

Expanding an Honors Program in the Midst of Institution Consolidation

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Institutions of higher learning have been facing budget constrictions throughout the country, leading to consolidations and cutbacks. Administrators often have to make hard choices about what programs to eliminate or cut back, but one program that is not on the table at the University of North Georgia is our honors program. On the contrary, we are expanding and adapting honors to accommodate the changing nature of our institution; we want students at all levels to have the honors advantages of global opportunities, undergraduate research, civic engagement, and a sense of community.

INSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUND

With more than 17,000 students and campuses in Blue Ridge, Cumming, Dahlonega, Gainesville, and Oconee County, the University of North Georgia (UNG) was created in 2013 through the consolidation of North Georgia

College & State University (NGCSU) and Gainesville State College (GSC). UNG is now one of the state's largest public universities.

Through its five unique campuses, UNG creates communities where learning thrives, providing students the opportunity to achieve success and become leaders. We ensure that students of wide-ranging backgrounds have access to academic success, dedicated mentors, leadership opportunities, and rewarding careers. The university has been recognized nationally for its academic excellence and economic value.

UNG is also one of only six federally designated senior military colleges in the United States; the others are the Citadel, Norwich University, Texas A&M University, Virginia Military Institute, and Virginia Tech. With this signature leadership program, UNG is designated as The Military College of Georgia by the Georgia legislature and as a state leadership institution by the USG Board of Regents.

HONORS BACKGROUND

The UNG Honors Program, as we now know it, was founded at NGCSU (now the Dahlonega Campus of UNG) in 1995. NGCSU, one of the oldest universities in Georgia, was founded in 1873. Since NGCSU enrolled students for baccalaureate and graduate programs only, the honors program was shaped to serve only four-year students. However, the consolidated institution now offers degrees from associate to doctorate, and the honors program has expanded to meet the needs of high-performing students across that spectrum. Thus, although the honors program is relatively young, it has become a valuable component of the institutional mission. In an environment of tight budgets, we have made a decision that the honors program should be not only retained but allowed to grow.

The UNG Honors Program has recently expanded to include students on the Gainesville and Oconee campuses in addition to the Dahlonega campus. Each of the programs offers an expanding number of extracurricular experiences including field trips, conferences, and community service. The program requires that each member hold at least one significant leadership position while in college, and most honors students serve in several different leadership positions before they graduate.

GLOBAL OPPORTUNITIES

UNG has a rich history of educating civic, professional, and military leaders who serve and work in communities locally and globally. To prepare them for today's global environment, we teach ten languages and provide a rapidly expanding opportunity for study abroad and internships. By the time they graduate, about forty percent of our honors students have participated in at least one study abroad experience.

For example, junior psychology major Amy Shim travelled this year to India to study the dynamics of children, teachers, and mothers during childhood development. Her work demonstrated opportunities for improved conditions for these children, and she stated that it opened her eyes to “new things, new people, and different ways of life.”

Similarly, Jacob Dietrich travelled to Oman in 2013. Using the experience as a foundation, he received a Fulbright scholarship and will return to Oman in 2016 to study the impact of tourism on Oman's culture. As Jacob put it, “The Honors Program provided me the support and encouragement I needed to continue my studies abroad. . . . [and] provided me with a forum in which I was able to share my experiences with future students traveling abroad. Traveling abroad is an addictive and enlightening experience. . . . [I]t allowed me to observe firsthand the global reach of my education.”

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH

UNG has long supported undergraduate research activities, and honors students are encouraged to participate in these opportunities. They are expected, prior to graduation, to complete an honors thesis, which must be a significant scholarly contribution. Honors students' participation can be a strong motivator for other students to become involved in undergraduate research.

Honors students Joshua McCausland and Obadi M. Obadi each engaged in undergraduate research projects with their faculty mentors. In large part because of their work on these projects, they were each awarded an NIH scholarship that includes a summer laboratory experience and full-time employment for one year post-graduation. This kind of early professional experience has a lifelong impact. “Not only did I gain much more appreciation for the value and power of research, but it also established many fruitful connections at conferences and meetings that eventually led to my current

employment at the NIH,” Joshua reported. “This work has made me a more competitive applicant, and it will definitely help me as I apply for graduate school.”

In addition to offering funding for thesis projects, the UNG Honors Program provides students with stipends for study abroad and grants honors credit for applicable courses taken internationally. This exposure to other cultures enhances students’ ability to work in an increasingly multicultural and global society.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Honors students engage with a variety of populations not only abroad but also in their local communities. The program encourages civic responsibility and active engagement as a means to help them understand the importance of giving back to one’s community. For example, Kelly Howard, an alumna who is now an attorney with a Washington, D.C., firm, also serves as a volunteer lawyer for the Homeless Persons Representation Project in Baltimore City. Kelly stated that the honors program “was such a crucial part of my college experience; it not only gave me an outstanding education, it helped to frame the importance of giving back to and being part of a community.” Honors students are urged to consider the ways they can give back, and their sense of social responsibility benefits their communities, both local and global.

BUILDING COMMUNITY AND A SENSE OF BELONGING

Students in the honors program also have the opportunity to be part of a tightknit learning community, providing support for one another emotionally, academically, and physically. They form study groups and perform community service together, with a combined total of thousands of hours each year. Honors activities include forums to debate politics, opportunities to tutor one another, times set aside to celebrate each other’s birthdays, and encouragements to share research ideas. In large part because of the strength of the honors community, the honors program experiences an 80% four-year graduation rate with a 3.6 collective GPA across our campuses in Dahlonega, Gainesville, and Oconee.

CONCLUSION

The UNG mission statement highlights our desire to “provide a culture of academic excellence.” Like other regional institutions, UNG strives to meet the needs of students from a wide variety of backgrounds and preparation levels. As we do so, we recognize the importance of the honors program in promoting a culture of excellence. Welcoming high-achievers and rewarding those who choose to do and learn more are important ingredients of that culture, and the University of North Georgia is committed to supporting this culture as an important asset to our multi-campus institution.

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