9 August 2017

Status of Assessment Efforts in the Honors College at Rutgers-Camden

Summary:

The following takes account of evaluation efforts in the Honors College from 2012 to 2017, the tenure of the current director. Our mission and goals, which are necessarily more programmatic than academic, are listed below and on the program website. The Honors College is constantly evaluating its effectiveness in meeting these goals, drawing not only on debriefing sessions in regular staff meetings but also on information gathered from campus partners like the Events Office, Admissions, the Office of New Student Programs, and the Registrar; from our student organizations, including the Honors Student Organization and “Think Tank”; and, perhaps most important, from hundreds of individual advising appointments with students each semester.

Over the past five years, the Honors College has grown from a 350-student program admitting students immediately from high school to a 525-student community that admits select rising sophomores and transfer students as well. Significant programmatic changes have included two successful increases in our admissions standards for matriculates from high school; revisions in our signature IMPACT orientation day event in late August; a redefinition of our Experience Projects requirement to distinguish short-term “enhancements” from more significant “commitments”; the creation of a new academic transcript designation “Honors Graduate with Distinction”; a multi-faceted simplification of Honors Engagement requirement, which has resulted in a reduction of paperwork and a significant improvement in compliance by students; and the development of Honors-specific learning goals to accompany the campus’s new program in General Education.

A 2013 study of retention of students at Rutgers-Camden shows significantly higher rates among Honors College students compared to the general population. See item #7 below.

Preliminary:

In the context of assessment, the Honors College is to be regarded more as a program than a college, since it does not have a faculty of its own but sponsors courses offered by faculty members in the academic departments. As a result, most of our goals are programmatic rather than academic, as the official mission statement and list of goals (below) will indicate. However, the new campus-wide curricula in General Education, taking effect beginning in the Fall of 2017, have prompted the Honors College to write academically-oriented learning goals that will supplement the standard learning goals associated with the ten basic and cross-cutting themes that define General Education going forward. These goals emphasize the importance of creating experiences and methods of evaluating students that are appropriate for lower-division non-majors. These new, Honors-oriented learning goals, which are now listed for all new Honors courses in the General Education Dashboard [Password “GenEdRU16"], can in theory be assessed in conjunction with the SIRS protocols at Rutgers. (Relevant course numbers are 50:525:151 and above.)
The official mission statement of the Honors College is as follows: **The mission of the Honors College is to support academic achievement, encourage engagement in campus life and in larger communities, and create a community in which students feel at home.**

The official goals of the Honors College, in support of this overall mission, are to

1. Enroll substantial numbers of students who are ready to take advantage of the resources of a major research institution
2. Facilitate, through effective orientation programming and small classes, a successful transition into university life
3. Establish an advising program that supports students in completing requirements, maintaining scholarships, and progressing steadily to graduation
4. Develop programming that helps build friendships and encourage identification with the Honors College and Rutgers-Camden as a whole
5. Encourage students to explore opportunities to broaden and deepen their academic experience, including individual research, internship, learning abroad, and interdisciplinary study
6. Offer incentives for students to participate in extracurricular life and to contribute to the general welfare of society
7. Graduate, each year, a substantial cohort of students ready to succeed in graduate school and in professional life

Commentary relative to each of our seven programmatic goals:

1. Our first goal relates to Honors admissions, in particular to the role of the Honors College in recruiting students with strong academic records for our campus.

   - Working with the Admissions Office and our academic dean, we have twice, over the past four years, raised our entrance requirements for first-year students: our new floor is a weighted index of 16. The average index of our Fall 2017 cohort is 17.2, average converted high-school GPA 3.92; the gradual statistical improvement in our classes is evident by comparison with the averages for Fall 2016, which were 16.6 and 3.74. (This weighted index, developed by our Admissions Office for all applicants, is a combination of the new two-part SAT and the high school GPA, adjusted to include credit for AP and accelerated courses. The use of an index permits a higher number on one side to accommodate a lower number on the other.)
   - Responding to a sense that our students do not reflect the overall student body on campus, we have also established two new points of entry in the Honors College. We created a process for admitting our first cohort of transfer students in 2013, and in 2015 we developed an invitation protocol for rising sophomores who have excelled in their first year of college. *Our rising sophomore program reflects our inference, based on an analysis of the records of first-year students, that traditional standards for admission to competitive programs often fail to identify future outstanding students. Our transfer program acknowledges the reality that more than half the students on our campus do not begin their college careers at Rutgers-Camden.*
   - These new admissions programs have helped us to replace students who have been dismissed for poor academic work or non-compliance with program requirements.
Formerly we relied entirely on student-initiated applications, which tend to appear spasmodically—often too late for a student to really benefit from the program—and present somewhat weaker credentials. (These programs have also helped us to raise our membership from 350 to 525 over the five-year period.)

2. Our second goal focuses on the transition from high school or county college to Rutgers-Camden, and it emphasizes orientation in the summer before matriculation and (in the case of matriculants from high school), the experience of small, topical Honors classes in the first and second year.

