

Honors Re-Envisioning Task Force

Assessment of the Future of the Honors College

University of Arizona

Task Force Members

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Task Force Charge

In January 2016, Provost and Senior Vice President Andrew Comrie charged this Task Force to “meet with key stakeholders including students, faculty, college and central administrators, and donors” to create a document that is “generative rather than exhaustive, with the goal of rapidly producing a ‘brainstorming report’ over the next few months.” Within this charge, the Provost also asked that the task force “examine the current model, both the student experience...and the administrative challenges of creating an integrated structure where partnerships with colleges are key.”

In sum, the Provost suggested: “The most important function of the task force will be to brainstorm and outline new ideas to enhance the distinctive UA Honors experience for the 21st Century. That experience should include opportunities for students whose passions and talents extend beyond the boundaries of conventional academic areas.” Within the scope of this charge, which also asked us to look closely at the relationship between the Honors experience and our campus’ 100% Engagement Initiative, the task force has constructed a document that lays out opportunities for future trajectories. It does not offer “a model” of honors education. It does provide strong recommendations about how to align the honors experience with the mission and vision of our university.

Over the past three months, the Task Force has heard numerous ideas that could strengthen the Honors College while moving forward. These are discussed below under the areas of: (1) Executive Summary; (2) Recruitment and Marketing; (3) The Honors Student Experience; (4) Financial Models and Development Opportunities; and (5) UA Honors: Toward the Future. Following the Provost’s charge, the remainder of this document is structured as a brainstorming exercise. The document builds upon areas of strength and opens up conversation about further opportunity. It is meant to be a document that is a starting point for how we build the next phase of honors education at UA.

Executive Summary

The Honors College serves not only the wider campus, but also local, national, and global communities. The overarching goal of the Honors College is that students' time at UA be focused on inquiry, discovery, research, and engagement; it propels graduates into an extraordinary future that is characterized by life-long, passionate learning. These future leaders are taking on society's grand challenges. The Honors College experience must continue to prepare them to do just that.

This is a challenge, in part, because the Honors College has been through a period unprecedented growth and expansion. On the one hand, this has resulted in a vibrant intellectual community of young scholars who, upon finishing their undergraduate degrees at UA, have gone on to become national leaders in business, arts, sciences, education, medical and law professions. On the other hand, it has required the Honors College to meet the wide-ranging needs of so many students.

Honors students are mentored by a highly committed interdisciplinary core faculty and staff within the Honors College as well as by some of the world's preeminent scholars found across the university. These student-faculty experiences are a strength of our UA Honors College.

Our students come from a diverse set of backgrounds and experiences. We must celebrate that diversity through an Honors College experience that offers our students a similarly diverse and personalized journey. Put more directly, an honors experience must continue to move away from a "one-size-fits-all" model, building an even more open and unique set of honors college experiences for all students that qualify.

The many successes of the Honors College have become evident in our discussions with different constituents – alumni, students, parents, staff, faculty, advisory board members, and administrators – over the last three months. These accomplishments include, but are certainly not limited to, the delivery of a robust lower-division honors experience, collaboration with leading scholars across the campus, and the coordination of a loyal network of alumni, board, and community members. The Honors College has also been at the forefront of the Engagement Initiative, providing a framework for integrating engaged learning into the honors experience at every level. Furthermore, the Honors College has led initiatives to enhance interdisciplinary and active learning, through the development of a suite of innovative curricular developments such as the interdisciplinary minor, the first year research project, and the first year colloquium, to name a few. We must build upon these many achievements as we look to the future.

Recruitment and Marketing

The Task Force believes that there remains value in the "College" brand for Honors and we do not recommend changing it. Many of the other elements of recruitment and marketing discussed below can be found in current Honors College materials, such as the reasons for joining the Honors College, however, they must be highlighted, foregrounded and easily accessible for parents, students, counselors, advisors, and faculty. The website, for example, must be overhauled and updated so that potential students can immediately access the stories of current students and the success stories of recent graduates.

As it stands now, the Honors College first-year admission is based on academic index (AI) score. It predominantly attracts US-based students and has little international appeal.¹ The process for admission is based on that score, although students also check a box on the application that they want to be considered for the Honors College. An additional honors application would provide caché to the Honors College experience at the beginning by investing the application in a more rigorous and comprehensive evaluation of student potential for success. This would also allow the Honors College to broaden its admissions criteria to include different sorts of activities, including but not limited to academic achievement. Students could demonstrate their qualifications to enter based on outstanding service, leadership or engagement within their communities, among other possibilities. As the university seeks to attract the extraordinary minds and next great innovators, not just from the United States but from around the world, it must adjust its application and admission policies to recruit such thinkers. This would mean a change in that the Honors College need not accept a student automatically based on high AI.

