

Honors Program

A vibrant honors program can benefit the University of Florida in several ways: It serves as an enticement to bring very strong students to UF who help raise the level of discourse among all students; it helps retain talented faculty who can interact with these extremely bright students, both in the classroom and in research; it brings honor to UF when these students win nationally noted prestigious scholarships and fellowships. A vibrant honors program also can benefit the state and the nation by helping prepare some of the very best students for future path-breaking careers in academia, business, and government.

Currently the honors program at the University of Florida lags behind programs at our national competitors. Making our honors program competitive will take time and resources. Fortunately, however, there are two factors that can help in this endeavor. First, in 2007 the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education created a taskforce to study the honors program and make recommendations. Many of the recommendations about best practices in this report can be traced to that committee's preliminary report. The report also contains many detailed recommendations that are not presented here. Second, a search is currently underway for a new director for the honors program. Recruiting a new, full-time faculty director for the honors program should enable the program to move toward reaching its long-term goals.

Best Practices and Recommendations

2-year versus 4-year program

The over-riding difference between the current University of Florida Honors Program and those at our peer institutions (and, indeed, at almost all other institutions) is that the UF Honors Program is almost exclusively a two-year program, with just a few colleges offering honors classes beyond the sophomore year. Two-year programs, however, are uncommon. Most undergraduate Honors Programs across the country are four-year programs with ties to the student's major at the upper division though some start and then track the student in a specific college. Regardless of this difference, however, the point remains that four-year programs are the majority. For instance, nationally Penn State, Ohio State, University of Minnesota, University of Pittsburgh, University of Texas at Austin, the University of Georgia, University of Illinois, and University of Maryland at College Park all have four-year programs. There is, therefore, significant appeal to extend the UF Honors Program from a two-year to a four-year program.

Extending the program would be costly. It could also have significant benefits:

- For instance, students who complete the 4-year program could have a notation added to their diploma. In turn, the requirements for completion of the program could be used to help further UF's goals. For instance, the program might require that students take a certain number of credit hours each

semester, say 15 or more, in an effort to help change the climate from taking the minimal number of credit hours that retains qualification for certain scholarships. Alternatively the program could require that the students study abroad for a semester, thereby strengthening students' exposure to different cultures. The program might require that the students undertake a research project or work in a research laboratory, thereby exposing these high-achieving students to the research arena. These suggestions are, indeed, just suggestions. The point remains that a 4-year program with a desirable diploma notation enables UF create an incentive to further challenge these students.

- Many of these students will want to conduct research while undergraduates. If the Honors Program was extended to 4 years, the ability of the program to help the students find appropriate research opportunities would be immensely strengthened.
- If the program is lengthened to 4 years, the ability of the honors staff to keep records of the honors students will be enhanced. In turn the ability to remain in contact with these students will be immeasurably improved. Doubtless it is the case that our past honors students have been among our most successful graduates. However this conclusion needs to be taken on faith alone because UF has not tracked nor kept in contact with the students once they have graduated. This failure is almost criminal because it deprives our current students of immensely valuable contacts; it severely limits our ability to invite graduates back to speak to the current students; and it makes raising funds from these graduates to help endow the honors program virtually impossible. To further enhance our ability to make and retain these valuable contacts, there should be an exit interview for each student at the end of their completion of the Honors Program, providing UF with details about the student's experience while at UF and giving UF the opportunity to collect data about the student's future plans.

Diversity and Admission Requirements

Most honors programs (Penn State, Ohio State, UNC at Chapel Hill, University of Minnesota, University of Pittsburgh, University of Texas at Austin, University of Illinois, University of Georgia, and University of Maryland at College Park) make an initial screen of students based on high school GPA and SAT or ACT score. Some (Ohio State and University of Minnesota) admit all students who exceed certain high school GPA and standardized test scores. Most (Penn State, UNC at Chapel Hill, University of Texas at Austin, University of Maryland at College Park, University of Illinois, and University of Georgia) require a more complete application process including essays and letters of recommendation from high school instructors. Most allow students who excel in their first semester or first year to join the honors program.

