

# An Effective Honors Composition Class Improves Honors Retention Rates: Outcomes and Statistical Prestiditigation

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In her essay “My Objections to Outcome [Note the Singular] Assessment,” Joan Digby rails against the rubrics and templates of outcomes assessment that have pervaded contemporary higher education, arguing that faculty “enjoy teaching and feel rewarded by the successes of their students. Bingo. That’s it. Nothing more to say or prove. No boxes to fill in. Anyone with an urge to produce data can take attendance at Commencement.” I must confess that I do just that with the students who have taken my honors freshman composition courses. At the end of each spring semester, our honors program holds an Honors Senior Showcase on the day before commencement. Each graduating honors senior presents his or her thesis work, most in poster form but a few in brief oral presentations, and then each student is recognized in a hooding ceremony. Family, friends, faculty, and administrators are invited to celebrate the students’ accomplishments, and I am always curious to see how many of my honors composition students have navigated through four years

or more of their major coursework, honors requirements, and thesis projects to graduate from the program.

At the spring 2014 showcase, I was particularly pleased with the results. In fall 2010, approximately 45 freshmen were admitted to the honors program, and 12 of these students graduated from the program in spring 2014, a four-year completion rate of approximately 27%. Eight of those incoming freshmen were enrolled in my fall 2010 honors composition course, and six of those eight students graduated from the honors program, a 75% retention rate from my class. Although I only taught approximately 18% of the incoming freshmen, I helped to produce 50% of the graduating seniors.

I can hear my colleagues in the social sciences howling at my overly simplistic numerical “outcomes assessment.” To start, the sample size was too small, and the data were collected from only one year. Expanding this assessment longitudinally, I have kept an annual tally of my honors composition graduates since the program’s inception in 1999. From fall 1999 through fall 2010, which was the most recent freshman class to have reached the four-year graduation mark, I taught 122 students across 10 sections of honors composition. Of those students, 72 graduated from honors, meaning that 59% of the students who took my honors composition course completed the honors program. According to my estimates of incoming freshman class sizes, which have grown from around 25 in fall 1999 to 63 in fall 2014, the overall program graduation rate is approximately 45%. Our program does not have current statistics on graduation rates, but the director believes that we are closer to 50–55%. In either case, my honors composition students do tend to graduate at a higher rate than the general honors population.

Granted, many more factors than just one composition course play into honors graduation rates. Students encounter various challenges in their major courses, and they work with other honors faculty in seminars and thesis research. Some transfer to other schools, some cannot maintain the required 3.5 GPA, some leave the program after achieving their desired MCAT or LSAT scores, and some admit that they never intended to complete the required thesis project but wanted the four years of scholarship money. Still, I cannot help but wonder what elements of my course might give students an edge in honors program completion. Like Digby, I am an English professor, yet my training lies in communications, rhetoric, and technical writing, so I focus assignments on discipline-specific research and argumentation from the students’ majors. This insight into modes of communication in their chosen fields might aid students in constructing and writing

more successful undergraduate research and capstone projects. Also, I focus on issues in honors education to demonstrate different types of argumentative strategies, and I supplement textbook chapters with appropriate articles from *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* and *Honors in Practice*. For instance, I use Bonnie Irwin's "We Are the Stories We Tell" as an example of narrative argument, and we analyze Janice Szabos' "High Achieving and Gifted Students" dichotomy during our discussion of definition arguments. Perhaps this awareness increases students' engagement in honors education and their commitment to the program. I have incorporated these types of assignments into my course because I have found through experience that students write more effectively when they are allowed to choose subjects that interest them and they can see how they will use these skills in the future. The only writing program requirements that I must follow are that my syllabus should include five major papers and that the course should focus on academic research and argumentation; beyond that, honors composition has not been assessed through common essays, portfolio scoring, or other typical methods, so we are generally free to move outside the box as we choose.

