

If They Build It, They Will Come: The Power of Student-Designed Honors Offerings in Small-Budget Programs

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Abstract: This essay describes a student-designed framework implemented by an honors program because of budget constraints. The framework's implementation, involving structured student leadership, feedback integration, and curricular adaptations, is detailed along with an exploration of the positive consequences of implementing a student-designed approach to co-curricular offerings. Benefits of the approach include better fulfillment of the honors mission, meaningful student leadership development, program growth, and eventually increased resources.

Keywords: student-designed framework; budget constraints; leadership development; resource expansion; honors program mission

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Honors programs face two perennial challenges: (1) achieving our core mission of creating a student community passionate about their education and intellectual inquiry, and (2) finding the funding to make the first goal possible. The honors program at Southeastern Louisiana University (SLU) found a way to meet both challenges by empowering honors students to build their own honors offerings. Our program quadrupled in size to more than 800 students after implementing student-led programming. The student-designed honors model deployed by the SLU program is offered in hopes that other honors educators may find it useful and affirming when facing the daunting task of running a program on a small budget.

FUNDING IN HONORS

Attending the annual National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) conference can leave new honors program directors at small-budget institutions in awe of the programming and support available to honors students, faculty, and staff at well-endowed honors colleges and universities. It can also leave them wondering how they are going to meet the needs of their own students with such a wide disparity in funding.

According to the most recent data available from the NCHC *Budget and Resources Survey* (BAR) (Cognard-Black, 2018), the mean annual budget for an honors program/college is \$155,602, with the best-funded programs reporting annual budgets in the millions. As Cognard-Black (2018) points out, however, that annual mean is far from telling the whole story of many programs: the median budget for those same institutions is only \$30,156, and 13.5% of institutions have an annual honors budget of \$5,000 or less.

This disparity in funding can be disheartening for honors programs with small budgets. Seeking to provide the same opportunities for intellectual growth, out-of-the-box learning, effective advising, community building, and achieving any other mission-appropriate goals can be a challenging experience with no full-time programming staff and little-to-no discretionary budget for offering honors events.

PROGRAM NARRATIVE

My own journey into honors started with a program that had almost no discretionary funds. Classes could be offered because those funds came out of the home department's instructional budget, but after a decade of budget cuts, the previous director had been reduced to paying for copier paper personally. I had one course reassigned time to run the program, a graduate assistant, and a half-time administrative assistant. I quickly realized that if I was going to make a compelling case for funding the program among myriad other critical needs at the university, I would need to serve more students. To attract those students, honors had to be more than just a random collection of classes about which few on campus were aware. We needed to offer opportunities for academic, service, and social development. Since no new funds or staff were likely in the short term, I turned to the students themselves to begin to build the kind of program that could be of use to them.

IMPLEMENTING STUDENT-DESIGNED HONORS OFFERINGS

Establish Formal Structures for Student Leadership

The first step in implementing student-designed offerings is to establish structures for input and accountability. In my first year as director, our honors program created an honors club that, at the students' request, rebranded as the Honors Student Association after several semesters. This group was charged with enacting two academic, service, and social activities each semester for their fellow honors students.

It took some time and energy to oversee the adoption of a constitution and bylaws, to navigate the university rules for creating an organization, and to recruit and elect officers, but the time investment paid big dividends very quickly. The group met twice per month throughout the fall and spring semesters. Developing the organizational mission and rules provided a pretext for students to engage with each other and the honors program office. To facilitate their objectives of hosting events for other students, the group appointed three committee chairs beyond their officers and decided that one of the two required events sponsored by each committee would take place at a regular meeting time and one would take place outside of regular meeting times to involve the broader honors community.

Identifying specific students to occupy officer and committee roles allowed for accountability in student-run programming. The organizational structure also provided many opportunities for formal and informal input from the students on the kinds of activities they would like to see as part of the honors experience. Student-generated activities in the first year included trivia nights, fielding a quiz bowl team, service days with local nonprofits, and hosting the occasional holiday party. This agenda has grown in the last five years to include a robust array of guest speakers, advising Q&A sessions, participation in campus-wide service and intramural activities, and organizing and hosting the new student welcome every fall.

A second source of input and accountability in our student-driven model emerged in year two with the creation of Honors Ambassadors. This group of students performed the typical duties of similar programs on other campuses, helping to host events and participate in recruiting. However, they were also tasked with meeting once a year to offer feedback on how the honors program could improve. Ideas that emerged from their feedback included better ways to advertise events to students, a stepped-up role for honors students in the university's signature on-campus recruitment nights,

more opportunities to mentor same-major students, and more group field trips to build camaraderie.

