

**Ohio State University
External Honors Review
Spring 2004**

Review Team:

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I. Introduction

The purpose of this report is to provide feedback from a site visit to review the Honors Program at Ohio State University, conducted on May 4-5, 2004. Our report is based on a careful study of written materials provided by Ohio State University including a self-study, a previous review conducted in 1985 and various surveys of students and alumni. We also toured facilities, including honors housing and conducted in-person interviews and visits with the President, Provost, Honors Program staff, the Faculty Advisory Committee, the Collegium director, and two groups of students. The self-study was thorough, well written and provided the team with important background information. We appreciated the speed at which this report was generated. The present report is intended to be helpful to the leadership of OSU and to the Honors Program, including staff, faculty, administration, and students.

We present an overview of the program, observations about its strengths and challenges, and finally, a set of recommendations. We thought this format would be the most efficient way to present the material as well as the most useful to the reader(s).

II. Overview

OSU has a large and well established honors program and tradition. There are over 5500 students enrolled in honors representing approximately twenty percent of each entering class. A large number of honors courses are offered across the various colleges. However, half of all first-year honors students routinely take two or fewer honors courses in their first year. The monitoring of honors students' progress is relatively weak. Honors in the first two years is distinctively different from honors in the second two years. Not all honors students who want to participate in honors classes in their second two years can due to a shortage of classes or spaces, especially in the College of Business. Less than twenty percent of honors students complete a thesis; even fewer study abroad. A generous budget of approximately \$5.2 million (including administration and honors course subsidies), in addition to \$1,097,000 for scholarships, is allocated to support honors education at OSU.

There is an apparent tension at OSU between using the Honors Program to recruit more students to attend OSU, with somewhat higher ACT scores than the median undergraduate population, versus recruiting clearly superior students and providing them with a rigorous education to meet their full intellectual potential. OSU has emphasized general recruitment, with "honors" used primarily as a titular reward, rather than offering a superior educational experience. The student profile for honors also reflects this unusual emphasis. In general, the educational experience that honors students receive at OSU is lacking relative to that at other large research universities. A smaller and more prestigious Honors Program would provide a long-term benefit to OSU and to the honors students who enroll at the institution.

Appendix K of the internal review outlined an ideal honors experience including honors housing, personalized advising, flexibility when deciding courses, a minimum of three honors courses per year during the students' first two years, an honors program enriched with a minor or research, study abroad and/or special internships, university and community service to develop leadership and citizenship, and additional co-curricular activities. We applaud these goals, but note that few of these components are assured to honors students at this point in time.

III. Strengths

The Honors Program has a centralized home in the Kuhn Honors and Scholars House, a charming facility with two functional classrooms, a large kitchen area, a patio for special events, a reading area, a small library, and limited office space. Considerable financial resources are also invested in honors education at OSU. Honors students receive priority registration, and a large array of honors courses are offered (though it is unclear to what degree students in different colleges/majors can partake in these courses). Two honors-specific study abroad opportunities are continuously offered. The entire staff of the Honors Program appears well qualified and dedicated to their work. While students offered insightful suggestions for improving the Honors Program, they all seem generally pleased with their OSU experience. Honors has clearly enriched their education.

IV. Challenges

There is an inconsistency between philosophy about honors education and practice at OSU. There is no mention of a mission or vision for honors education in any of the written documents nor was there reference to the mission in any of our interviews. Only one administrator used the word "rigor" in our many discussions. While the financial investment is large, it is spread out too thinly across the university. Given the large numbers of honors students, these resources are not producing the desired results.

The variety of honors programs on campus, with inconsistent admissions standards and academic requirements, is very confusing. Student recruits may have difficulty discerning what they can or should be labeled and more seriously, what they can or should do as honors students. If students change majors/colleges and/or wish to pursue multiple majors, the confusion escalates to what appears to be almost unmanageable levels. Honors students need more structure and guidance regarding course selection, career opportunities, graduate school, major scholarship opportunities, and study abroad experiences.

Securing institutional data under college control is difficult, but needed (e.g., the number of honors students enrolled in honors courses). Like many other honors programs/colleges, ethnic and international diversity is very low relative to the student body. More scholarship funds might be helpful in this regard and to attract more superior students generally. Expanded physical space for the University and Scholars staff would be a great asset for the program as would additional staffing. Most important of all, we

recommend a re-organization and downsizing of the honors student body to help the staff function more effectively, and to raise the overall profile of the program.

V. Recommendations

We offer the following recommendations for your review and consideration:

#1. *OSU Honors Program(s) should be more than “honorary” and offer a consistently rigorous, high quality Honors education to superior students. Such an honors program should include an enhanced learning experience characterized by both breadth and depth of academic study.* Accolades based on college gpa alone should be separated from honors education (a 4.0 is not the same as another 4.0 depending on the courses and experiences a student has participated in).

