HONORING INVESTMENT IN EXCELLENCE: 
A Literature Review of American University Honors Opportunities and Student Performance

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As explained by the Association of Graduates, West Point’s forthcoming Academy Scholars Program will offer “experiential learning opportunities to enhance cadets’ education and leadership development,” including domestic and international internships, as well as opportunities to collaborate with faculty on empirical research. The rationale for the program is that cadets’ personal and professional development as future leaders and global citizens requires substantive engagement beyond the classroom to apply the skills and knowledge learned within the traditional classroom environment. Consequently, the Academy is actively pursuing development efforts to fund a $37 million interdisciplinary Academy Scholars Program endowment as part of its 2013 For Us All capital campaign (AOG, 2013).

This review of US-based university honors programs outlines their history and growth, and finds early evidence of their benefit on academic performance, social outcomes, and professional development. Though there exists considerable literature on the approaches to and design of various honors courses, programs, and colleges, there remains surprisingly little evidence-based research and analysis to inform decision-makers creating and directing these resource-intensive opportunities. The goal of this literature review is to assess lessons learned to help inform continued efforts at West Point to design, develop, and operationalize its own strategy for honors opportunities, with the ultimate aim of improving student experiences both within and beyond the traditional classroom. Though one can derive some lessons learned, West Point’s leadership – and the national honors education community – could benefit from more extensive efforts to identify best practices in order to ensure proper financial and social return on donor, faculty, staff, and student investment.

History and Growth of University Honors Opportunities

American universities adopted the British academic tradition of bestowing honors distinctions on its undergraduates in the 1920s. First appearing at Harvard College, honors education swiftly proliferated, such that there were more than 100 Stateside honors programs within approximately ten years of their introduction. In response to perceived Soviet competition with the launch of Sputnik in 1956, American universities witnessed further growth in honors programs, with financial support from the Carnegie Corporation, the National Science Foundation, and the United States Office of Education (now the Department of Education). In 1966, faculty and staff providing specialized opportunities for high-performing students founded the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC). Colleges and universities independently developed their own selection processes and models, to include honors semesters, research
projects, specialized academic programs, and dedicated colleges. Meanwhile, NCHC grew as a resource and network providing academic enrichment opportunities (NCHC, 2013). A second expansion began the latter half of the 20th century as universities, increasingly competing for top students, considered honors programs a means of attracting talent (Long, 2002; Baker et al., 2000).

Analysis of Student Performance and Outcomes

Today there are almost 1,000 broadly defined “honors programs” in the United States, yet they remain under-analyzed. Though the NCHC publishes a journal, its content focuses more on members’ experiences and programmatic offerings, and less so evidence-based analysis. Despite an explosion in the number of honors programs, they remain relatively understudied in higher education research (Pascarella et al., 1991). Cosgrove (2004) cites claims regularly provided in support of honors education, including attracting top-caliber students and faculty, student retention, academic enrichment, graduation rates, institutional prestige, and fundraising, to name just a few. His concern is that benefits reported come from descriptive case studies, rather than large-n multivariate institutional analyses. It has only been in recent years that more rigorous research has been undertaken (Seifert et al., 2007), from which West Point’s leadership may benefit as they assess external lessons learned for the Academy’s program design and implementation.

Recommendations

Though this literature provides merely a cursory review of existing honors programs’ experiences, five suggestions for developing an Academy Scholars Program are as follows:

1. **Clear communication trumps whitewash.** As US universities have turned to new honors opportunities for rebranding purposes, West Point must actively avoid its new Academy Scholars Program being perceived as a mere marketing tool by identifying, developing, and communicating best-in-class educational opportunities distinct from existing programs.

2. **Start early.** Studies demonstrate some positive effects of early engagement on long-term success. In contrast with West Point’s existing Scholarship Program, formally convened as XH497: Critical Thought spring of a cadet’s third year, an Academy Scholars Program should support promising cadets beginning plebe year.

