

To: Kate McCarthy  
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From: Lee Simpson

Date: April 8, 2019

Re: CSU Chico 5-Year Review

I appreciate the opportunity to review the CSU Chico General Education Honors Program. The program report along with my site visit with faculty, students, and administrators provide plenty of evidence that Chico has developed a unique and successful General Education Honors Program that is worthy of the university's continued support. With two minor exceptions, the program meets all of the AAC&U high-impact practices (common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, and capstone courses and projects).<sup>1</sup> The program also meets the National Collegiate Honors Council's definition of Honors education, with its emphasis on a curriculum that goes broader, deeper, and more complex than comparable coursework.<sup>2</sup>

What truly stands out at Chico is the curriculum. To the best of my knowledge, Chico is the only campus in the CSU offering multidisciplinary and team taught courses. In many traditional team teaching situations the faculty simply split the course and lecture or present on separate days according to their area of expertise. At Chico, both instructors are present in the classroom and they work together to deliver the content to students. In the two classes I visited, the upper division HNRS 330 Mind in the Machine, and the lower division, HNRS 203 Virtue, I witnessed two instructors from distinct fields of study engaging with students throughout the class period. The faculty model life long learning and the importance of studying and discussing material that might be out of their area of training. They represent true citizen-scholars. Faculty reported feeling part of a dynamic and exciting community of scholars where all are committed to delivering high quality liberal arts education to their students. One faculty member, who joined the Honors faculty as an assistant professor, expressed his praise for the team teaching approach. He felt mentored by his more senior partner and applied what he learned in Honors to his non-Honors pedagogy. Other faculty members noted the importance of team teaching and the multidisciplinary curriculum in breaking down academic silos. They felt it improved the sense of collegiality across campus.

Students also praised the curriculum. They appreciate being part of an academically-minded community of students working with faculty who truly care. They value the small classes that allow for in depth conversation. Students noted that Honors classes are their "fun" classes. They move at a smooth pace and are "pleasantly challenging." All of the students I met particularly

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.aacu.org/leap/hips>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nchchonors.org/directors-faculty/definition-of-honors-education>

valued HNRS 200 Honors Survey of Civilization. Most agreed that it was “the best class ever.” Rather than being overwhelmed by a 9 unit class meeting 3 days a week, they argued it set them up for success in the rest of their studies and provided an excellent transition from high school to college.

The report expresses some concern with the Honors thesis as an impediment to student completion of the Honors Program. Some of the younger students echoed this concern, feeling intimidated by the prospect. Students in the thesis class, however, all praise the class and would be opposed to limiting it to a single semester. They note the importance of learning how to break a large and complex project into component parts. They feel they did receive the proper preparation for the thesis through their prior Honors coursework and they are receiving all the support they need to complete projects that are of publishable quality. All felt that the thesis made them more competitive and better prepared for graduate school than their peers who are not completing theses.

The Honors thesis class is currently staffed by a lecturer, Heather Altfeld. In many respects she *is* the Honors Program for the seniors. They see her as a friend and a mentor who sets extremely high expectations with a high level of support. The course she has developed is an outstanding model of undergraduate research. It should be noted that the work she does in this class exceeds the expectations of average lecturers in the CSU. Professor Altfeld helps students identify content advisors, explains to these advisors the expectations and roles of the advisor, and navigates difficulties when they arise. She reads and critiques a plethora of writing styles and projects and plans and executes an end of the year presentation of thesis projects. It is troubling that the Chico State administration does not prioritize attending this final celebration and see the quality of work completed by Chico Honors students. I also worry that as a lecturer, professor Altfeld lacks the protections of a tenured faculty member.

It appears that the only real weakness in the program is currently related to recruitment and retention. In order to offset the high cost of team teaching, the program must recruit and retain students. This could be accomplished by engaging in more robust off campus visits by the Program and creating a more dynamic relationship with Admissions & Outreach. Students reported that the email marketing is effective as was the Choose Chico event. Students are drawn to priority registration and to the Honors housing community.

**Recommendation 1:** Identify the main feeder high schools and arrange visits through either the counseling offices or (preferably) visits to senior AVID or AP/IB classes. These should be completed during October and November (the admissions window for the CSU). Visits to junior AVID or AP/IB classes can also be useful in the second half of the spring semester. If possible, take students. They are our best ambassadors.

**Recommendation 2:** Whenever possible, present at statewide high school counselor conferences about the program.

**Recommendation 3:** Make sure the campus Admissions & Outreach team knows the details about the program (not just that you exist, but what you really do). Invite them to sit in on a class or two and attend their training events. Make sure they have copies of your marketing material at

all high school visits. Encourage students to apply for jobs in the Admissions & Outreach office as student assistants, tour guides, and eventually as admissions counselors and officers.

**Recommendation 4:** If the applicant pool remains small, use student assistants to call all eligible students to explain the program and address concerns about workload and AP/IB burnout.

**Recommendation 5:** Work with faculty across the campus to identify current Chico students who would be good additions to the program and encourage them to apply. Advertise to high achieving students (3.5 GPA or higher) at the end of the first semester of the freshman year.

**Recommendation 6:** Orientation is a prime opportunity to begin building the Honors community cohesion and addressing student concerns with workload, especially fear of the senior thesis. Work with the Orientation team to embed Honors advising into the program schedule. If possible, hold a single orientation session (consider partnering with EOP or other special programs). Encourage Honors students to apply to be orientation leaders and then assign incoming Honors students to those groups.

**Recommendation 7:** Some students reported an initial concern with living in the Honors housing in Sutter Hall. They recommended better marketing of the living experience in Sutter. Students could develop some short videos describing the Sutter experience and other benefits of the Honors Program. (I received a grant from our student government to fund marketing videos created by students).

**Recommendation 8:** The program report expresses concern with students signing up for Honors and reaping the benefits of priority registration without actually taking courses. Consider requiring Honors students to complete a minimum of one course per year to maintain priority registration.

**Recommendation 9:** The current GPA requirement to remain in Honors is 3.3. Consider dropping the cumulative GPA to 3.0. If there is concern with standards consider a requirement of a B or better in Honors courses in addition to the minimum 3.0. Students who receive a grade of B- or below would need to take another Honors course to achieve the certificate.

**Recommendation 10:** To address program attrition and student concerns with the rigor and demands of the thesis, in addition to promoting undergraduate research, make sure students understand that the skills they are developing in the lower division Honors courses are preparing them for a thesis. Building a research eportfolio might be one mechanism to do this. First year students should also be encouraged to attend the thesis presentations in the spring. Consider adding a Q&A session where students can ask questions about the process of preparing for a thesis and actually accomplishing the work.

**Recommendation 11:** The loss of the dedicated Honors space in Meriam library is a potential deterrent to retention. The new office space is hidden away in the Housing complex and Honors no longer has its own lounge/study space. The study room is difficult to access and far removed from the faculty/administrative offices. Space shared with Housing can be off-putting to students who are not living in Honors. It also sends a message to Honors students that they are not

deserving of a dedicated space. Lounge/study space is one of the few perks we can offer Honors students.

Chico State is fortunate to have a strong and well-functioning GE Honors Program. The university would be wise to prioritize the program in its marketing material. 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. Chico should become a Plan A school for high-achieving students across the state who are looking for a challenging undergraduate experience that will prepare them for admissions to top quality graduate programs nationwide. They simply need to know the program exists and is worth applying to.