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The Honors College Experience Reconsidered: Exploring the Student Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

Often administrators overlook the student voice in developing strategic plans, mission and vision statements, marketing strategies, student services, and extracurricular programming. Engaging students in these areas may enhance students' cooperation, interactions, responsibility, and expectations. In order to assess honors students' perspectives and experiences, the present study, rooted in a phenomenological approach, conducted three focus

groups of traditional honors students, senior honors students, and honors college ambassadors. Students described their honors experience in three contexts: connectedness, community, and opportunity. This study informed a new vision and a new set of goals for the University of Southern Mississippi Honors College, and it might serve as a model for other honors colleges and programs.

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Founded in 1910, the University of Southern Mississippi (USM) is a public, mid-sized, research university located in the central Gulf South, with campuses in Hattiesburg and Long Beach, Mississippi. In the fall 2015 semester, the university enrolled nearly 15,000 students in more than 140 undergraduate and 200 graduate programs with approximately 1,000 academic staff members. USM first offered honors classes in 1965, and by 1976 the honors program had developed into a full-fledged honors college. This evolution was an indication of the university's increasing commitment to honors programming as an institutional priority and underscored the role and influence of the USM Honors College, among other colleges within the university, in shaping the academic mission of the institution.

The present study generated data related to student perspectives on the experiences associated with being an honors college student at USM. Such data are useful to a variety of stakeholders, including the dean, staff, and faculty affiliated with the USM Honors College as well as institutional administrators and both current and future honors college students. This knowledge of student perspectives may inform the college's strategic planning processes and the alignment between its mission and marketing. Additionally, the findings of the study may influence honors college programming, student services, and planned activities in order to meet the needs of students more effectively. Such realignment may contribute to increased retention and recruitment efforts.

The willingness of the USM Honors College administrators, staff, and students to initiate and participate in this self-assessment demonstrates a commitment to program quality and greater student engagement. These dynamics enhance student success among honors college students and contribute to the campus-wide academic community. In addition to revealing unknown or unanticipated areas for future assessment and evaluation, the study demonstrates the effective use of student perspectives in mission realignment and rebranding at USM and quite possibly at other universities as well.

FRAMEWORK

The pursuit of improved undergraduate education has remained the focus of extensive discussion, research, and strategic planning for institutions and systems of higher education for decades. In the 1980s, Chickering and Gamson proposed principles for good practice in the education of undergraduates; they argued that, when applied consistently, these guiding principles lead to enhanced cooperation, diversity, interaction, responsibility, activity, and expectations among undergraduate students. The pursuit of such outcomes serves as a significant motivation for self-study, program evaluation, strategic planning, and mission realignment designed to improve recruitment, retention, and student success initiatives.

As student success and retention become increasingly relevant as topics of discussion in the ethos of American higher education, so does the need for effective program assessment and evaluation. Outcomes assessment among general student populations in higher education is an ever more frequent and essential part of data-driven decision-making, and in an evolving culture of higher education management driven by perpetual demands for cost-cutting, honors colleges are not exempt from having to justify the need for and the effectiveness of their programs. Lanier (2008) reinforced this notion by posing the question, “how often have those of us who have been in honors for even just a few years heard cries for help from a program director under fire from a provost who wants to downsize, eliminate, or radically change an honors program?” (83). Outcomes assessment data can be helpful in providing the help that Lanier calls for, enabling the design of effective program evaluation.

Discussion and research on the factors that influence student outcomes are extensive in the literature on higher education as they relate to individual development, learning, and success. In 1991, Pascarella and Terenzini offered a compendium of research on theories and dimensions of student development that can aid in assessment design. In 2000, King and Howard-Hamilton argued that the interpretation of outcomes assessment data benefits from designing research protocols and analyzing findings from a conceptual framework built on student development theory. In relation to student development theory, Rinn in 2005 described research aimed at distinguishing between general college student populations and honors students. Then in 2006, Radomski argued that honors programs, in the aggregate, offer programming and services aligned with a generalized set of academic characteristics but fall short in offering specialized, non-academic services that may be needed by this evolving population demographic, indicating that strategic planning and

honors outcomes should include academic and non-academic dimensions of students' experiences.