#2. *The proportion of students enrolled in the OSU Honors Program versus the Scholars program should be re-evaluated along with the criteria for admission.* The Honors Program should be more selective and enrollment should be reduced substantially to no more than ten percent of the first-year class, whereas the Scholars Program may be enlarged to twenty percent of the first-year class. Standards for admission should also be raised with factors such as high school class rank, grade point average, letters of recommendation and standardized test scores considered. Minimum collegiate entry standards should be raised to at least a 3.6 OSU average based on at least 15 hours of graded academic credit.

#3. *Academic standards, course requirements and expectations for students in the Honors Program should be raised.* The standards for remaining in good standing should include at least three honors courses per year for the first two years of undergraduate study. Honors contracts also should be carefully reviewed to ensure academic rigor and uniformity of standards across the various schools and colleges. University-wide Honors standards should be established and enforced centrally as a floor for entry and continued participation in all college programs.

#4. *Greater authority and management of OSU Honors education should be vested in the Director.* The University Honors office should provide the overall direction and control of Honors education at OSU. In consultation with the faculty, the office should monitor the progress of all honors students, set uniform minimum standards for admission and performance, enforce minimum standards for honors education and provide oversight of admissions and scholarship allocation. The allocation of staff time in the central office should be evaluated to assure a match between program priorities and resources. A review at the college level should also be conducted because that is where the academic decision-making and authority rests at this point.

#5. *The selection of Presidential Scholars should be revised to include more data points than a single essay.* The selection of Presidential Scholars should involve more than a single essay. A personal interview along with transcripts, standardized test scores, and letters of recommendation should be included in a holistic review process prior to making

final awards. Given the tremendous investment, greater care and cultivation of Presidential Scholars should take place from first-year until graduation to ensure the very best personal and pedagogical outcomes. All Presidential Scholars should be core members of the Honors Collegium from start to finish at OSU.

#6. Greater support should be given to the Honors Collegium to assist OSU in producing more major scholarship winners. Visibility and the profile of the Collegium should be enhanced on the campus. The Honors Collegium provides OSU with its best chance of producing more national scholarship winners. Many of these students should come from the ranks of the Presidential Scholars.

#7. Academic advising should be required of all Honors students each quarter prior to course registration. Every department should have an Honors Advisor(s) who should, among other things, provide academic advice before registration and assist students in finding a thesis topic and faculty support for their research. Priority registration should be retained to ensure that honors students have the opportunity to plan schedules to accommodate research, volunteer service, the Collegium, study abroad, and multiple majors or minors.

#8. An Office of Undergraduate Research should be established at OSU to encourage the development of undergraduate research opportunities. One of the ways the OSU Honors Program can distinguish itself from others is to provide a small college environment in the context of a large research university. An Office of Undergraduate Research can identify, publicize, and broker research opportunities for undergraduate students. The office also can encourage the completion of more theses by honors students.

#9. Honors students should be guaranteed honors housing. Honors Housing is essential for entering first year honors students and should play a major role in recruitment. Students who are committed to academic excellence need to be housed in an environment that encourages them to maintain their goals and the opportunity to commune with students having similar goals.

#10. Study abroad opportunities should be encouraged for honors students and OSU faculty. Study abroad is an essential component of honors education in a rapidly globalizing world. OSU should consider promoting study abroad more aggressively among honors students, creating special scholarships for such study, and developing semester-long Honors Study Abroad opportunities that are led by OSU faculty and integrated into the OSU curriculum. Such programs can enhance the experience of students and faculty alike. They can better link faculty to the very best undergraduates; assist faculty in conducting their own research abroad; and, by joining students and faculty in a program of shared inquiry, deepen undergraduates' understanding of scholarship and the work of a leading research university.

VI. Conclusion

These suggestions are offered in the spirit of helping OSU be competitive for the best and brightest students in their region. They are also offered out of a commitment to improving the quality of educational experiences offered to these superior students.

We would be happy to discuss our report with you as you desire. We commend you for the seriousness with which OSU undertook this review and sincerely wish to see the program make significant progress toward the ideals laid out by the faculty committee responsible for the internal review. We appreciate the hospitality and support provided by OSU during our visit to the campus.

Appendix A

Constituent Groups Interviewed

Administration & Faculty

- Dr. Karen Holbrook, President
- Dr. Barbara Snyder, Provost
- Dr. Linda Harlow, Associate Provost
- Dr. Martha Garland, Dean of Undergraduate Studies
- Dr. Dennis McKay, Director, Honors Collogium

Internal Honors Review Committee

- Dr. J. Robert Warmbrod
- Dr. Robert Gustafson
- Dr. Ellen Mosley-Thompson
- Dr. Allison Snow

University Honors Faculty Advisory Committee

- Dr. Deborah Ballam
- Dr. Karen Ahijevych
- Dr. David Stetson
- Dr. Amanda Simcox

University Honors and Scholars Staff

Honors Students

Honors Collegium Students