer mentors scored highest on their knowledge of the honors curriculum (question 7); the simple availability of peer mentors (question 8) was the second-highest scored item. We took the latter—students

**TABLE 2. PRELIMINARY COMPLETION RATES OF STUDENTS ADVISED BY PEERS IN 2020 COHORT**

Cohort Year	Met with Peer Mentor	Number of Students	12+ Units Honors (after 2 semesters)	Percentage Completion (to date)	6+ Units Honors (after 2 semesters)	Percentage Halfway through Coursework (to date)
2020	Yes	349	156	44.69%	293	83.95%
2020	No	234	66	28.20%	145	61.96%

TABLE 3. STUDENT RESPONSES TO PEER ADVISING SURVEY

#	Question	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Meeting with a peer mentor helped me to choose honors opportunities that were a good fit.	1.00	7.00	4.85	1.60	2.55	167
2	My peer mentor advised me about honors opportunities that I might not otherwise have considered.	1.00	7.00	4.81	1.77	3.12	167
3	Talking with a peer mentor helped me to plan my next steps in the Honors Program.	1.00	7.00	4.89	1.81	3.29	167
4	My peer mentor offered additional help beyond what I already knew.	1.00	7.00	4.86	1.89	3.58	166
5	Meeting with a peer mentor helped me to complete the University Honors coursework requirement in a timely manner.	1.00	7.00	4.53	1.80	3.24	167
6	Meeting with a peer mentor should continue to be an Honors Program requirement.	1.00	7.00	4.74	1.89	3.57	167
7	My peer mentor was knowledgeable about the University Honors curriculum.	1.00	7.00	5.64	1.39	1.92	167
8	I appreciated the opportunity to meet with a peer mentor.	1.00	7.00	5.35	1.67	2.79	167
9	Interactions with a peer mentor made a valuable contribution to my experience with Honors.	1.00	7.00	4.86	1.82	3.33	167



appreciating the opportunity to meet with peer mentors—as falling within the interpersonal dimension of the peer mentoring experience. We also saw questions 3 and 9 as falling, at least in part, within the interpersonal dimension of peer mentoring. All three of these questions received some of the highest scores, which, once again, accords with what previous studies have found, namely that peer advisors score higher than professional advisors or faculty on the interpersonal dimension of the advising relationship (Brown & Myers, 1975; Habley, 1979 & 1984; Murry, 1972).

Student responses to the two open-ended questions at the conclusion of the survey provide further indication that the peer mentoring experience was especially valuable because students were able to make a personal connection with their mentor. For example, in response to the first question (What is one example of a way that peer mentoring contributed to your Honors experience?), one student wrote: “It was helpful to have someone knowledgeable about the program closer to my age (instead of a faculty member) who could help me plan out my methods of getting all my honors credit.” Another student remarked, “I got to see from a student’s perspective what they have done, as well as have the opportunity to think about how I want to fulfill each part of my honors curriculum early on.” We also saw from the responses that mentees were especially appreciative when their peer mentor’s experiences were directly applicable to their own, like when they shared a major: “My honors peer mentor had the same major and was on the same track at the time of our meeting. This allowed me to get some insight early on in my freshman year to plan for what the next steps were and how I wanted to lay things out based on their experiences.”

Conversely, we found that mentees were disappointed when their fit with their peer mentor was imperfect. Specifically, a number of responses to our second question (Based on your experience, what recommendations do you have for improving peer mentoring in Honors?) indicated a desire for greater personalization: “I think the system could be improved by making sure that peer mentors speak mainly with students who have the same or a similar area of study.” A similar theme among respondents was a desire for more

personalization in matching mentees with mentors whose experiences fit with their aspirations: “Provide additional opportunities to meet with a peer mentor that has experience in areas that you are interested in.”

Other responses confirmed what we found with our completion data, namely, the effectiveness of peer mentoring in helping students to stay on track with the curricular requirements. Several respondents spoke to this function directly. Examples include: “Meeting with a peer mentor helped me figure out what honors classes to take in order to fulfill my requirement on time,” and, “A peer mentor helped me to figure out opportunities to catch up with honors coursework when I realized I could not finish it in time for the deadline.” Another respondent said: “I had questions about the requirements for the program and how to fit the needed coursework into my schedule. My mentor helped me to navigate the requirements.” Further, many respondents confirmed that peer mentors pointed them to classes and opportunities that they would not otherwise have found. For example, one respondent said: “They introduced me to the Honors Writing Fellowship for experiential credit, otherwise I may not have applied and would not have gotten the fellowship.” Another said, “I learned about IPRO [Iowa Policy Research Organization] from Honors Peer Mentors, and I loved the class a lot.”

