Assessing Success in Honors: Getting beyond Graduation Rates

SEAN K. KELLY

FLORIDA GULF COAST UNIVERSITY

An honors curriculum with realistic graduation requirements should have a respectable graduation rate. This number, when low, can indicate significant problems in the program. But a high graduation rate does not necessarily indicate success. A quality honors program, especially one that remains attentive to students' ability to thrive, might have better measures available for judging impact and effectiveness. After all, manipulating a graduation rate is easy: make the curriculum excessively convenient and lower standards. While some honors curricula are perhaps unnecessarily rigid or unusually difficult, the faculty and administrators of most quality programs have managed to create a curriculum with standards and requirements that the majority of honors-type students are able to achieve. Even so, honors requirements must represent challenges. Aristotle reminds us in *Nichomachean Ethics*, "it is also hard work to be excellent" (51), and thus it is important that honors achievements remain admirable and its requirements adequately aspirational.

Given these facts, many students who enter honors will lack the desire or ability to graduate from the program, but this is no reason to automatically assume that honors has failed these students. In fact, I contend that one of the best measures of honors' success and effectiveness can be discovered by assessing this group. If directors and deans could demonstrate that students who have "touched" honors graduated from the university at a higher rate, accomplished more, were more fully engaged in university life, and demonstrated higher satisfaction rates with the institution than their peers who never joined honors, then honors administrators would have powerful evidence that their work promotes individual and institutional successes regardless of honors' own graduation rate. Moreover, results from such assessment might enhance the positioning of honors within the university as its role in helping the institution achieve excellence could be measured in areas beyond the program. Several basic and tested mechanisms are potentially useful to a program desiring to assess itself based on such metrics.

ADMISSIONS

Student success starts by matching a student with an appropriate program. Since one of the necessary conditions for graduation from honors is generally a minimum G.P.A., a program has the responsibility to make sure that a student's academic record predicts meeting that standard. This kind of prediction becomes more important if honors has a rich social structure and residential community. Accepting a student at risk of failing means potentially removing a student whose social identity may be constructed around inclusion in this community. Should first-year students make all of their friends and identify future roommates in honors, removal of these students can have significant emotional consequences. The first step of the process, then, is to identify the best predictors of student success in the program and accept students who are clearly capable of meeting these standards.

Using only grades and test scores, however, can be highly problematic. Using only quantitative admissions metrics guarantees eliminating good candidates and perpetuating certain social injustices, but this problem can be remedied via other mechanisms. Peter Sederberg notes several strategies such as "creating a path through which students can transfer into honors after their first semester or year; opening honors courses to non-honors students on a space available basis; or creating programs that are designed from conception to include both honors and non-honors students" (10). Admissions practices such as these allow programs to include outstanding students whom metrics initially exclude. Moreover, these students have a lower risk of failure and the associated emotional distress since they have already demonstrated that they are willing and able to succeed on campus.

Admitting students with outstanding high school records or who demonstrate ability once on campus both mitigate the danger of unnecessary student failures. However, neither guarantees that a student will graduate with honors. No matter how carefully admissions criteria are crafted, even high-achieving students often struggle with the transition to college or encounter unexpected difficulties that adversely affect their performance. Expelling such students from the program can impose real difficulties on them during a trying period of their lives, and it can also sour them on their larger university experience. Since the goal is to help all students, regardless of their ultimate honors graduation status, programs should conscientiously avoid creating such hardships by creating a probationary policy that allows students time for academic recovery or eases transition out of the program. Successful or not, students should remember the honors experience fondly for introducing them to all that the campus provides in the way of clubs, organizations, mentors, friends, and other opportunities that will aid in growth. A harsh and swift removal from honors could prevent students from relating to other areas of campus life and

quickly undoing much of the program's positive developmental work. Thus, honors has a special responsibility to ensure that transitioning out of honors happens in such a way that students have no regrets and can thrive because of their past involvement with the program.

CURRICULUM

Having identified the best potential matches for the program, honors faculty and administrators need to make sure they have crafted a curriculum that deeply and substantively engages students with the university as a whole, aiding the development of all the students whether they graduate or not. Honors courses are known for their innovative pedagogy and have a long history of embedding practices like study abroad and service learning in the curriculum. George D. Kuh names these and other such experiences "high-impact educational practices" (HIPs). Kuh's research reaffirms that student immersion in such "deep approaches" to learning has profound impacts on students' academic performance, campus engagement, and satisfaction with learning. Kuh writes that "students who use these approaches tend to earn higher grades and retain, integrate, and transfer information at higher rates. Students who have these experiences are also more engaged overall in the clusters of effective educational practices represented by the NSSE [National Survey of Student Engagement]" ("High-Impact Practices" 14). Students engaged in such practices, Kuh argues, learn more and are more satisfied with their chosen university.