Within and beyond the application and admissions materials, the advantages of entering the Honors College are vague. We recommend that the specific advantages to pursuing a UA degree within the Honors College, the “Top 5 Reasons,” be made explicit, highlighted and disseminated widely and consistently across different marketing channels and the university, including among upper administration. These “Top 5 Reasons” (as outcomes of an honors experience) might include: the capacity to build a unique learning experience at UA, the ability to take up the grand challenges of our day, the capacity to build a unique and personalized learning experience at the UA, greater placement opportunities for graduate programs, amazing future careers, or selection for nationally competitive awards such as the Truman, Fulbright, Rhodes, or Boren. If, in fact, these outcomes are unknown, we urge the Honors College to compile the data to demonstrate the added value that having the Honors College experience would provide University of Arizona undergraduates.

There are many other areas of recruitment and marketing that could be developed to attract the most dynamic students to UA Honors from both first-year cohorts, transfer students, international students, and current students.² To entice students who display initiative and drive as well as scholastic achievement, so that they enter the Honors College at different stages of their career, the Honors College should create an ongoing recruitment plan. Part of that could include opening Honors College events to the larger community and also having the Honors College co-sponsor other events happening on campus, in which prior to the speaker or event, the “Top 5 Reasons” could be viewed on a larger screen or they could even put within the pages of the program for events.

The benefits of the Honors College must be made explicit not only to the student but also to the wider university community. As part of our public research, land grant mission, the Honors College students serve the broader community and the state of Arizona. Our marketing and recruitment must emphasize that Honors College students have a more personalized experience within the larger university as well as multiple opportunities to work with world-renowned experts in their fields of specialization.

The Honors College needs to underscore in its materials that it is a program in which inquiry, discovery, research, and engagement are threaded through every facet of the experience, making for a

¹ Arizona State University now makes international recruitment an overt aspect of their honors experience and international students make up 5% of ASU’s total honors population.

² There could be future need to build an honors recruitment and marketing experience for distance and online students.

unique undergraduate academic career. UA Honors is not an island within a larger sea. It is an integrated experience where some of our most highly motivated students work closely with faculty, staff, and other students to create an unparalleled learning experience.

The financial incentives of being in the Honors College could be more comprehensive and include a wider variety of engagement opportunities, including, but not limited to, study abroad or taking part in internships abroad, research, community service, and leadership activities. The fee could also be used to recruit students, if it was more transparent to them as to what it supports. The Honors College development campaign should include opportunities to fund the Honors College fee and the University must increase its commitment to unique scholarships and awards designed to attract students to the Honors College.

The demographic profile of the Honors students reflects that of the larger university and we should be highlighting this within our marketing materials. However, we must also recruit internationally. The presence of international students will enhance the Honors College experience for all. Having clearly defined benefits and outcomes will enable us to do so. This has not been capitalized on as yet.

The Honors Student Experience

Honors students at the UA strengthen the entire campus through interaction and community-building within and beyond the university. As we recruit students to the Honors College, we have to provide an intellectual framework and institutional structure that allows each one of them to co-create their honors experience with their peers, mentors, faculty, and community leaders. Because we are one of the nation's top public research universities as well as a land-grant institution, we don't want to build an isolated honors experience. On the contrary, our Honors College enterprise will be one characterized by collaboration, involving the entire campus and community.

A one-size-fits-all model for the Honors College is not the future. This immediately raises questions, for example, such as: should all honors students be required to take 30 honors units?; should all honors students be required to produce a thesis?; should the honors experience be characterized exclusively based on academic coursework and a final thesis project? Most honors students are, by the nature of their curiosity and intellectual rigor, interdisciplinary thinkers and that thinking extends far beyond the classroom. Students should, therefore, have the ability to co-develop a pathway through the Honors experience across their coursework and other non-credit engagement opportunities that fits with their diverse interests and skills. Creating an environment in which this model can be available for all honors students will be challenging, but we are convinced that the benefits, in terms of student investment in their honors education, would be dramatic. To address diverse interests at the end of the Honors experience, sharing advising materials that stress the flexibility of the final, tangible "product" for students in different disciplines is essential. The term "thesis" has connotations that can discourage some students for whom it conjures the notion of a dry, written document that may not be appropriate for their area of basic, applied, or creative activity. Whatever form it takes, the overall student learning pathway must provide an opportunity for Honors students to reflect on how their path through the Honors experience has enriched their engagement within the university, our wider community, and has also enhanced their understanding of their chosen professional path in life.

