


21 January 2014

UNIVERSITY-LEVEL HONORS PROGRAMS

A presentation on Talent Development
for the Danish Committee Studying
Quality and Relevance in Higher Education

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Some Context



UC-Irvine Students
700 (3%) Honors
22,000 Undergraduates
6,000 Graduate/Professional

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Why Do We Have Honors Programs?

- Recruiting tool
 - Strong competition for good students
 - Driven by rankings
 - Increased intellectual diversity
- Pedagogical tool

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What is an Honors Program?

- Goal: provide a more challenging and effective learning experience for a university's top students
- Dimensions along which programs vary
 - Curriculum
 - Housing
 - Co-Curricular Activities
 - Advising
- National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC)
<http://nchchonors.org/>

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Curriculum

NCHC recommends that

- Honors program curriculum “constitute a substantial portion of the participants’ undergraduate work, typically 20% to 25% of the total course work and certainly no less than 15%.”
- Honors courses combine 5 objectives
 1. To help students develop effective written communication skills
 2. To help students develop effective oral communication skills
 3. To help students develop their ability to analyze and synthesize a broad range of material
 4. To help students understand
 - how scholars think about problems
 - how creative artists approach the creative process
 5. To help students become more independent and critical thinkers

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Menu-Based Curriculum

- Students choose courses freely from a list of courses designated as honors courses
- Requirements
 - Minimum number of courses
 - Sufficiently good grades
- Some programs
 - Allow some “regular” courses to be converted to “honors”
 - Either allow or require honors “experiences”
 - Require a thesis or participation in a substantial community service project

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Directed Curriculum

- Unlike the courses in a menu curriculum, these courses are typically limited to honors students
- Advantage: the cohort of students entering in each year take a substantial number of courses together
 - They become a community of learners
 - developing lasting interpersonal bonds
 - and a network that is both supportive but also challenging
- The directed curriculum can be easier to organize

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“Breadth” Requirements

- Most American universities have some ‘breadth’ requirements
 - They reflect a “liberal” tradition of education
- 1. **Writing** (two lower-division plus one upper-division course)
- 2. **Science and Technology** (three courses)
- 3. **Social and Behavioral Sciences** (three courses)
- 4. **Arts and Humanities** (three courses)
- 5. **Quantitative, Symbolic, and Computational Reasoning** (three courses that may also satisfy another breadth category)
- 6. **Language Other Than English** (one course)
- 7. **Multicultural Studies** (one course that may also satisfy another breadth category)
- 8. **International/Global Issues** (one course that may also satisfy another breadth category)

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UCI's Campuswide Honors Curriculum

- Two overall goals of the curriculum
 - breadth of knowledge
 - depth in at least one subject area
- Breadth goals are achieved by a directed curriculum consisting of three, 3-course sequences
 - Humanities
 - Social Sciences
 - Physical and Biological Sciences
- Depth is achieved by courses in a student's major(s) and by the honors requirement to produce a thesis

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Curriculum: Summary

- Menu-based curriculum
 - Students choose courses freely from a specified list
 - Typically requires that more honors courses be offered
 - Quality control can be difficult
 - There need not be coordination across courses
- Directed curriculum
 - Course typically created just for the honors program
 - Common required courses helps create a social network
- These approaches are on a continuum
- The campuswide honors vs. discipline specific programs

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Housing Option

- About half of honors programs give students the option to be housed together in dedicated housing
- Helps to create a community of scholars
- Heavily used by and popular for first-year students

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Co-Curricular Activities

- Examples
 - Community service opportunities
 - Coffee Hours
 - Fireside chats with faculty
 - Trips to the theater
 - Barbecues
 - Sporting and social events
- Co-curricular and extra-curricular activities help
 - Build the community of scholars
 - Provide alternative learning experiences
 - Provide mentoring opportunities

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Advising

- A supplement to standard academic advising is provided by about ½ of honors programs
- Rationale
 - Standard advising is geared to the needs of the majority of students
 - Honors students generally have more complex schedules
 - Take more units
 - Complete more majors
 - Are involved in more research / performance / organization
 - More likely to study abroad

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Does the Honors Program Work?

- By many measures: Yes
- Honors students are much more likely to graduate
 - Very few fail to graduate
 - Over 90% graduate within the normal 4 years
- They graduate
 - with more units taken
 - Higher GPAs
 - more double and triple majors
- A higher percentage study abroad
- Of course, a much higher percentage complete theses
- They receive over half of the prestigious academic awards
- Twice as many go directly to Ph.D. or professional programs
 - Of those that do not go immediately , 75% intend to within 2 years

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Summary

- Honors programs are a mix of
 - Curricular enhancements
 - Along with some or all of
 - Separate housing option
 - Co- and Extra-curricular activities
 - Dedicated advising

Designed to provide a more challenging and effective learning experience for a university's top students

- Are they an unnecessary luxury or elitist?
 - Answer depends on what is to be equalized
- Talented students are a “resource” worth developing
- Academic subgroups already get different resources

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Questions?