At the University of Florida, students are offered admission to the Honors Program based strictly on a high school GPA/SAT requirement (4.1 and 1410 SAT for 2009), plus automatic admission for National Merit and National Achievement Scholars. Applicants are also required to write an Honors essay; however, this required essay is

currently not read by the Honors staff, so effectively all students who apply are admitted. We believe that this selection process is woefully inadequate. We also believe that strict reliance upon test scores and high school GPA unnecessarily limits the applicant pool, cutting off students that would benefit from being in the Honors Program and would likewise benefit the Honors Program by being in it. In its place, we recommend the following procedure:

- National Merit, and National Achievement scholars are automatically admitted to Honors.
- Other students with high GPAs and/or high SATs are invited to apply. The cut-offs here are probably lower than our current requirements in order to broaden our applicant pool. Increased emphasis should be placed on high school GPA since that is a better predictor of success at UF than the SAT score.
- The table shows from students admitted to UF for 2006 (these are the latest data available when this table was compiled) the number of students that would be eligible based on different requirements of UF-adjusted GPAs and SAT (or equivalent ACT scores). The first line, a 4.0 GPA and SAT of 1,400 or higher are the current requirements. The other lines show the effect of lowering the SAT requirement.
- Students invited to apply must write an Honors essay. Existing Honors students would be used to read and score the Honors essays. The students must be trained how to score the essays and more than one student reads each essay. A staff member (or members) also reads and scores the essays. The staff members make the final admission decision.
- The GPA/SAT cutoffs can be adjusted to keep the reading task manageable. The final admissions decision can be made based on keeping the program at the appropriate size given its resources.

GPA	SAT	Number of eligible students
4.0	1400	1,666
4.0	1390	1,870
4.0	1380	2,349
4.0	1350	2,790

We believe that the recommended procedure will 1) more accurately assess candidates; 2) allow students who do not perform as well on standardized tests but are still strong candidates in their own right an opportunity to be in the Honors Program; 3) will lead to a larger pool of applicants; 4) promote well-rounded candidates; 5) be easier to advertise because parents and students can be assured that the student will be invited if they meet the specific criteria; 6) promote the Program's reputation because there is an actual selection process; 7) give current Honors students an opportunity for additional input into the direction and composition of the program. The major drawback is the fact that the process requires more time and effort by the Honors Program, both on the part of the existing Honors students who participate by reading the essays and also the staff who read and then make the ultimate choices. However in order to advance the Honors Program, we believe that the benefit from the new admissions process easily outweighs the costs.

Honors Classes

The evaluation of existing honors courses and approval of new courses is currently at the discretion of the director. Faculty members submit proposals for courses to the director. There is no formal process to solicit new courses from faculty nor is there a formal process for students to submit requests for new courses. Almost all Honors courses are offered by the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences with Agricultural and Life Sciences offering 3-4 courses per semester and one course is offered by the College of Business. There is an expectation from CLAS for each department to offer an Honors course but this does not always occur. Adjunct instructors are typically hired to teach honors courses and are paid \$3000 per course. While workable, this structure does not seem primed to create the most intellectually challenging courses for our gifted honors students.

The Task Force examining the Honors Program made a number of recommendations about classes and class creation. Some are easily implemented. Indeed, some of the suggestions may already be underway with the recent creation of the faculty Honors Advisory Board.

- Have a standing Curriculum Committee of faculty and students to review current courses and proposed courses.
- The Honors courses should pay instructors at least market rate for CLAS (\$4500 v. the current \$3000) and likewise across other colleges because currently there is a strong disincentive for colleges to offer small honors courses rather than large classes that generate more student credit hours. This incentive issue may need to be examined at the provost's level.
- Honors courses should be systematically reviewed after a few years.

Prestigious scholarships and fellowships

	RHODES			GOLDWATER			TRUMAN			MARSHALL			UDALL		
	08	07	06	08	07	06	08	07	06	08	07	06	08	07	07
University of Pittsburgh	0	1	1	2	2	2	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
Emory	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
UNC, Chapel Hill	0	1	0	0	3	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	1
FSU	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
University of Georgia	2	0	0	1	2	4	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
University of Richmond	0	0	1	1	3	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Ohio State	1	0	0	4	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
UF	0	0	0	3	3	3	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	0

The table above shows how UF compares to some peers and regional competitors in five highly competitive scholarships for the past three years. UF students won more Goldwater scholarships over these three years than the other seven schools in the table but over the same three years UF students won no Rhodes or Marshall scholarships and only one Udall scholarship. Given the small numbers of scholarships awarded and the small number of years examined, drawing conclusions is tricky. However it seems a fair assessment that, at best, UF falls in the mid-range of these schools. Of the publics, it seems clear that UGA and UNC both had more success than UF. Given the resources that were available to the Honors Program over this time period, being even in the mid-range is an accomplishment. In particular, the University of Georgia, the University of Pittsburgh, and FSU have a staff person with the task of grooming and preparing students. UNC, Chapel Hill has an “Office of Distinguished Scholarships,” staffed with two people, which is devoted to preparing students. For UF to compete, a similar position is necessary. This adviser will engage in expanded outreach to students, more systematic identification and tracking of potential applicants, the development of greater awareness and involvement on the part of faculty in identifying and preparing potential applicants, and increased time working individually with student applicants. For UF to not create this position is to harm our students.