The honors experiences at UA aim to build students' skills in Interdisciplinary Curiosity, Community Partnership, Global and Local Thinking and Action, Intercultural Competency, Scholarly and Creative Activity, and Transformational Leadership. Credit-bearing and non-credit bearing experiences are key for students in developing these skills. Two-way communication between the Honors College and

disciplinary colleges is essential; disciplines should have an active role in the credit and non-credit activities, partnering with the existing opportunities available through the Honors College. The Honors College should support positions within the disciplinary colleges that coordinate with academic advisors to help students explore majors, career opportunities, and to plan a coherent honors pathway. Although this person could function as a professional advisor, it is also possible a faculty member could serve in this role. The Honors College also needs to provide a framework for developing a final project outside of the major.

Additional interdisciplinary coursework should be situated within colleges that builds upon the already well-received freshman colloquium model. This course would accomplish several goals for the Honors College. First, it would help sustain the community created in the honors freshman colloquium. Second, it would afford students the opportunity to stretch their interdisciplinary thinking while exploring opportunities within their colleges. Third, these courses would provide an entry point for students who transfer into the Honors College as upper-classmen or transfer from other institutions. Involving senior honors students in the mentorship of students in these foundational courses would build the senior students' leadership skills and allow new students to expand their communities by learning from the students who have gone before them.

To promote Honors students' engagement with the community and to build on the University's 100% Engagement goal, there should be formally UA-approved non-credit engaged learning opportunities to connect with agencies and groups within Tucson that represent specific community needs. Honors students value the the diverse experiences from participating in the Honors Civic Engagement course, internships, and serving as the Honors College Ambassadors and Honors Student Council, and we would like to see these types of engagement and leadership opportunities strengthened. This would help deepen partnerships with areas within Student Affairs and Enrollment Management/Academic Initiatives and Student Success as well as Global Initiatives, all of which are currently developing formally approved non-credit engagement experiences.

Having a flexible and central space for honors activities (colloquia and other courses as well as extra-curricular), small-group sessions, larger community events, and possibly even dining facilities would be ideal. It would create increased opportunity for student interactions across the entire honors experience (particularly for upper level students who have moved off campus) as well as promote student-faculty-staff connections.

The college's interdisciplinary faculty, along with the disciplinary faculty from the academic colleges, who teach honors courses and who supervise honors research, are exceptional. Providing credit and incentives for faculty (and their departments) who serve in these roles has been a long-standing problem. The University's initiatives around interactive engagement and active learning in the classroom demonstrates the kinds of engagement that should be at the center of an honors experience, and professional recognition of the efforts of faculty to play these roles should be a prime consideration. Recognition of the importance of disciplinary faculty in the engagement of honors students will provide incentive for more departmental buy-in.

Financial Models and Development Opportunities

The Honors College budget is made up of central investments, an honors fee, and development (fundraising) dollars. This budget must pay for the student support and instructional experiences within and beyond the college. The University of Arizona has built a new budget model, responsibility centered management (RCM), and within that the Honors College is a central unit within the provost's

office. This means that the Honors College does not generate budget dollars based on student credit hours (SCH) or majors within RCM, but it does maintain control over its fee and development dollars. We believe that the Honors College is a central resource and is properly located within RCM. The Honors College has carried a fund balance over the last several years. A comprehensive assessment of Honors College revenue and expenses is warranted, although beyond the scope of this report.

That said, the Task Force heard quite often that RCM, which decentralizes resources to the academic colleges, has the potential to incentivize colleges away from honors-oriented programming. This is because in the current educational model of Honors, academic colleges must offer high cost and less efficient smaller classes in a budget system that relies on SCH to generate year-in-and-year-out revenue streams. A further challenge within RCM is that honors thesis supervision is a one-on-one experience that requires a considerable time investment on the part of faculty. Many academics surveyed through this process argued under RCM this is an “inefficient” use of faculty time, given that they are already stretched to the limit by meeting the demands of graduate education in many of their units (also highly reliant on one-on-one interactions). It should be said that these challenges are not unique to RCM, but have been exacerbated, at least discursively, within the current conversations around this new budget model. The reality, as well, is that fewer tenure track faculty exist while student enrollments have increased (particularly in honors), making delivery of high quality, high impact honors education and experiences an ongoing fiscal challenge under the current Honors College model.

