

# HONORS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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## **Honors in Higher Education: An Introduction to the Inaugural Issue**

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## **Abstract**

This paper introduces the inaugural issue of *Honors in Higher Education*, which includes an impressive array of authors from many disciplinary backgrounds, writing for a broad audience of honors educators and administrators, about issues such as curriculum, research, and community service. Several fundamental themes weave throughout all the articles: What are current practices in honors, how do these accommodate – or fail to accommodate – the needs of honors students? How can current practices be informed and improved through assessment and innovation? How could novel practices in one honors program or college inform those at other institutions? Readers should find *Honors in Higher Education* to be a useful resource, with many examples of programs and ideas that can be replicated across institutions.

## **Honors in Higher Education: An Introduction to the Inaugural Issue**

We are delighted to introduce readers to the inaugural issue of *Honors in Higher Education, The Journal of HERU: Honors Education at Research Universities*. As noted in Brady's preface (this volume), HERU exists to support honors education in research universities, through its biennial conference and now through this journal.

Honors education, administered within over 800 honors colleges and programs in two- and four-year institutions across the U.S. (National Collegiate Honors Council, 2015) and the world (Smith, this volume), serve the best interests of some of the most academically motivated college students. In the course of this service, honors colleges add quality to the academic mission of their host institutions by promoting the highest intellectual standards. Necessarily differing in form and content across individual institutions, all honors programs and colleges share the basic goal of identifying and supporting the most motivated and talented students as they learn how to prepare not only for successful careers, but also for life-long learning and meaningful civic engagement (e.g., Humphreys, 2008). This goal is met through innovative and challenging programming in the areas of curriculum, undergraduate research, and community engagement.

This first issue of *Honors in Higher Education* includes an impressive array of authors from many disciplinary backgrounds, writing for a broad audience of honors educators and administrators, about exactly these issues – curriculum, research, and community service. Several fundamental themes weave throughout all the articles: What are current practices in honors, how do these accommodate – or fail to accommodate – the needs of honors students? How can current practices be informed and improved through assessment and innovation? How could novel practices in one honors program or college inform those at other institutions?

Readers should find *Honors in Higher Education* to be a useful resource, with many examples of programs and ideas that can be replicated across institutions.

### **A Preview of the Contributions**

The first several papers address curricular issues. Kastner, McCall, Cutler, and Dolliver take an interdisciplinary approach (a hallmark of honors education) in describing attempts to change their institution's approach to honors education generally and the curriculum of their introductory honors seminar specifically, by applying research and theory from psychology and sociology. They discuss infusing their curriculum and programs with lessons from, for example, Dweck's work on mindfulness to approach the education of honors students more holistically, more individually.

In the second paper, Smith also discusses an innovative approach to first-year programs, one necessitated by dwindling resources in the face of rising enrollment. In particular, her honors college restructured its first-year seminars and incorporated undergraduate teaching assistants as teaching partners for faculty members. The course redesign also included higher levels of collaborative and self-reflective learning practices. Smith's article provides a practical look at the challenges and opportunities of such a collaborative learning model.

Chang, Hall, and Bottoms provide a broad perspective on curriculum and programming with their discussion of multifaceted efforts aimed at (a) supporting the unique needs of a very diverse student body and (b) realizing the benefits of student and faculty diversity. They present ways they have infused diversity and an appreciation for diversity (broadly defined) throughout honors education, providing many concrete examples of their diversification of course offerings, the honors faculty, and so forth.

Next, Cooke, Quimby, Horvath, and Levin provide a blueprint for a living/learning community anchored by biological sciences-related curriculum, research, and service. Students in this program take classes and conduct research in the life sciences, both on campus and in the community at federal and other biomedical research facilities, where their work entails a service-learning component that benefits students and community partners.

The theme of community-engaged undergraduate research continues in the paper by Amar, Haggerty, Ladenheim, Silka, Welcomer, and Jemison. They describe a multi-disciplinary collaborative research effort focused on sustainable food systems. Students in the program learn to work in partnership with faculty members and community groups such as food banks to pose and answer questions of mutual interest.

The next two papers address a special kind of honors research and scholarship – the senior honors thesis. Students often face significant challenges in completing this capstone accomplishment, perceiving it as a monumental hurdle too high to clear. Both papers offer excellent ways to support students both individually and structurally, increasing the numbers of students completing the capstone thesis. Specifically, Gutgold and Rodgers focus on innovations such as intensive specialized mentoring, dedicated thesis-focused seminars, and structured written thesis guides, while Baker and Williams describe a program using predictive analytics to track student progress, an automated system of milestone reminders for students and their faculty advisors, and various strategies for connecting students to faculty members to facilitate the beginning of a research project.

If curriculum and research are two pillars of honors education, then surely community service and service learning constitute a third. Hoar continues the theme of community engagement started by Cooke et al. and Amar et al. by describing a service-learning program

framed by the tenets of social entrepreneurship. In this model of community engagement, the efficacy of students' service activities, their specific community impact, and the assessment of such take center stage.

Our issue ends with Smith's critical review of the book, *Talent Development in European Higher Education*, which describes honors programs across northern Europe. Honors is an international endeavor, and programs in the U.S. have sometimes served as models for programs in other countries. Much is to be gained by collaborative work with other nations as we all move forward in improving honors education. Smith clarifies what we can all learn from this book.

## **Conclusion**

Most of the articles in this issue describe efforts, varying in scope, to assess the usefulness of the novel programs described. As we pass our editorial duties along to the next editors, we hope that as HERU grows, so too will research in our field and wide dissemination of that research through *Honors in Higher Education*. That is, as an organization – actually, more a collective than a structured organization, by design – one of HERU's goals is to foster the extension of the unique research mission of our institutions to our honors colleges and programs, not merely to assuage the calls for evaluation that all programs in higher education face, but to truly understand the efficacy of our efforts – our programs, our courses, our advising, our student advocacy, and so forth. We are currently experiencing a rapidly increasing use of multivariate social science statistical methods to investigate many aspects of higher education, honors should be no different. In turn, the quality of honors education should continue improving nationally, and even internationally. We hope that this first issue of *Honors in Higher Education* will not only inform current practices in honors colleges across the nation, but also foster creative thought about how to achieve a more sophisticated level of self-examination through research.

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