

JNCHC

Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council

50th Anniversary Issue

Forum on the Value of Honors

Vol. 16, No. 2 | Fall/Winter 2015

with essays by James Herbert and by 39 college
and university presidents



Relevance, Rigor, and Return on Investment: How Honors Enhances Education

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In my opening address to the university community a few years ago, I set out three key concepts (three contemporary Rs) to guide our thinking as we grow and develop our institution. They all have to do with student success: relevance, rigor, and return on investment. The education we provide must be relevant and address the needs of the region and the world now and in years to come; it must be of the very highest quality and impart to students the best concepts and the greatest skills; and it must be a good value that pays off handsomely for the student and for all whom she touches. The Frederik Meijer Honors College at Grand Valley State fulfills those Rs admirably and helps the whole university live up to them. Importantly, the college strives to create an honors experience in which students “thrive”: it maximizes their experience by engaging them deeply in learning to succeed in their academic and vocational goals; by establishing positive relationships with their faculty, peers, and others; by fostering their active citizenship on campus, within our

surrounding communities, and across the globe; and by encouraging a positive outlook on circumstances and life (Propst Cuevas; Schreiner).

First, the Frederik Meijer Honors College delivers relevant education and adopts new pedagogies as learning styles change. At Grand Valley, the honors college fulfills the university's general education requirements in a way that prepares students extraordinarily well. In team-taught interdisciplinary courses, students learn through multiple lenses and develop skills that cross disciplinary boundaries. In course sequences such as Food for Thought, Social Product Innovation, Theory and Practice of Rights, and Urbanism, instructors focus on developing skills of writing, critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving, even in freshman courses. These are the skills and abilities that are needed most in our fast-paced world, and because of the depth of their educational experiences, honors students become highly competitive in many fields. Alumni often report back to us that they were extremely well-prepared for graduate school or a career because of the deep training in those skill sets. One student who was studying abroad recently wrote that she was in a program with students from "really good schools" (i.e., Ivy League) and that she initially felt a bit intimidated by them, but she quickly realized that she was "just as prepared or more so academically."

Honors co-curricular activities get students involved in sustainability, civic life, non-profit organizations, and healthcare. Honors is also entrepreneurial: the Meijer Endowed Chair of Entrepreneurship and Innovation teaches Design Thinking and mentors students on how to address needs in society and industry. Seniors often address real-world issues in honors senior projects and make connections between research and practice. The projects vary from high-level laboratory research on potential cures for cancer to improving water purification systems in developing countries, developing effective pedagogies for twenty-first-century secondary students, or creating computer programs and smart-phone applications for the modern world. One example of students forging connections through honors is a graphic design major who went on the honors service learning trip to Ghana and then, for her senior project, produced a beautifully designed coffee-table book about the trip; the book became a significant part of the portfolio that helped her secure a job at a prominent communications firm.

Grand Valley expects a lot from honors students, and they in turn help raise the bar across campus so that the honors college has a very significant effect in promoting rigor in education. Many students who matriculate in the Meijer Honors College could go to college virtually anywhere, but three

quarters of them choose Grand Valley as their first choice because of the welcoming environment in honors, the personal relationship with faculty, and the excellent facilities and opportunities. These students help raise the overall profile of students at Grand Valley (which now ranks second in the state of Michigan), and it is no coincidence that as honors has grown, so has the student profile. Our honors college has a healthy balance of challenge and support—faculty demand a lot of students and ask them to perform at a very high level while at the same time encouraging and affirming them. A lot of the support comes from the rich living/learning environment in honors. The Glenn Niemeyer Learning and Living Center houses 450 students in well-appointed apartments and incorporates excellent classroom space as well as faculty and administrative offices. The collaboration between faculty, administration, and housing staff is very strong and allows for true holistic learning, actualizing the Meijer Honors College motto, “Live, Learn, Lead.” The living/learning model has been so successful that Grand Valley is currently building a new freshman living center to extend to the general undergraduate population the same kind of rich academic community.

With such challenge and support, honors students rise to the occasion, with not a few freshmen presenting research in our annual Student Scholars Day as well as local and regional conferences. Some even publish in their first year, setting them up for success early on and helping them perform extraordinarily well. Among those honored by Phi Kappa Phi, for instance, 40% of the freshmen honorees and 56% of the inductees this past year were honors students when honors comprises less than 8% of the undergraduate population, and 42% of the most recent departmental awards across the university went to honors students. Honors students also average a significantly higher cumulative GPA than students who are eligible for honors but do not participate, demonstrating that prior success and ability alone do not prompt students to achieve but that the environment must challenge and support them.

The success of honors students translates into success for students more broadly because they perform well in non-honors and major classes, too, thus raising the curve all over campus. They not only raise the curve but also bring excitement about their learning to all their classes. The director of our honors program tells me that not a day goes by that he doesn't talk to students who are passionate about their research, their study abroad program, their internship, or their service learning. Their eagerness is infectious, and it infuses the whole university—faculty, staff, and other students—with the joy of learning. Furthermore, they are invested in helping other students succeed, honors and

non-honors alike: over 40% of the consultants in peer writing and research and the tutors in math and science are honors students, so they are a vital part of the support structures for all students. Honors students model, promote, and support excellence throughout the whole university.

The Meijer Honors College promises a wonderful return on investment. To be sure, the students' investment of time, effort, and money is sizeable, but the payoff is great. Honors students can be assured of gaining vital knowledge and skills and dispositions that will help them prosper in this fast-paced world. They graduate in good time and are eagerly sought after when they do. They go on to graduate programs in some of the most prestigious universities in the country and the world, often having to make difficult choices between extraordinary opportunities. Because of experiences they have had over their academic career, they are good candidates for Peace Corps, Teach for America, Americorps, City Year, and competitive fellowships such as the Fulbright. Furthermore, those who elect to go into the workplace find excellent opportunities with world-class companies. This past year alone, graduates received offers from General Motors, Hewlett Packard, Spectrum Health, Arirang TV (a major Korean Broadcast network), Dematic Corp., Deloitte, etc., and a few are involved in start-ups such as RefuTea, a retailer of tea and a tea shop to benefit refugees in West Michigan.

The return on investment for the institution is considerable. The honors program is one of the most expensive in the university, but the value it has brought more than compensates for its cost. The Meijer Honors College has markedly enhanced the reputation of the university, increased its ability to recruit the brightest and most capable students, improved student outcomes, and helped boost the metrics so that they are the envy of most other institutions in the state.

The Meijer Honors College, then, has added very significant value to Grand Valley and to the students it serves. Let me conclude with an illustration of just one student. In 2012, Leah Beaulac was attracted to Grand Valley largely because of the Meijer Honors College. She is a biology major and expects to go to medical school when she graduates. In her freshman year she took the year-long Honors Foundational Interdisciplinary Sequence on the Islamic Middle East and was so fascinated by the topic that she added a double minor in Middle East Studies and Arabic. She heard about opportunities to apply for fellowships to study abroad and was assisted in her application by the Meijer Office of Fellowships (a service provided through the Meijer Honors College). She received a Boren Scholarship and will study in Jordan for

the 2015–2016 academic year. This experience will dramatically enhance her application to medical school, and her medical expertise will be of significant value to the government, to which she will owe some service as a condition of the Boren Scholarship. Leah is a poster child for student success: her education has been relevant and rigorous, and it is already yielding a wonderful return on her investment. Leah is only one among hundreds of examples, but she demonstrates the value of honors. We believe that through a relevant and rigorous honors experience, the return on investment will pay off for our students and alumni for years to come as they build on their foundation at Grand Valley toward a future of great consequence.

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