Many students, faculty, and staff also pointed out that the fee structure of the Honors College (\$500 per year per student) sometimes produces a transactional culture, whereby students feel some of the largest benefits come from the perks that the fee enables, such as priority registration. There is concern, as well, that students who are already facing financial challenges – particularly first generation and under-represented minority students – do not have access to the Honors College because of the fee. Throughout the process, constituencies, from students to administrators to board members, have argued that because honors students elevate the University of Arizona as a whole, the Honors College must have a budget that matches that aim. This suggests that the university evaluate the current budget, its utilization, and how that financial plan (and additional resources) can be best deployed to match the aspirations discussed in this document.

In the 21st century, for the Honors College to remain competitive and to attract honors students to our campus, the university must build a space that supports a commitment to honors education. As mentioned above, this includes not only a new, dedicated Honors College building but new spaces across the campus that serve not only honors students but all UA students. Put more directly, a new Honors College building makes the honors college experience great but it does little to address the needs of students in the labs, maker spaces, and innovation centers across the campus. These spaces are essential for recruitment of the best students because it is challenging to recruit new honors students when the tours are limited to a few spaces that have been renovated, while other areas remain under-resourced. A comprehensive development campaign must leverage the Honors College as a mechanism for achieving cross-campus infrastructural investments, which would help recruit all students to a vibrant and energetic campus environment that engages all students.

What was uniformly discussed as a competitive advantage – that a UA Honors experience centered on inquiry, discovery, and research wherein honors students are active across the campus – can only be successful if the Honors College resources are distributed to support those interactions and initiatives. A potential model suggested is the recent investments made in the 100% engagement initiative, wherein staffing is being supported centrally *and* in the academic colleges. The Honors

College is a node within a wider campus network. It must be resourced in a way that affords it the opportunity to build on that function.

If the Honors College moves from a model of requiring 30-units of honors coursework to achieve the honors distinction, the pressures on colleges to produce smaller courses or honors contracts dissipates. Investments in a two-year core experience within honors, which is partially funded under the current Honors College model, thus provides that intimate honors experience – the one that so many want for honors – and takes pressure off colleges with large numbers of honors students relative to their total populations (such as Colleges of Science or Engineering). In general, the current academic model demands a particular financial model. Before further investments are made, the current budget must be matched to whatever vision and practice of the Honors College might exist in the future.

Immediately, however, the campus can envision a comprehensive development campaign that leverages our suggestions in recruitment and marketing to establish a more robust presence for the Honors College. Put more directly, donors must be sought to create the 21st century infrastructure that allows us to accomplish all that is discussed above.

Appendix

Honors College Task Force Meeting Schedule

In addition to collecting information through numerous conversations, informal meetings, and surveys of current and former honors students³, the Task Force also held information/brainstorming meetings with the following:

Group/Person	Date
Provost Comrie (Charge Meeting)	January 26
Dean MacCorquodale	February 1
Parent and Family Association	February 12
University Academic Advising Council (UAAC)	February 16
President Hart	February 19
Student Engagement Leadership Team	February 22
Honors College Leadership Team	February 25
Campus Life Leadership Team	February 25
Western States High School Counselors	February 26
Honors Students Living in Residence Life, Yuma Hall	March 4
Provost's Deans Council	March 8
Honors Students Living in Residence Life, Arbol de la Vida Hall	March 9
Student Affairs and Enrollment Management Marketing and Admissions Groups	March 16
Honors Interdisciplinary Faculty	March 21
College Academic Administrators Council (CAAC)	March 22
University Senior Leaders Group (included representation from Academic Affairs, VPR, and SAEM/AISS)	March 24
Strategic Planning and Budgeting Advisor Council (SPBAC)	April 6
Honors College Advisory Board	April 9

³ Each member of the Task Force was encouraged to be a point person for questions, comments, and concerns from faculty and staff around campus. These data points were brought into the Task Force's analysis. In addition, several Task Force members have taught or are currently teaching honors students. They used these networks to collect further data for this report. Student committee members also spoke with other honors students on campus. Several Task Force members also discussed the honors experience with students who chose not to complete honors or who were not accepted to the Honors College as well. The Task Force chose not to complete a campus-wide survey of faculty, staff, and students after the first round of data collection in late February/early March, as themes were already emerging and there was a fair amount of consistency in those themes across constituencies.