3. **Be comprehensive.** In contrast with a single honors project, semester, or class, effective honors opportunities should be comprehensive, including academic, physical, and military learning for top cadets.

4. **Learn outside the box.** An effective honors program may begin in the traditional classroom, but that is only the starting point. Consider incorporating holistic learning opportunities, to include colloquia, research, domestic and international travel and internships, speaker series, and other meaningful real-world experiences.
5. **Monitor and evaluate.** Though one never wishes to simply advocate for continued research in lieu of identifying concrete answers, the reality is that undergraduate honors programs have grown while remaining surprisingly unexamined. Though recent years’ work points to potential gains, a great deal of research relates to attitude and mindset, more so than tangible performance. Consequently, West Point must follow developments in higher education research, while carefully assessing its foray into an Academy Scholars Program with the continued goal of organizational learning and improvement.

**Annotated Bibliography**


This article addresses challenges of attrition in American undergraduate engineering programs. At the time of this study, less than half of all first-year college students beginning engineering studies graduated with engineering degrees, with more than 50 percent leaving programs freshman year. The authors speak to the importance of academic success and attitudes learned early in one’s college career, recommending targeted educational opportunities and improved monitoring and evaluation.


Though West Point’s liberal arts educational model is understandably very different from that of a nursing school, this paper is relevant in that it provides an analysis of honors education for a cohort of students training to assume professional responsibilities within the same profession. That is, it may be worth considering whether a West Point honors program should take a different form than those found in civilian universities, from which graduates pursue a diversity of career trajectories. Noteworthy in this paper is an experiential approach to education, both within and beyond the traditional classroom learning environment.


This longitudinal study examines the academic performance, retention, and degree-completion rates of three groups of high-achieving students, all possessing comparable levels of aptitude. The author finds that partial exposure to an honors program does not significantly improve academic performance, graduation rates, or time to degree. Students who complete an honors program have the highest academic performance and graduation rates, in addition to the shortest time to degree completion.

Floyd and Holloway describe costs and benefits of honors programs and courses in a community college environment. Of particular note for West Point is the consideration of resource-intensive investment of time, energy, and funds in the context of a publicly-funded institution dedicated to egalitarianism in educational and training opportunities.


Gregerman et al evaluate research partnerships between university faculty and underclassmen, finding such opportunities promoting student retention of students. Students found to have the greatest improvements in retention rates as a result of a research program are African American students and students with low grades.


This analysis of introductory statistics classes reports that students prefer nontraditional classes to traditional classroom experiences. Specifically, students prefer hands-on activities, smaller class sizes, and interactive visuals in learning the very material included in West Point’s core curriculum.


This book speaks to the value of a student engagement for student success. Specifically, Kuh and Kinzie cite the importance of learning opportunities outside the classroom, including residential hall experiences, colloquia, community service experiences, engagement with top faculty, etc.


This paper presents evidence from a study of first-year students’ academic performance, compared to an equivalent group. Those students participating in an honors program were found to have higher levels of achievement after one year.

The goal of this study was to learn whether honors college students differ from other comparable students over time. Rinn found significant differences between juniors and seniors with regards to academic self-concept, educational aspirations, and career aspirations.


This survey traces the growth of American honors colleges, highlighting the trend of new colleges emerging from existing honors programs with the intent of raising the public profile of an institution. These new colleges may offer genuinely top-quality educational opportunities informed by comprehensive analysis and integrated design processes, or simply rebranding of an established program.


The authors claim the majority of honors programs continue without evidence of increased performance. This longitudinal, multi-institution study identified small, but significant, positive effects on critical thinking abilities, mathematical skills, and the composite cognitive development of undergraduate honors students during college. Those particularly supported included men and students of color.


This study considered the effect of living-learning community models on student performance, finding more positive outcomes for students in environments that actively facilitate interaction beyond traditional classroom settings.

**Additional Citations and Resources**