- We have made many changes, year to year, in our signature IMPACT Day, which brings all our new students together in late August for a day of orientation and acquaintance-making. Based on input from the Campus Events Office as well as internal office discussions, we have made the event less staff-centered and more focused on keeping our students in small groups. We have also created a poster-making contest that maintains the dynamic of the group and creates a relaxing end to the day.
- Capitalizing on the momentum created by the new Gen Ed program, we have written Honors-specific Learning Goals that will encourage faculty members to be more mindful of the status of their students as younger non-majors. Our individual consultations with students have taught us that professors sometimes approach our students as if they were majors in the field, and more experienced academically. Our new goals encourage faculty members to emphasize more frequent, timely, and varied approaches to assignments and evaluation.

3. Academic advising is key to the mission of the Honors College. It starts with one-on-one, open-ended advising appointments in the summer before matriculation and continues, for subsequent semesters, with both individual sessions during registration and drop-in appointments as desired. The Honors College continually evaluates and reports its success in encouraging students to schedule advising meetings and register for classes well in advance of the coming term. Anecdotal information, gleaned in conversation with advisors based in the schools, suggests to us that rates of participation in voluntary advising (around 70%) and of pre-registration (nearly 100%) are significantly higher than for non-Honors undergraduate students.

4. The Honors College schedules numerous social and extra-curricular events designed to strengthen our students' sense of community and identification with Rutgers-Camden. These events change from semester to semester, based on rates of attendance and students’ reaction to them. Among recently instituted events are a Dr. Seuss Day, developed in collaboration with local elementary schools and with the EOF Office; a “Halfway There” event, an outing scheduled for the end of sophomore year; a “Meet and Greet” event in which seminar leaders offer a brief preview, over lunch, of upcoming Honors classes; and an “IMPACT Reunion Day,” involving a train-ride over the Ben Franklin Bridge for lunch at the Reading Terminal Market. See item 6 (below) for additional details on community building.

5. Our fifth goal is supported by the program’s Experience Projects, our flexible approach a traditional Capstone experience required by most Honors programs. Honors capstones are traditionally represented by a senior thesis requirement. However, to accommodate
students in three undergraduate schools and with diverse interests and curricula, we created options ranging from single-semester experiences like short-term study abroad or internship to longer and more intensive experiences like completing a second major or, indeed, a senior thesis.

- **Responding to a growing sense that some curricular experiences are intrinsically more demanding than others, we created in 2013 a distinction between shorter-term “enhancements” and longer-term “commitments.”** In order to help increase interest in “commitments,” we now require two of the former and one of the latter.

- We are in the process of developing a submission portal that will enable us to study the total number of enhancements and commitments completed over time. This data will enable us to assess the extent to which Honors College students are taking advantage of special opportunities at Rutgers. It will also tell us whether “commitments” are becoming more popular with students, something the program’s staff would like to see.

- **Responding to our sense that Honors students perform and engage at widely divergent levels, we have begun discussions with the Registrar on creating a new academic transcript designation, which will supplement our simple current one: “Graduate of the Honors College.” The new designation--“Graduate of the Honors College with Distinction”--will recognize students with high GPAs who complete a capstone “commitment” and whose Honors Engagement record is complete.

6. **One of three pillars of the Honors College program is Honors Engagement, a two-part requirement involving a) participation in campus activities and events; b) community service and civic engagement.** Compliance and record-keeping have always been a problem.

- For academic year 2016-17 we simplified our requirement radically, mandating fewer but, ideally, more meaningful experiences. We now require, each semester, attendance at one Honors events, one major (half-day) community service event, and three additional campus events. We now allow students to claim ongoing commitments like leadership in a campus organization, participation in a sport, or membership in band or choir (among many additional possibilities) in lieu of the three campus events,

- We have now pre-selected community service events for our students, working with partners in Camden and organizing group participation in events like the Susan Komen Walk and the MS Ride to the Shore. Formerly, when students claimed their own events, they tended to fudge and exaggerate.

- **Having made the requirement simpler, we can now hold students more credibly to it, and our policy allows one semester of incomplete participation before dismissal.** As a result of these changes, we were able to hold strictly to the letter of the requirement and we had just 11 dismissals for non-compliance during 2016-17.

- Finally, we created a web-based submission portal, in the Summer of 2016, that improves compliance and reduces, substantially, the need for documentation and paperwork.

7. **Our seventh goal is about retention: having recruited these students for Rutgers we want to keep them here.** Our rates of retention were studied by our campus Office of Institutional
Research in 2013. They were substantial higher for Honors students than for the campus as a whole:

A comparison of outcomes for incoming first year Honors College students and other first year students showed statistically significant differences in retention, GPA, and graduation outcomes. Students who entered as first year Honors College students had significantly higher mean GPAs after their first year (3.31 vs. 2.58), second year (3.29 vs. 2.71), third year (3.31 vs. 2.84), and fourth year (3.20 vs. 2.95). Additionally, Honors College students were significantly more likely to:

- Be retained to their second year at Rutgers University–Camden (87% vs. 75%)
- Be retained to their second year within Rutgers (90% vs. 80%)
- Be retained to their third year at Rutgers University–Camden (71% vs. 62%)
- Be retained to their third year within Rutgers (82% vs. 67%)
- Be retained to their fourth year within Rutgers (74% vs. 62%)
- Graduate within 4 years from Rutgers University–Camden (35% vs. 20%) – Fall 2009 cohort only
- Graduate within 4 years from Rutgers University (40% vs. 22%) – Fall 2009 cohort only

A new retention study is overdue. I plan to initiate one this Fall.

Faithfully submitted,

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