The National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) has addressed both academic and nonacademic characteristics of honors colleges in contemporary higher education by identifying and describing core principles and practices in its Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors College and in the 2008 monograph *The Honors College Phenomenon*, edited by Peter C. Sederberg. The monograph includes case studies of honors colleges from across the United States that operate within varying institutional contexts, exploring the relationship between institutional dynamics and the development, assessment, and evolution of honors colleges. The monograph also describes the challenges associated with sustaining vitality in older, developed honors programs, challenges that are particularly relevant to the present study. The self-assessment of the USM Honors College described here is, as Sederberg noted, "an opportunity for reflection upon the challenges of sustaining vitality" (121).

PURPOSE

The primary purpose of this study was to assess student perspectives on programming and experiences among current honors college students at USM. As part of a strategic planning, marketing, and mission realignment process, the administration and staff of the honors college sought student input on its strengths and its needs for improvement in providing services, programming, and guidance to its students.

METHODS

The dean of the honors college approached the research team and requested that it conduct a study in order to gain a deeper understanding of students' perspectives as a part of a strategic planning and redesign process. Prior to conducting the research study and collecting data, the researchers obtained Institutional Review Board approval (Protocol #1410 1001).

Design

The research team adopted a phenomenological approach to explore the experience of students within an honors college at a comprehensive Carnegie research university with Southern Regional Education Board-Level 1 designation. This approach, which attempts to understand people's perspectives

and perceptions within a particular circumstance (Munhall), was appropriate since little was known about students' honors college experience at USM.

Sampling

The honors college sent out invitations to participate in the study to three types of honors college students: traditional honors students, senior honors students, and honors college ambassadors. Traditional honors students are academically talented students who enter the honors college as freshmen; these students intend to remain in the honors college for four years, take foundational honors courses in their first two years (including a university forum lecture series), and complete a thesis involving original research, usually in their academic major, under the guidance of a faculty advisor. Senior honors students are academically talented students who have completed a minimum of forty hours of college coursework, typically entering the college as rising juniors; these students intend to remain in the honors college for two years and, like the traditional students, complete a thesis involving original research, usually in their academic major, under the guidance of a faculty advisor. The ambassadors are honors college students who assist with a wide range of college activities and recruitment efforts; most often these are traditional students although any student can apply to become an ambassador.

The honors college sent an email to each of these groups of students inviting them to participate in the focus groups. Students who expressed interest received information about the time and location of the focus groups, which took place in a private student lounge of the honors college. Fifteen students (11 females, 4 males; 13 Caucasians, 1 African American, and 1 Asian) participated in three focus groups.

Data Generation

Three focus groups were conducted lasting approximately two hours each. One focus group was primarily traditional honors students, one was mostly senior honors students, and one was mainly honors ambassadors. Researchers attempted to keep each group separate while allowing flexibility to meet participants' schedule needs. Refreshments were provided during the focus groups, and each student received a \$15 gift to the bookstore at completion. Two experienced qualitative researchers conducted the focus groups. After an oral presentation was given and questions answered, consent was obtained. Focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by an experienced transcriptionist with all identifying information removed.

Each focus group was asked a similar set of questions or statements while allowing for individual group discussions:

1. How do you see the honors college?
2. What attracted you to the honors college?
3. Tell me about your experience at the honors college.
4. What does the honors college mean to you?
5. What are some aspects of the honors college that have been helpful?
6. What are some areas for improvement?

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed in two separate, independent processes using thematic analysis for identifying commonalities within and across groups (Munhall). Initially, the two focus group facilitators analyzed the transcripts. For confirmability, a three-member team with varying experience in qualitative research separately analyzed the transcripts without prior knowledge of the initial findings. The three-member team was not involved in the facilitation of the focus groups and was independent of the data collection process. The five members, ranging from a student to a seasoned academician, had varied expertise, with backgrounds that included higher education administration and health-related fields. This diversity provided a rich perspective that allowed for a more thorough analysis.