The final formal student structure we implemented to help with student-designed honors offerings was the implementation of honors Living-Learning Communities (LLCs) in year four of our program reboot. We offered two themed LLCs initially—one focused on leadership and citizenship development and the other focused on appreciation of the arts. Students in each LLC enrolled in a specially themed freshman orientation course as a cohort. They had specialized assignments appropriate to the LLC theme and an engagement requirement to attend at least five honors LLC events over the course of the fall semester.

The LLCs performed several unique functions in allowing students to build and design a relevant honors program for themselves. First, the introduction of the LLCs supported the efforts of the Honors Student Association to offer meaningful events and experiences to all honors program students by providing a sizable audience to attend and fill out the ranks. A synergy emerged as the handful of non-LLC students who were initially interested in attending events showed up to rooms with 20-30 students rather than 8-10. Events seemed robustly attended and thus more attractive. Pictures and notes about “goings on” in the weekly email increased interest in attending the next event. Second, the focus on leadership and the arts helped grow the student-design element. The Leadership LLC students met with current ambassadors and explored ways to emerge as leaders in the honors program. They volunteered to help with recruitment. They attended training on leadership with university coaches and the head of our MBA program. When they were invited to serve as HSA officers and Honors Ambassadors in their sophomore year, they answered the call. The students in the Arts Appreciation LLC played a different role in implementing a student-led honors model. These students connected to the theatre, music, and art departments and found multiple opportunities for free honors partnerships. In the semesters since its introduction, the honors Arts Appreciation LLC has made dinner and a performance at the local theatre the signature honors event of the semester. All students in the program are invited to wear their fanciest clothes, enjoy a simple meal, and serve as the preview audience for one of the shows. Honors students organize attending gallery openings and concerts together each semester.

In addition to providing a way to hold students accountable for participating in honors experiences, the LLC sections of the mandatory first-year experience course also provided a formal way for students to

share feedback on the program's direction. A feedback/focus group with the honors director was built into their syllabi. The first-semester students lobbied for a third LLC focused on the health sciences. They asked for a way to stay together the next year and for a way to mentor the next incoming class. Their feedback resulted in the introduction of a third honors LLC option the next year—the Health Sciences LLC, which has grown to be our most popular LLC—and the creation of a formal mentoring program.

Informal Feedback

The Honors Student Association, Ambassadors, Mentors, and LLCs created formal role expectations for student input and leadership that were essential to implementing a student-led design. They brought an additional value: informal feedback. In the routine interactions of planning meetings, setting up events, cleaning up after events, and traveling to and from locations for events, students routinely chatted with me about their experiences. I learned about the topics and professors in their honors courses. I received suggestions for improving our RSVP system. I found out how much various awards were coveted and student perceptions of what was and was not important for honors to offer.

Focus on Connecting Socially

One of the hardest ideas for me to embrace when trying to build a student-led honors program on a budget was the importance of focusing on the affective aspect of program-building. Much of the discussion in honors journals and at conferences focuses on the rich academic experiences we can (and should) be offering honors students. The attraction of the director position was to be able to engage intelligent students in meaningful discussions of critical issues from an interdisciplinary perspective. For a program looking to grow, however, the importance of helping students connect with each other through the program should not be underestimated. We can grow the co-curricular academic experiences more easily if students are excited to attend with their friends. Once they have connected and they are leading events, we can encourage them to plan academic-centered programming that attracts other students not just because of the topic but also to support their peers running the event.

We worked to facilitate student connections in a number of ways. Like most programs, our students took smaller classes. The LLC students lived

alongside each other and took one required course together with a second recommended course for the group. The Honors Student Association organized field trips to the state honors conference, a behind-the-scenes tour of a local haunted house attraction, and the World War II Museum. Students paid some of the fees themselves, but we were able to secure grants to offset some of the costs of travel. When the recent pandemic subsided, allowing events for the first time in almost two years, our students really wanted to wear prom dresses that never got used because their proms were canceled. They organized a red-carpet photo night prior to our annual dinner as well as a show and threw themselves a mock-prom. These events may not sound particularly intellectual, but they helped students to see the honors program as more than courses. The program became part of multiple aspects of their lives, developing not just their academic abilities but their social and networking skills as well.

