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CHAPTER TWO

ROLES IN THE HONORS PROGRAM

The Honors Director

The success of a well-planned honors program still depends on talented and dedicated people. The issue of personnel is equal in importance to that of institutionalization, or making the honors program an integral and necessary component of the college's mission. The people involved in the planning and subsequent administration of an honors program need to be flexible and have a genuine commitment if the program is to prosper.

The most important role in an honors program may appear under a number of different titles: honors coordinator, honors counselor, director of the honors major, director of the honors program, or chair of the honors council.

A detailed list of personal qualities beneficial to an honors director would, at minimum, start with high academic stature and standards—preferably a doctorate and tenure at the college—and the respect of colleagues and students. Those searching for someone to run an honors program will want to find someone who has talent in one or more of the following areas: teaching skills; administrative, managerial, and public relations skills; public speaking skills; and sales techniques. A successful honors director may have a visionary, flexible, and comprehensive perspective on honors education as well as a high energy level and the ability to motivate others. Since each director wears different hats at different times, and there is no successful honors director who has not had to do some on-the-job training, in the end, the optimal character traits are adaptability and patience.

The approach here is to introduce most of the possible functions that a director may be asked to undertake. The honors director usually has a committee, office assistance, and the regular administration of the college to help accomplish all of the necessary tasks. Therefore, each institution will decide what it wants its person in charge to do.

The official description of the position for the honors director should articulate specific duties. As the job expands with the program, the description of the position may have to be revised, and these moments are crucial in the negotiation and renegotiation of remuneration and benefits for the director. While the honors director will most likely be responsible in a number of different areas, the vague and all-encompassing lines of the position description should be kept

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to a minimum. How the institution evaluates employees, assesses programs, and incorporates institutional effectiveness must be considered. In establishing a program, the institution may need to reassign much of the director's time, as much as fifty to one-hundred percent, so that the director may accomplish the necessary tasks.

One of the first questions to be addressed and answered, after the position description, is where the functions of the honors program will be handled—in an honors office or in various administrative offices throughout the institution. For instance, will the honors program admit students, or will that be handled by the regular admissions office? Will the honors program advise and register students for classes, or will that be handled by the college's guidance personnel? This decision is left up to each institution; however, it is critical to understand how starting an honors program may increase the workload of some of the other departments.

However committees are formed at the institution, the honors director will play a large role in the management of the honors committee, including perhaps appointing the committee, managing communications and meetings, keeping minutes and records, carrying out policies, and updating official documentation such as the program description, procedures, or bylaws.

In fact, the management functions of the director cannot be overstated. In areas of student relations, budgeting, communications, report writing, presentations, and time management, the director's role is critical. Often, the director recruits new faculty into the program by helping them to develop an honors course. This type of course development requires the coordination of counseling, academic affairs, scheduling, course and faculty evaluation, and curriculum development.

Besides the crucial role of offering honors courses in the honors program, the behind-the-scenes role of holding meetings and keeping minutes/records and facilitating the flow of information to and from relevant offices around campus requires good organization. Such interaction may need to occur on many levels, including meetings with the honors committee, department or division heads, honors instructors, and honors students.

Honors directors may be the main source of information about the program at the institution, so they may need to be prepared with written or published information, or promotional materials: program brochures, course descriptions, program rules, policies, procedures, an operations handbook, and a student handbook. The director may be the first line of communication and may answer correspondence related to the program.

The program director may play a crucial role in recruiting students. Often, local area high schools and other feeders, such as home school organizations and non-traditional student organizations, will need to be contacted; high school counselors will need brochures and updates about changes in the program; prospective students may need the opportunity to ask the director questions directly. The director, most likely, may be the one to handle follow-up meetings, correspondence, and phoning. This type of networking is important for establishing a good relationship with the community and a good reputation with the local high schools. In addition, prospective students and high school counselors may be invited to campus for a visit, especially if the program has its own space or some distinctive viewable characteristics, such as a special study area, lab, or collection.

Directors may play an integral part during the student's application process—first, to get into the two-year honors program and, then, to transfer out of it. They may serve some of these functions alone or share the responsibilities with a committee, depending on the size of the program. The application dossiers of all candidates for admission to the program may have to be evaluated. Depending on the program, students may have to be notified of their status, so letters or calls or meetings may be necessary. If a student is not going to be accepted right away, there may be follow-up appointments or the creation of a document advising the student what additional tasks need to be accomplished along with deadlines; someone will have to monitor the conditionally accepted student's progress. If a student is automatically allowed to try honors courses, the honors director may monitor the student's progress, perhaps offering academic advice or other help, and then compare the student's progress to the program's graduation requirements.