In both data-analysis processes, each team member independently read the transcripts and developed thematic interpretations for each focus group and across the groups. The team members brought their interpretations to their respective analysis team for discussion. Dialogue among the members clarified the analyses, and conflicts between interpretations were resolved by returning to the texts. Team members identified and explored themes that cut across texts. New themes emerged and previous themes were continuously refined, expanded, or combined. When each team reached consensus, both teams met to compare results in the same iterative process until they also reached consensus.

RESULTS

The students stated that the honors college brought them together in a communal experience with the staff, faculty, and other students, enriching

their educational and professional growth. They expressed this experience within three themes—connectedness, community, and opportunity.

Connectedness

One of the key themes to emerge from the qualitative analysis was students' sense of social connectedness among their fellow honors college students. According to Lee and Robbins, whose seminal 1995 research on "Measuring Belongingness" helped establish the foundation for current studies, social connectedness was defined as "an enduring and ubiquitous sense of interpersonal closeness with the social world in toto" or "one's opinion of self in relation to others" (239). Social connectedness represents a fundamental psychological need that, if met, promotes social, emotional, and physical well-being (Lee & Robbins, "Understanding Social Connectedness"). Conversely, as Lee and Robbins wrote in 1998, individuals lacking a sense of connectedness and belonging are prone to low self-esteem, chronic loneliness, and a negative perception of their surroundings.

In 2011, Pym, Goodman, and Patsika examined the role of social connectedness in students' transition to higher education. Results indicated a positive relationship between social connectedness and academic performance. Additionally, participants acknowledged that social connectedness helped provide a sense of belonging as well as a supportive, encouraging, and nurturing environment. Later, in 2014, Irani, Wilson, Slough, and Riegar explored social connectedness and perceived isolation in graduate students enrolled at the University of Florida, examining students residing on and off campus. Their findings validated the hypothesis that students residing off campus feel less connected to their home departments and experience a greater sense of isolation than do students residing on campus.

Although the concept of social connectedness has been studied in various academic settings, there is a paucity in the literature regarding social connectedness among students in a unique environment such as an honors college. Analysis of the qualitative data suggests that the experiences implicit in the USM Honors College have fostered a unique element of social connectedness, both within and among the three focus groups in this study. The participants attributed social connectedness to the similarity of student experiences, rigor of the program, and unique opportunities afforded to honors college students. This sense of connectedness is a prominent theme in the following student comments:

It's a group of like-minded students who . . . hold each other accountable for what we are going to achieve. (Participant 2, Focus Group 1).

[Facilitator question:] "If someone asked you at home or someone you went to high school with, or your family, to describe the honors college in one word, what word would you tell them?" "Connection." (Participant 2, Focus Group 1).

There's a sense of family here 'cause we all are going through a very similar process that other students aren't going through . . . but, at the same time, other students in our majors aren't having to deal with that, so you do get closer to your honors students. And you have your honors student friends who you call and freak out about, "Oh my goodness, this class is ridiculous! I'm never going to pass. My thesis is killing me. I'm just going to drop out of everything and die." [laughter] . . . and when we're doing recruitment events that's how we pitch it. We pitch it as a family environment and especially like our mentor groups and stuff. (Participant 2, Focus Group 2).

I think it's started to mean more to me now as I've been working on my thesis. I feel more connected now. Like I'm not going to drop if it gets hard cause like when I first started, I wasn't that connected with it. . . . I feel like I'm more connected to my work and . . . the honors college does offer you a lot of opportunities if you do want to get involved. There's a community here, you know, that wants to spend time with you, to help you on your journey to complete your thesis. It's nice. (Participant 3, Focus Group 2).

I would say more for me the honors college has offered opportunities of knowing professors one-on-one so then you can get those connections. (Participant 2, Focus Group 3).

There's a feeling that they really care about us. They want to help us. If you go to my department and get advised, of course they'll do everything they can but they don't actually care. They don't know who you are or what you want to do . . . unlike everyone here. (Participant 4, Focus Group 3).

Well, for me it's not just . . . it's the fact that everyone I meet through honors instantly becomes that connection on campus. I mean the people I talk to everyday as I'm walking from one end to the other are

honors people . . . whether I'm talking to someone about a class we are in together or whether I'm talking to someone about an honors ambassadors event, or their thesis . . . the people that I think of when I think of USM are honors students that I've met, that I know, that I connect with. (Participant 2, Focus Group 3).

