Honors Program 5-Year Review: Dean’s Summary and Recommendations

Chico State’s Honors Program underwent a thorough review five-year review in 2018-2019, following a process similar to that of an academic program review. The program completed a Self-Study in March 2019, and Professor Lee Simpson, Sacramento State Honors Director, conducted an external program review and submitted her report in April 2019. My brief report responds to these documents with an assessment of the Honors Program’s strengths and challenges and makes a set of recommendations for consideration by the Vice Provost, Provost, and the new Honors Program Director.

Program Strengths

1. Unique interdisciplinary curriculum

As noted in both the self-study and the external reviewer’s report, the great strength of the Honors Program is its distinctive interdisciplinary curriculum. Students pursuing Honors in General Education take 24 units of their GE coursework in the program, electing from four lower-division courses (Beauty, Truth, Nature, Justice) and four upper-division seminars (Agents of Change; Science and Human Values; Mind in the Machine; Men, Women, and the Land). The 9-unit Honors Survey of Civilization is also an option at the lower division. These courses are all team-taught by two or three instructors from different disciplines, giving students the truly interdisciplinary learning experience that we often promote but rarely fully realize. As Lee Simpson notes in her review, “Students who participate in the program are receiving a truly unique curriculum that differentiates Chico from the rest of the CSUs. They are receiving all of the benefits of a private liberal arts education at a public school cost.”

2. Quality faculty

The faculty who teach in the Honors Program are some of the University’s most prestigious scholars and outstanding teachers. Students are learning from leading experts who are also highly effective in the classroom. A review of spring 2019 Honors faculty SETs shows all well above university norms with strong feedback from students who note their instructors’ passion, depth of disciplinary knowledge and high expectations for student engagement and learning.

3. High-impact research experience

All students in the Honors program complete a yearlong thesis or creative project as a culminating senior-year learning experience. These projects are showcased at a large-scale end-of-year public event that draws a large audience. This kind of high-impact research experience catalyzes students’ self-understanding as scholars and leads many to go on to graduate school. Data in the self-study confirms that participation in the Honors program supports student success in terms of both GPA and graduation rates.

Program Challenges

1. Diversity

The Honors program has not kept pace with the University as a whole in the diversification of its student body and, to a lesser degree, its faculty. Data presented in the self-study suggests that, while underrepresented minority participation has steadily increased, it has only reached about 7%. This issue should be addressed on multiple fronts—recruitment, curriculum, faculty, even physical space and
The program should be commended for the fact that participation in the Honors program significantly closes the gap in graduation rates between underrepresented minorities and non-underrepresented students; this is further incentive to make the program’s benefits available to more historically underserved students.

2. Enrollment

As the self-study notes, enrollment in the honors programs is suffering from both fewer applicants and from attrition of those who enter the program but fail to complete it. Professor Simson noted in her report that some students were deterred from the program by the daunting nature of the thesis requirement. While better recruitment might address the drop in applicant numbers, attrition, which the self-study attributes in part to failure to maintain GPA requirements, must also be addressed.

3. Program costs

The high quality curriculum of the Honors Program can be credited largely to the practice of team-teaching, which, while effective in student outcomes, entails high instructional costs. Buyouts of tenured/tenure-track faculty and hiring of lecturers to staff this program constitute a large, and currently unsustainable, cost to the program. Low enrollment in the Honors Program has caused an imbalance between the number of faculty the program employs and the number of students it serves. Increasing enrollment and/or an adjustment to the team-teaching structure will be needed in the absence of any budget growth.

4. Space

In 2017, the Honors Program was moved from its former location in Meriam Library to a new space within University Housing. This move precipitated two problems for the program. In losing its central location in the core of campus, the program lost visibility to the student body as a whole, and especially to continuing students, as University Housing is frequented almost exclusively by first-year students. The new location also entailed a physical separation of the Honors Program’s student study and gathering space from the offices of the Director and faculty advisors. This has limited the accessibility of program leadership and limits opportunities for valuable community-building among students.

Recommendations

Upon careful consideration of these strengths and challenges, and based on the material in the self-study and the external review’s report, I make the following six recommendations for the Honors program as its new Director assumes leadership.

1. Recruitment and retention: The program should pursue all avenues possible to recruit and retain diverse, curious, and motivated students. The external reviewer’s report provides ample and details suggestions for recruitment, including visits to feeder higher schools, presentations at statewide counselor conferences, and a more robust partnership with the Admissions Office. As the reviewer also suggests, to improve retention and to broaden the Program’s appeal to those who might be strongly motivated but not have a record of academic achievement, the
Director should consider, in consultation with faculty, lowering the GPA requirement for program retention from 3.3 to 3.0.

2. **Curriculum review:** In close consultation with the Honors faculty, the Director should undertake a review of the curriculum to identify opportunities to (1) broaden its relevance and appeal to a broader student population; (2) improve the cost-effectiveness of the program through more rational student-faculty ratios; and (3) take advantage of General Education updates that might allow greater visibility of and access to Honors courses.

3. **Faculty participation:** The Honors Program currently employs an outstanding roster of faculty, as noted above. But there has been little expansion or turnover of that faculty in the past five years, while many excellent new instructors have joined the Chico State ranks. In particular, the Director might look to complement the strong representation of humanities and science faculty with additional instructors from the social sciences. Faculty hiring should also be informed by a clearer review process to ensure continued excellence.

4. **Data tracking:** Interventions to address diversity, recruitment, and retention should be driven by comprehensive data. The campus transition to the Salesforce/Chico State 360 advising platform offers an opportunity for the Honors program to review and update what information is tracked, how it is stored, and how it can be used to inform program improvement. In particular, student demographic data should be used to assess recruitment and retention efforts and to drive targeted outreach and support initiatives.

5. **Collaborative space:** The loss of dedicated space for Honors students to gather, study, work on senior projects, and interact with Honors faculty has been a blow to the program. The Director should explore all possible options for re-establishing such a space, ideally in a central campus location. Creative approaches to collaboration with other programs within and beyond UED, including Meriam Library, might solve this problem while raising the campus profile of undergraduate research and other high-impact practices more broadly.

6. **Integration into UED:** The location of the Honors Program in Undergraduate Education (UED) links it with some of the University’s most prominent student success-oriented initiatives. The Director has the opportunity to align his vision for the Honors Program with those of the First Year Experience Program, the Chico Student Success Center, and the Office of Civic Engagement to maximize program impacts through collaborative strategic planning, joint initiatives, and shared resources (including possibilities for shared space). The UED Directors Retreat in July 2019 will provide an opportunity to chart such a course.

This five-year review underscores the effectiveness of the Honors Program in delivering an outstanding General Education experience to its students, one not often found in a comprehensive university of Chico State’s size. Longstanding Honors Director John Mahoney and the faculty and staff he cultivated deserve enormous credit for building and sustaining this distinctive program. I look forward to working with the new Director to build on its success for a new generation of Chico State students.

Respectfully submitted,

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