After the director has successfully accepted students into the program, the students will probably need further advice and guidance in order to succeed. Most programs will have standards honors program students need to meet to remain in the program. For instance, they may have to maintain a minimum grade point average (GPA); in this case, the director, perhaps with the help of an academic advising staff member, will need to evaluate honors students' GPAs. Often, students will need to be reminded and warned about special considerations, such as minimum qualifications for transferring to a particular four-year college.

Given the prevalence of such programs as service learning and volunteerism in higher education today, students will also need to be

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provided with opportunities to show their leadership skills and involvement in or commitment to their community. They may wish to belong to professional or social organizations or may wish to have the honors program provide them with professional opportunities, such as internships or shadowing. Many programs will invite students to serve on standing committees; students will either have to be appointed to these positions or elected. Many students have experience creating and publishing newsletters, newspapers, or other publications like creative writing journals; if the program provides these opportunities, the director may be involved in some way. In order for students to be aware of all of the opportunities created for them, informational fliers, orientation sessions, luncheons, or other events may be useful. Finally, students may need to be acknowledged in some official way: a dinner, a ceremony, or a certificate. Such activities will also involve the participation of the honors director.

Besides managing the honors program locally, directors may need to interact with people and agencies outside of their own institution. In these interactions the directors will represent their college and its honors program. At home, directors may report on any work done or agreements produced from these contacts, direct all alliance programs with other honors programs or institutions, act as a liaison between the two institutions, and implement all policies and procedures necessary to uphold the contractual agreements between the two institutions. Such relationships with other institutions may come from affiliating with directors of other honors programs in the immediate area or, perhaps, from affiliating with and participating in the NCHC and regional and state honors organizations.

The director's participation in local, regional, and national conferences dealing with honors and related topics will probably take up a significant amount of time and, perhaps, money, especially when student participation at these conferences is promoted. For instance, the vast majority of directors have found it worthwhile to attend and participate in the NCHC Annual Conference and the annual meeting of the Two-Year Committee that takes place there. It is also useful to keep the NCHC and the home institution abreast of each other's policies, activities, and/or problems. All of the honors meetings, local, regional, and national, have proven to be excellent places for students, faculty, and directors to make presentations and share ideas about what works well. Getting involved in some of the lively discussions about issues related to honors can lead to improvement and progress in individual honors programs. In addition, an honors

program may wish to emphasize undergraduate research or affiliate with scholarly and honorary organizations and societies, such as Phi Theta Kappa. Many of these societies have program requirements that will need to be learned, met, and monitored for compliance.

While paperwork can be time-consuming, there are rewarding and fulfilling tasks as well. One of the most pleasant tasks that an honors director has is to create and improve opportunities for students to receive financial support for their education. An alliance with the foundation or its equivalent at the home institution may result in a full scholarship program with a multi-faceted approach to dispersing funds dedicated solely to honors students and courses. In this case, additional scholarship funds may have to be procured from other parts of the college, agencies outside the institution, or donors. All of this fundraising is in addition to the director's normal institutional budgeting process. The director may have to attend fund-raisers or plan them as a separate honors occasion. If the director is successful in attracting financial support, scholarship rules will have to be written and approved, schedules for application and disbursement of funds established, and application forms and award letters written. Doing research to discover funding sources that have not yet been tapped and establishing relationships with scholarly organizations that offer student funding will also expand the funds available for scholarships. These efforts are often most appreciated by students in the honors program, and these funds will serve as powerful recruitment and retention tools.

The functions and tasks involved in an honors program call for office assistance, especially if the honors program has many students or many components. Some honors programs will require a secretary or assistant director. This person has to have more than standard secretarial skills of typing and organizing the office; he or she will need to assist in all of the functions for the director mentioned above and most likely interact with honors students on a daily basis and on a personal level. This person may serve as student advisor and counselor, activities coordinator, room scheduler, special events planner and host, photographer, and even chauffeur. Like the director, the effective assistant must be committed to the program and to the students. The optimal assistant needs to be an energetic person who can juggle many jobs at once—answering the phone, emailing, and collecting project money—and all this while planning ahead and getting the paperwork done for the major events throughout the year—ordering vans and reserving hotel rooms for student trips, preparing invitations

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and programs, and ordering refreshments. For those programs that do not have an assistant, the bulk of this responsibility may revert to the director or to other offices on campus that handle these tasks.

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