Related to recommendation to create an Advisor for Distinguished Scholarship position, this advisor might also be able to help create structured, intentional programming provided for the special scholarship programs managed by the Honors Program, that is, the Lombardi Scholars Program and the United World College Scholars. These students have been pre-selected to be among the best of the best and may well be those who are later nominated for the sorts of prestigious scholarships noted above. Peer programs at other institutions have much more programming and support for similar students, frequently including a dedicated staff member for these scholarship programs.

Linkages to Graduate and Professional Schools

Honors Program should partner with graduate and professional schools to foster recruitment and admission. The Honors Program should partner with existing priority admission programs to help advertise and recruit students for these programs.

But beyond that basic suggestion, the fact is that the vast majority of honors students arrive with the full quota of 30 academic credit hours for AP, IB, and dual enrollment work. In theory these students could graduate in three years. In practice many linger for four years and then leave with a Bachelor’s degree. While there is certainly merit in taking one’s time to fully contemplate life and future plans, UF has a wide variety of high quality 3/2 Master’s degree programs. The Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education has suggested that these programs should be marketed to many more of our undergraduates with the goal that UF attains the nationwide scholarly reputation giving our undergraduates much better than normal preparation because many of them to graduate with a Master’s degree. This policy would also help UF attain its goal of growing graduate student credit hours. The honors students seem to be a natural fit for this enterprise. From the start these students, as well as their parents, should be informed and then frequently reminded that it is eminently possible for the student to emerge from

UF in four years with a *Master's* degree not just a Bachelor's degree. These marketing efforts should note that at the possible cost of one year's tuition (because Bright Futures does not cover graduate work) and one year's time, the student will be significantly better prepared for whatever career he or she wishes to pursue, be it business, engineering, medicine, law, another professional degree, or whatever. Properly marketed, a large fraction of these highly motivated honors students should be willing to take advantage of this opportunity.

Graduation

Honors students who complete various requirements should graduate with some level of Honors recognition, perhaps including honors through their department (magna or summa cum laude). If a student does not graduate from a 3/2 masters program, the academic program for Honors students should culminate with a scholarly project in the senior year. These projects range from a research or scholarly paper, to a composition, recital, work of art or some other demonstration of their creativity and achievement in their chosen area of specialty. Students should also strive to have the results or outcomes of their research or creative work disseminated at a national level such as coauthoring peer-reviewed publications. Existing programs which foster this goal include the UF University Scholars Program, the Beckman Scholars Program and the new Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) Science for Life Program.

Staff Size

The staff of the honors office is insufficient for the current size of program. The number of students admitted to the present two-year program (750 freshmen each year) is large compared to our current staff of 7 members. Our peers generally have larger staffs. Including the directors, Ohio State has 8; Penn State has 19; University of Pittsburgh has 10 (the honors programs at Penn State and University of Pittsburgh are colleges not departments); the University of Georgia has 14; University of Illinois has 5 (with a Fall Freshman class of 125 students per year); and the University of Maryland, at College park has 10. Currently at UF there are 3 professional staff members with master's degrees, along with vacant 4th and 5th positions. There also are office manager and a program assistant for support staff. If the program is increased in size or scope, either by admitting more students or by implementing a 4-year program, certainly the number of staff needs to be increased proportionally.

Endowment

The Honors Program needs additional resources in order to meet its current goals as well as some of the initiatives we have outlined above. Presently the Honors Program raises a limited amount of funds by contacting parents of current students. This process is inadequate. By way of contrast, the University of Georgia raises over \$1 million per year. Penn State's Schreyer Honors College was initially founded with a gift of \$30 million

from the Schreyer family and its endowment is now in excess of \$50 million. The UF Honors Program must make fund raising a priority for its new director.

A newsletter would be informative and an excellent tool for recruiting new students, for outcomes measures, and for alumni bonding. An excellent model is that published by the University of Georgia or the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. These newsletters are published in an electronic format, which reduces costs and articulates well with database-driven program tracking. Such an effort will be an excellent “bridge” between alumni and the Honors Program as well as among other interested UF units such as Colleges, UFF, and the UF Alumni Association