Use the Curriculum

Creative use of the curriculum can also make room for student-designed leadership of their honors experience. The honors version of the first-semester experience course contains mandatory engagement points to expose students to honors outside of the classroom in their first semester. The foci of our initial LLC offerings were strategically chosen to embolden students to feel comfortable advocating honors experiences that would interest them and to take advantage of the cultural/social opportunities already available on campus. When students suggested a mentoring program, we did not have any funds to pay mentors or any staff to run a volunteer program, so we developed a one-hour mentoring course. Students could be compensated with a credit for their mentoring work, and faculty could be compensated for overseeing it. The formal structures of a course also allowed for assignments, reflection, and accountability.

DISCUSSION

The implementation of a student-designed honors model at the Southeastern Louisiana University Honors Program not only addressed the funding challenges inherent in small-budget programs but also served as a catalyst for fulfilling the core mission of an honors education. The innovative approach to program development has proven to be a transformative

experience, showcasing that impactful growth can emerge even in the face of resource constraints.

Small Budgets Can Mean Big Growth

Entrusting students with the responsibility of implementing honors co-curricular events replicates the effects of larger budgets without the financial burden. While better funded institutions can rely on financial resources to host events and hire recruiters, the student-led model at SLU has allowed for co-curricular programming that students like. Just as importantly, the process of designing and offering the events provides enrichment to their education, thus addressing the honors mission of fostering intellectual growth and community development. In many ways, the success of this approach demonstrates that financial constraints need not be an insurmountable obstacle to achieving program objectives.

The student-designed honors model introduces an element of high stakes that is important, too. The possibility of failure adds an extra layer of responsibility for students. Students have been empowered to take ownership of their educational experience, thereby developing essential leadership, organizational, and problem-solving skills. When events they plan go sideways, they learn from that as well: resiliency, the importance of planning, better communication—these are skills taught through failure more than success. This high-risk model places emphasis on learning through both successes and challenges, fostering a culture of continuous improvement that prepares students for real-world endeavors.

Intentionality in Articulating Growth

An important aspect of the student-designed honors model is the need for intentional reflection and articulation of personal progress. To maximize the learning and enrichment possible with this model, a program needs to build in reflection moments along the way. In our mentoring class, for example, students must answer a series of common job interview questions, making specific reference to examples from their mentoring experience to support their claim to have a given quality. Intentional reflection is essential to a deeper understanding of the skills they have acquired and the personal growth they have undergone. This reflection not only provides valuable feedback for program enhancement but also instills in students a sense of achievement and awareness of their own development.

Be Comfortable with Some Initiatives Fizzling Out

An inherent characteristic of any innovative approach is the possibility of some initiatives not reaching the desired outcomes. Not every event or project will achieve the same level of success. Our first “dine with the director” event was an awkward encounter with three faculty members and almost no students. Our first recognition ceremony was held for 14 students in a cavernous theatre that echoed and emphasized the lack of attendees. That’s alright. Events may not always resonate with students as anticipated. The great news about a failed event is that it can serve as a yardstick for measuring a program’s progress. Our recognition ceremony is a popular event that has now outgrown that theatre. Not being afraid to experiment and thus learning from these experiences establish a growth mindset and can serve as a model for our students if we are transparent about it. The freedom to embrace trial and error encourages a culture of resilience, adaptability, and creativity in the program and in students.

Recruiting and Program Sustainability

The students who have actively participated in designing their honors experiences have now become our best advocates. Having been empowered to take the reins of their education, they are well equipped to share their journey with prospective students and assist in recruiting efforts. They routinely attend campus recruiting events for the program. Without prompting, they now tag us in their social media, allowing the program to showcase their successes with a wide audience that includes potential recruits. The student-designed model not only sustains itself but also fuels the growth of the program through a grassroots approach.

CONCLUSION

The student-led approach in our program demonstrates that smart innovation can be the antidote to tight budgets. Student involvement in program design sparked growth in tight times. Reflecting on their experiences mentoring, putting on events, and representing the program to potential students improved their leadership prowess and adaptability. Mistakes were not dead ends but stepping stones for improvement.

And here is the twist: growth often beckons resources. As our program bloomed, so did our support. We have now evolved into honors college status, welcoming added leadership and advising personnel. When students

construct the program, sometimes the provost's purse strings follow suit. It is a formal dance of progress.

Beyond budgets, the student-designed model embodies honors education's core—curiosity, leadership, community. It shows that inventive methods plus student engagement equal excellence, no matter the cash flow.

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