

Assessing and Evaluating an Honors Program in a College of Agriculture

Isabel Whitehead  
Graduate Assistant  
University of Arkansas  
iwhitehe@email.uark.edu

Leslie D. Edgar  
Professor and Assistant Dean of Student Programs  
Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences  
University of Arkansas  
AFLS E221 Fayetteville, AR 72701  
(479)575-6770  
ledgar@uark.edu

K. Jody Davis  
Director of Advising & Student Records  
Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences  
University of Arkansas  
Phone: (479)575-7758  
kdavis@uark.edu

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## **Introduction**

Honors programs in higher education are thought to promote active learning, engage students in undergraduate research, and provide capstone experiences (Siegfried, 2001). Assessment and evaluation of honors programs creates an opportunity to address the mission of the program, highlight program strengths and weaknesses, gather information, and gain program support (Otero & Spurrier, 2005). The need for program and course assessment is supported by accrediting bodies; however, honors colleges have remained hesitant to self-assess, citing the qualitative nature of honors programs as a difficulty in measuring program success (Driscoll, 2011; Shushok, 2006). The current lack of self-assessment among honors programs is concerning for educators, honors directors looking to improve their programs, and students, who are arguably the largest stakeholder group. Lack of assessment could place honors programs at risk when resources are tight (Shushok, 2005). The University of Arkansas established a campus wide Honors Program, and the Bumpers College began participating in 2003.

Priority three of the AAAE National Research Agenda specifies that interest in higher education in agriculture is on the rise, which is vital to provide the industry with skilled young professionals to address complex, interdisciplinary agricultural issues (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016). Colleges of agriculture, particularly those with the unique addition of an honors program, need to make an effort to understand the needs of current agricultural honors students. The purpose of this quantitative study was to determine students' perceptions of the Bumpers College Honors Program. The following research objectives guided the study: determine honors students' perceptions of the program as well as honors students' perceived areas of improvement and perceived areas of success.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Honors programs typically exist in two forms in higher education. Firstly, under a university wide honors program, or secondly, a departmental program (Cosgrove, 2004). Students are recruited and selected to participate in a more personalized, rigorous educational experience, often with the addition of undergraduate research or study abroad opportunities. At the core, honors programs are designed to "add quality to the academic mission of their host institutions by promoting the highest intellectual standards" (Bottoms & Gutgold, 2016, p. 4).

Touted benefits of honors programs include a positive impact on student retention, elevated academic coursework, and raising intellectual levels across campus, graduation rates, and more (Cosgrove, 2004). While these claimed benefits are dispersed throughout the literature, the greater impacts of honors programs still remain largely unstudied in higher education from a multi-site empirical standpoint (Cosgrove, 2004). As such, any evidence based on single-site studies may only provide educators with a narrow view of the true impact honors programs have on college students' experiences. Although the researchers agree that multi-site and longitudinal studies provide a broader view, the program started with a single-site inquiry to be expanded over time. For educators looking to actively maintain, grow, and improve their programs, various forms of support are suggested to provide students with a successful honors experience, particularly through providing faculty and peer mentoring options, discipline specific thesis guides, and thesis oriented coursework (Gutgold & Rogers, 2016). Students that enter honors programs are held to high standards. The literature emphasizes program structure and

organization is recommended to combat student procrastination, minimize risk, and increase accessibility (Siegfried, 2001).

### **Methods**

This quantitative research used an electronic survey to collect information from students enrolled in the Bumpers College Honors Program. The instrument was assessed for face and content validity by the Bumpers College honors faculty committee. The instrument was analyzed to determine reliability (Cronbach  $\alpha = .95$ ). Census sampling was utilized in order to gather feedback from all students enrolled in the honors program. Instruments were provided in electronic form and distributed using current honors student emails. A 66% response rate was achieved, with 99 respondents. The instrument consisted of 20 questions that assessed students' perceptions of the program. Data was exported from the electronic system and analyzed with SPSS© version 23. Data analyses consisted of descriptive statistics, including the computing of frequencies, means, standard deviations, and percentages. Open-ended responses were categorized and counted to determine frequency.

### **Results**

Participants were comprised of an approximately even number of freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors, from a population of 149 students. The instrument was designed to gauge students' overall perceptions of the honors program, ranging from the local agricultural honors program, to the overarching larger honors program offered at the university. Students reported slightly lower satisfaction with the honors courses available in the college and even lower satisfaction with the honors courses available at the departmental level. Students were highly satisfied with the depth of interactions with faculty, research funding opportunities through the honors college, and with funding opportunities for study abroad. Students also noted a positive perception of the research opportunities available, assistance from mentors, and assistance from the college with administrative forms. Students reported their faculty mentors to be extremely helpful in selecting a topic, assisting with research proposal development, and conducting research. However, lower response rates were noted for questions pertaining to the writing and revision of a thesis. A small portion of students had not been met with, or enrolled in any orientation courses to cover the requirements for graduating with honors through the agricultural college.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The objectives of the study were to determine student perceptions of the program and identify areas of success and those needing improvement. Although students noted lower dissatisfaction with the courses available at the departmental and college level, students did report satisfaction with the teaching faculty, research mentors, and their general experience in the Bumpers College Honors Program. Students largely indicated an awareness of opportunities for mentoring, funding, and study abroad within the college. The main areas of improvement included addressing students that had not met with faculty or staff to learn about program requirements as well as increasing the courses available in the college and among departments. Student perceptions reflected the findings of previous studies, showing that organized program structure, mentoring experiences, and clear thesis outlines are beneficial to undergraduate honors students (Gutgold & Rogers, 2016). The researchers recommend longitudinal assessment and evaluation of the efficiency of the Bumpers College Honors Program to encourage continual improvement.

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