Amid comments affirming the peer mentoring experience, however, were a clear minority who did not value it, as represented by this response: “I think it should be optional and not mandatory. I already knew what my peer mentor and I discussed. I think honors students are more likely than many to research options and requirements on their own time and don’t necessarily need to have a meeting about it.” The respondent’s concluding sentence, however, recognized that this generalization might not extend to all honors students: “it could be a good option for people who want to opt in.”

## **DISCUSSION**

Our data show a strong correlation between peer mentoring and completion of required honors coursework, which is our

study's measure of student success. Yet, other factors likely affected these results. For example, students who chose to use peer mentoring could have already been more motivated and engaged with the program than students who chose not to meet with an honors peer mentor. Hence, their completion of the 12-unit honors coursework requirement may have had little to do with the peer mentoring they received. In other words, some may have been eager rule-followers who would have completed the course requirements at higher rates than their less proactive counterparts even in the absence of honors peer mentoring.

Although we are mindful of the limitations of our study, the findings correspond with what other studies have found. Peer advising under the supervision of professional advising staff can produce results that are at least equivalent in some respects to those achieved by professional advisors and faculty. Additionally, peer advising appears to surpass professional and faculty advising on the interpersonal dimension, which is unsurprising. Most students will naturally feel more comfortable with a peer than with a professional advisor or faculty member.

We do not suggest, however, that peer advising can supplant or, in general, surpass advising done by professional staff. Rather, we recommend peer advising as a supplement to advising by professional staff. We can say with assurance that peer mentoring has markedly broadened the reach of our professional advising staff and has helped bolster student success in our honors program. We have also been able to offer honors-specific advising to our large student population at a cost that is less than half of what we would pay for just one additional professional staff member. As a form of honors-specific advising, peer advising's potential to offer an effective and satisfying advising experience to students is represented by two responses to the question "What recommendations do you have for improving peer mentoring in Honors?" One student answered, "Nothing. My peer mentor answered all my questions and gave me as much information as I needed to move on and do well." A second student responded, "Nothing really, just keep choosing good people that actually care about others." Finally, like previous researchers,

we found that the peer mentors themselves benefit and grow from the experience (Diambra & Cole-Zakrzewski, 2002; Griffin et al., 2015; Habley, 1979, 1984).

## REFERENCES

- Barman, C. R., & Benson, P. A. (1981). Peer advising: A working model. *NACADA Journal*, 1(2), 33–40.
- Brown, C. R., & Myers, R. (1975). Student vs. faculty curriculum advising. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 16(3), 226–231.
- Diambra, J. F., & Cole-Zakrzewski, K. G. (2002). Peer advising: Evaluating effectiveness. *NACADA Journal*, 22(1), 56–64.
- Drake, L., & Johnson, E. (2019) *Analysis of the honors program graduate survey AY16–AY18*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Iowa Honors Program.
- Frana, P. L. (2023). How honors advising is different. In E. E. Edgington (Ed.), *Advising for today's honors students* (pp. 3–30). National Collegiate Honors Council.
- Goldberg, L. G. (1981). Peer advising: A supplement to, but not a substitute for, faculty advising. *NACADA Journal*, 1(2), 41–43.
- Griffin, M., DiFulvio, G. T., & Gerber, D. S. (2015). Developing leaders: Implementation of a peer advising program for a public health sciences undergraduate program. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 2. <<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2014.00288>>
- Habley, W. R. (1979). The advantages and disadvantages of using students as academic advisors. *NASPA Journal*, 17(1), 46–51.
- Habley, W. R. (1984). Student paraprofessionals in academic advising. *New Directions for Student Services*, 1984(27), 37–49. <<https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.37119842705>>
- Minor, F. D. (2007). Building effective peer mentor programs. In B. L. Smith & L. B. Williams (Eds.), *Learning communities and student affairs: Partnering for powerful learning* (pp. 57–69).

Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education, Evergreen State College.

- Murry, J. P. (1972). The comparative effectiveness of student-to-student and faculty advising programs. *Journal of College Student Personnel, 13*(6), 562–566.
- Newton, F. B., & Ender, S. C. (2010). *Students helping students: A guide for peer educators on college campuses*. Wiley.
- Upcraft, M. L. (1971). Undergraduate students as academic advisors. *Personnel and Guidance Journal, 49*(10), 827–831.
- Zultowski, W. H., & Catron, D. W. (1976). Students as curriculum advisers: Reinterpreted. *Journal of College Student Personnel, 17*(3), 199–204.
- Zunker, V. G., & Brown, W. F. (1966). Comparative effectiveness of student and professional counselors. *The Personnel and Guidance Journal, 44*(7), 738–743.