

# Admissions, Retention, and Reframing the Question “Isn’t It Just More Work?”

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In the lead essay of this Forum, one of the questions Jerry Herron asks in discussing honors admissions is “What are we offering?” This question relates directly to the question often posed by well-meaning parents, well-intentioned students, and inquisitive administrators who want to know if honors is just more and/or harder work and hence not worth the risk. Having gotten a B in honors calculus will do damage to a GPA when the student could have earned an A in a non-honors calculus course. Students and parents might thus perceive the cost of honors work to outweigh the possible benefits, believing that the notation of honors on a transcript or diploma will not look as important as the GPA on a future résumé.

Many of us in honors, when we reply to queries about the difficulty of honors, explain that honors education is different in approach from regular coursework and employs different methods. We typically have retention and graduation rates that support our contention that honors helps rather impedes a student’s college career. While this strategy often allays the worries of students and parents, perhaps we can do more in making the argument convincing to upper-level administrators, especially given the seemingly constant strain on resources in honors. We need also to make the case that the skills students develop in honors will benefit them in future job interviews and graduate applications. As honors apologists, we need to emphasize recent research on co-curricular activities and their effects on retention and graduation, making the case that honors education has a positive impact on retention and graduation for undergraduates. The answer to the question about what honors has to offer is that it provides the kind of co-curricular support for an academically rigorous curriculum that enables students to graduate from college with a rich experiential background and to launch a successful career. If strong and meaningful co-curricular activities have positive effects on graduation and retention and honors is a co-curricular experience writ large, then worries about the risk of honors are misplaced.

The factors that influence student success are myriad. Socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, gender, and immigrant background can all influence student success (Kuh, et al.); these factors are beyond the institution's control and, in some instances, can militate against success in college. The institution does have control, though, over many important factors that can benefit students, including expectations in the classroom, the structure of curricula, and the availability of extra-curricular activities (see Kuh, et al., footnote 1, for a long list). The evidence also suggests that educational programs and practices that significantly engage students during their first year can and do have a positive influence on student success (Gerken and Volkwein). An institution can deploy these kinds of strategies and programs to increase retention and graduation and honors programs can make three important contributions in the areas of meaningful student-teacher relationships, significant peer relationships, and clear expectations.

Student-professor relationships are an essential feature of honors programs, where the smaller class sizes create opportunities for high-quality relationships with professors. Graunke and Woosley, among others, have shown that meaningful out-of-class contact with professors about either research questions or how to succeed in college is positively related to student success. Students do better if they feel they can approach a professor about more than simply coursework. Mentoring relationships and advising activities also meaningfully contribute to a student's success, helping them to feel part of the larger community. Any program or set of practices that brings students and faculty closer together is likely to have a salutary effect on success, especially since honors teachers tend to be enthusiastic in their support of students.

The second area of importance for student success is peer interactions (Kuh et al.). Honors students spend the preponderance of their time in close contact with members of their peer group, where they develop a new social identity away from and sometimes radically different from their high school or family identity. As students grow comfortable with their identity on campus, they begin to work through and discuss topics of importance to them in the socio-political realm. They interact with peers and often professors as well to understand currently relevant political and moral issues. Beyond social interactions with their peers, students can create or find support in study and discussion groups, often carrying forward discussions from their classes. As honors puts together students who are geared toward success in a variety of programming areas (living learning communities and service projects as well as classes), the students help one another maintain their drive and achievements.

The third factor important for success is student expectations. Wrong or vague expectations of college can negatively influence students' satisfaction with their college experience and lead to lower persistence to graduation

(Kuh et al.). Honors students may come into college with a more nuanced understanding of what to expect from college, but they too need to pay close attention to their curriculum and receive good advising about how to meet requirements and position themselves for entry into graduate school or the job market. Many in honors assume that the students come into a program already motivated and focused on their future, already attuned to the values of honors, so that advisors need only to guide them through the process of achieving their goals through honors. While this assumption may be true in most cases, honors helps students internalize their goals and achieve them in a focused manner.

These three factors comprise a powerful sales pitch for honors, in Jerry Herron's parlance. I tell students and parents that honors classes are smaller and promote a qualitatively better kind of student/professor interaction. I stress that having a good relationship with professors can help them do better in classes because they get to know how professors think and what they expect. The professors can help them get summer research appointments or internships, and can then write letters of recommendation for graduate schools or jobs. Honors students can also be more successful because they are surrounded by other students who are interested in achieving in the same ways they are. They study and work in an intellectual atmosphere that encourages service projects and other kinds of active participation on campus or in the broader community. Finally, honors is an environment where students are expected to perform at their best. Being told that they are honors students leads them to have higher expectations of themselves. They receive privileges and opportunities that others do not, and they typically strive to deserve them by doing well in their classes, being an example for others on campus, and making the university proud.

Honors thus acts as one large and multi-faceted co-curricular as well as curricular activity that incorporates factors proven to lead to student success and to mitigate possible causes of failure. Hence, the worry that honors is so hard that it might inhibit success is exactly at odds with what the research suggests. Honors education provides the very sorts of activities and supports that we know contribute to success, so it is much more than mere salesmanship when honors administrators claim that honors is a mechanism for student success.

## REFERENCES

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