An honors program that focuses on enhancing student engagement with learning and with the university as a whole should encourage faculty to adopt HIPs at specific points in the curriculum and to heed Kuh's advice that "to engage students at high levels, these practices *must be done well*" ("High-Impact Practices" 20). Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa concur: "Engaging activities and peer collaboration do not have to be antithetical to learning, but they are likely conducive only in specifically structured contexts that focus students' attention appropriately on learning" (132–33). As Arum and Roksa write, HIPs require effort and skill: "It is not only students who may not put active and collaborative learning activities to best use. Faculty are not very skilled in doing so either" (133). Honors thus needs to assume responsibility for training faculty for effective use of the HIPs identified by Kuh: "first-year seminars, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, service learning, undergraduate research, study abroad, and other experiences with diversity, internships, and capstone courses and projects" (Kuh, *High-Impact* 14). Moreover, honors should specifically link one or more HIPs to each class/ touch in the curriculum, guaranteeing that students who enter honors, regard-less of their ultimate retention, experience multiple HIPs in their college years.

An appropriately generous probationary period ensures that even students who ultimately leave honors, get exposure to these high-quality opportunities for at least one or two years, experiencing multiple HIPs that generally far exceed Kuh's suggestion that a college student experience a minimum of two.

Critics argue, justly or not, that HIPs do not provide a rigorous academic experience, describing them as "fun" or "extracurricular." Given the educational and professional aspirations of honors students, the rigor and outcomes associated with honors education should not be compromised in favor of experiences that are merely socially gratifying even if they help graduation rates. A high-impact curriculum should demand tangible outcomes that both the students themselves and also outsiders can easily identify as significant, the kinds of outcomes that students can place on résumés or can reference in graduate school applications and job interviews.

Fortunately, a curriculum rich in HIPs such as research or service facilitates outcomes. Achievements that are widely acknowledged in academia and the professional world, e.g., publications, presentations, leadership positions, and fundraising, demonstrate that the student has spent the time-on-task necessary for deep, meaningful learning to take place, thus validating the use of HIPs in the curriculum. Moreover, such outcomes give students ownership of their learning, which ideally transfers to the students whether they graduate or not. The outcomes also provide faculty incentive to emphasize the learning aspect of the HIPs they employ. "What is clear is that student-faculty interaction matters most to learning when it encourages students to devote greater effort to other educationally purposeful activities during college. The key is substantive contact. Casual contact with faculty members has little to no effect on learning gains or effort" (Kuh, "What We're Learning" 29). HIP learning outcomes focus both the professor and the students on fully engaged learning, with student achievement providing a type of peer review of the quality of the HIP. Student ownership of accomplishments and expanded mentorship possibilities mean that students embed themselves in university communities beyond honors. If honors facilitates these engagements carefully, a student should no longer need to stay in honors in order to succeed; the assessment measure I am suggesting captures honors success in student development regardless of graduation rates.

For example, at our university, our honors service labs not only promote meaningful service learning but also structure initiatives in such a way that students, in order to complete the projects, must employ skills that they learn in the process of project implementation. In fall 2012, for instance, one service lab began with the professor challenging students to create a project that raised at least $10,000 for an organization, used at least five forms of social media, and involved runners traversing at least five hundred miles. Eighteen students

created Trails for Tails, a run for panther habitat conservation. Ten runners ran relay-style from Fort Myers to Key West and back (over 550 miles) in seven days. Through this project, the students learned significant skills in logistics, crowd sourcing, webpage creation, marketing, non-profit accounting, and organizational management. They ultimately raised over $13,000 in three months and nearly reached "viral" status on Facebook. Every student walked out of the class able to demonstrate at least one new skill, and the runners will always remember the personal accomplishment involved in the event.

Honors theses provide another opportunity for HIP outcomes, and a variety of HIPs embedded within the curriculum can help students who plan to produce a thesis while also providing a better undergraduate experience for all students whether they stay in the program or not. An introductory honors biology course might include undergraduate research that results in mastery of certain laboratory techniques or isolation of a virus found in the environment. In such a course, young researchers gain not only research experience but also professional skills that translate learning beyond the home campus. Students who continue with honors can continue to build on this foundation, perhaps leading to a thesis, while students who leave honors acquire skills and opportunities that they can use in their studies outside of honors.

ASSESSMENT

If an honors curriculum ensures that students who are in the program for even one or two years engages in multiple, high-quality HIPs and helps them walk away with ownership of concrete accomplishments and an academic support system, then graduation from honors is far less important than the way that honors has facilitated their successes and interactions with the university. If a first-year course requires service abroad, then students, regardless of their ultimate honors status at graduation, will have visited the office of international service and the office of civic engagement, traveled to a foreign country, and performed service in such a way that they have accomplished deep learning and made concrete achievements with academic mentors; these resources, experiences, achievements, and mentors will be available to them from that point forward.

Provided that honors emphasizes gradual, dignified, and graceful exits for students who will not graduate, the knowledge and experiences that all students carry forth from honors are ones that should enhance their relationship with the university as a whole and show up in assessment. If this hypothesis is correct, then both honors graduates and former honors students would have (1) higher participation in campus activities and university sponsored programs, (2) more individual accomplishments related to their university experience, (3) higher satisfaction with their university experience, and (4)

higher retention rates than their non-honors peers. Comparing former honors to non-honors students would demonstrate the impact of honors on the wider campus, perhaps identifying specific departments and areas receiving significant benefits. The conduct of such assessment on an individual campus as well in a wider context will, I predict, increase appreciation of the role that honors plays in improving the quality of education both within and beyond honors.

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The author may be contacted at

skelly@fgcu.edu.