For me, since I'm a junior, I'm thinking about grad school and not beyond that, yet . . . but it connects you to people who are doing the same things you are doing and have the same goals you have . . . like, my friends who aren't in honors college can't help me with the GRE and can't answer my questions. They're like "what is that?" Honors college people are like my personal mentors because they are helping me through . . . they've already done the GRE and they've already applied to grad school in the honors college . . . so they are lined up with your same goals and accomplishments. (Participant 2, Focus Group 3).

Community

Another aspect of the student experience was a sense of community, a theme that emerged in all three focus groups. When students were asked what the honors college at USM meant to them, many responded by stating that it provided them with "a sense of family" (Participant 2, Focus Group 2). Students stated that writing a thesis during their senior year and taking required honors classes were factors that brought them closer to their peers. Many of the students felt they were "all going through a very similar process that other students aren't going through" (Participant 2, Focus Group 2). The students credited their community with their success in the college: "There's a community here that wants to spend time with you, to help you on your journey to complete your thesis. It's nice" (Participant 3, Focus Group 2).

Forming communities within academic settings is an invaluable tool that can potentially improve overall student involvement and retention (Chickering & Gamson). The community formed within the honors college provides students with a network that enables them to succeed in future academic endeavors and employment opportunities. According to Schlossberg's 1989 study, one of the most challenging aspects of building a community is helping students overcome the feeling of marginalization: "It can take time for students to feel central to a group, as if they matter to others" (3). Students reported that the honors college at USM provided a community that made

them feel that they were important, that their presence mattered: “It’s all about being part of a community that cares about your future. We’re thinking about what we can do as part of this community through our thesis” (Participant 3, Focus Group 3).

Opportunity

When asked to describe in one word what being a part of the honors college meant to them, students in all focus groups consistently mentioned opportunity as one of the honors college’s most significant strengths. In particular, they described opportunities for more personalized education, leadership, and individual research. Their comments were in line with what Hammond, McBee, and Hebert reported about honors college students in 2007: that honors students are “offered numerous possibilities” such as “opportunities for research with faculty” that provide motivation for achievement. Participants in our study also felt that they had more opportunities for social networking, extracurricular activities, and making connections than they would have had otherwise. One student stated, “I feel that we are more willing to take advantage of opportunities and the things that are available to us as far as student resources and just extracurricular activities” (Participant 2, Focus Group 1). Honors students at USM have their own “honors college calendar” encouraging them to take advantage of extracurricular events with other honors students. “We are part of the elite that get more opportunities,” one student stated, going on to say, “We are offered things that other students aren’t: more experiences and opportunities and leadership positions and connections and personal education than other students on campus” (Participant 2, Focus Group 3). One participant noted that “opportunities to do research, opportunities to network, opportunities to make . . . useful contacts with people, opportunities to put some things on your résumé” (Participant 3, Focus Group 2). These kinds of special opportunities are characteristic of honors according to Owens and Travis; in their 2014 survey of honors program directors, 94% ($n = 159$) reported that “special opportunities for social interactions were perceived to be a benefit to participating students.”

DISCUSSION

The findings of the focus group study have informed a variety of initiatives and propelled a number of ongoing changes in the honors college, suggesting the value of soliciting student input in an informed, intentional, and unbiased

fashion both for honors education and for other student-centered educational programs. An immediate result of the focus group findings, for example, was the creation of a new honors college mission and vision statement, one that focuses on and highlights what students indicated they valued in their honors college experience. The new mission statement has led the college to create new promotional materials, revise the website, and create a new communication plan for recruitment and outreach. Perhaps most significantly, the dean of the college has taken the findings as an impetus to undertake a comprehensive assessment of the honors college curriculum and has continued to solicit student input in strategic planning, program analysis, and reform. In short, the student perspectives emerging from the focus groups have profoundly shaped the direction of and procedures within the USM Honors College. With its focus on student engagement and student voices, this study might serve as a model for other honors colleges and other academic units considering or designing program evaluation and assessment strategies.

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