Without the yoke of mandated assessment, I still prefer to be a reflective practitioner, so I have talked informally with students and graduates about what worked and what could have been improved in my classes. For example, I designed an assignment in which each student had a fifty-minute class period to lead a discussion of a brief, audience-appropriate article related to his or her discipline-specific research. My goals were to strengthen students' abilities to discuss topics from any discipline and to help them practice scholarly debate. I was unprepared for the amount of resistance I encountered, such as students bringing their bibles to class when certain scientific or medical topics were to be discussed, so for the next two years I replaced the article discussions with in-class writing activities. Students later began to tell me how much they had learned from the discussion sessions, so I returned the assignment to the syllabus, albeit with a better set of guidelines for conducting academic debate. These types of changes have been spurred organically from spontaneous discussions with my students rather than by conducting formal exit interviews or relying on the quantitative course evaluations that yield data so generic as to be almost useless. The fact that I begin class on time cannot possibly represent my success as a teacher or show administrators that I am not wasting money.

When I have discussed my honors composition numerology with colleagues, I have received a variety of responses. Some of my departmental

colleagues have jokingly asked me not to broadcast the numbers because they make the professors who rotate in and out of the other honors composition sections look bad. The writing program administrator also wondered what was going on—or not going on—in the other two honors composition sections each fall semester because, if my graduation rates were higher than the program average, someone else's necessarily had to be lower. Fortunately, this line of inquiry has not yet led down the slippery slope toward using my syllabus as one of Digby's dreaded templates. We do not teach honors composition from a common syllabus, so professors have the freedom to teach their sections as they see fit, and many move beyond what they would normally do in a regular composition course. To be honest, I would not want my syllabus to be appropriated and forced upon someone else, especially for the sole purpose of increasing retention rates. On the other hand, only one of my colleagues has ever asked me what I do in my course, even though honors composition is the focus of my scholarly work. In fact, honors faculty in other departments have shown more interest in how I teach my course and how they can build upon what I do. Of course, they are safely removed from internal departmental politics, but they also tend to be regularly involved in the program and more focused on improving the program in its entirety.

Continuing down the standardization rabbit hole, I can imagine what would happen if my casual statistical prestidigitation were thrown into the gears of the annual goals and outcomes report machine. Into what educational management language would I be required to shoehorn my practices to ensure that they conformed with or exceeded established standards? What assessment instruments would I be required use both latitudinally and longitudinally to measure the reliability and validity of my pedagogical methods? Would I retain the freedom to adapt aspects of my syllabus to address the changing needs of different student groups, or would I have to justify changes only in terms of increasing the retention rate? Would I then be pressured to demonstrate an annual increase in said retention rate? In the end, would all of this quantitative outcomes assessment help me to be a more reflective practitioner who addresses and adapts to the needs of her students, or would I simply become a more creative statistician who massages the numbers to meet the needs of administrators? In twenty-two years of university teaching, I have sent scores for thousands of common essays, standardized exams, and graduation portfolios up the assessment pipeline, but I have almost never seen a response come back down to the teachers' level—and I have been told that I do not want to see a response because it will come down as a mandate.

Best practices say that we should close the assessment loop by implementing change based on the results, but all I see are changes to attendance policies, reduction of credit-hour requirements, or the implementation of campus-wide midterm grade notifications in lower-level courses rather than substantive curricular change.

Perhaps I am akin to the younger professors to whom Digby refers: rather than shouting from the parapet against measurable outcomes, I acknowledge with a grumble, a sigh, and a rolling of my eyes that number-crunching is a permanent part of today's academia. I will scan through a batch of standardized essays, hastily write down some scores, and dutifully pass them up the chain of command, knowing that the entire enterprise is probably statistically invalid but conceding that the administratosphere demands numbers, and I will continue to take attendance at the senior showcase, smiling quietly to myself and knowing, at least for now, that what I do in my class helps my honors students to graduate but that their graduation rate does not dictate what I do in my class.

## REFERENCES

- Irwin, Bonnie D. "We Are the Stories We Tell." *Honors in Practice* 8 (2012): 17–19.
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