

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### ENRICHING THE PROGRAM

Once the honors program is in place, the honors director and the honors committee will continue to work on enhancements and expansions. The following suggestions are not listed in any particular order because the importance and success of each item will vary according to the needs of a particular honors program; however, honors directors should find some of the recommendations listed below helpful in the recruitment and retention of students and in the overall success of their program.

#### **Assessment**

One of the best ways to enhance the honors program is to become fully invested in the two-year institution's assessment process. Sometimes this process is called institutional effectiveness or quality management, but, whatever the title, it typically refers to the systematic self-evaluation of programs to see if stated goals have been achieved and to develop new goals within the context of the college's whole community. Some honors programs have been exempted from the reports, paperwork, or processes required of other programs.

When an honors program does not regularly assess and document its workings, one danger is that it risks becoming so deeply associated with one dynamic professor or administrator that they cannot survive the passing of honors program leadership from this person to any other person. When the honors program is well integrated into the processes and structures of the college, its chance of surviving the retirement of a charismatic leader is much improved.

A benefit of true integration for the honors program is that other programs on campus may find they have more in common with the honors program than they had previously thought; this connection would open up many opportunities for cooperation. Furthermore, these other programs that once may have characterized the honors program as elitist or unrealistic could find common ground for discussion and mutual benefit.

Generally, assessment involves the periodic evaluation of the honors program in a written report. The first step is usually self-assessment, writing up a list of goals and methods of achieving them that is published for the general college community. Often, these initial reports include a mission statement and a list of objectives that will be stored in

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a folder or database accessible through the college's computer systems. Considering the attributes of one's honors program in terms of NCHC's "Basic Characteristics" should be one of the first steps in the assessment process. (See Appendices A and B.) Should the college lack the resources to keep all of these reports on the computer system, the reports will still be available in one location, such as a dean's office or the library, since the assessment process is usually a community activity. Once a program states its initial purpose and goals, it will have to evaluate its progress toward those goals on a regular basis, possibly annually. These reports are often the place where the facts and statistics of the program's achievements can be collected and published for all interested parties to review. Many things can happen in these evaluations:

- the program manager may have decided to discard some goals, and this report will clearly explain if the goal has been rephrased, replaced, or simply eliminated;
- the program may have achieved a goal, and this achievement can be recorded; the report will then establish that this goal has been reached or that it will be reconstituted in the coming year;
- the program may have failed to achieve a goal, and the report will explain why it failed and how it will respond to that result, perhaps by trying again or discarding it as an inappropriate goal for the program.

Many interesting issues can emerge from these reports, especially if other programs on campus can be asked to indicate how they are contributing to honors education and adding to the value of the institution.

While this process may seem overwhelming and many associated with honors will claim that the benefits afforded by honors programs cannot be measured, full integration into the institutional assessment process is still worthwhile for any two-year institution thinking of starting or enhancing an honors program. This brief description should make the honors director and honors committee interested in this process, but all should be aware that the vocabulary used here often changes from institution to institution. Sometimes, the troublesome snarls in these processes can come about because of simple misunderstandings about words like "goals" and "objectives." (For an in-depth discussion of the nuts and bolts of assessment and evaluation, see the NCHC monograph by Rosalie Otero and Robert Spurrier.)

## Retreats

Honors directors at two-year institutions take every opportunity to enhance the feeling of community among honors students, and an annual retreat has been used successfully at many institutions. For example, one college has a retreat near the beginning of the fall semester so that second-year students can welcome and become acquainted with first-year students. Besides familiarity with other honors students, the bonding experience can make new students more comfortable with the director. The retreat is usually organized around a theme; when it is the Phi Theta Kappa Study Topic, Phi Theta Kappa provides many useful supplemental materials. The current honors students prepare the materials before the retreat to produce activities and performances that help the new students to bond and to stretch their boundaries. Guest speakers, films, discussion groups, games, skits, a campfire, and other activities can work well at retreats. Secluding the retreaters at some camp or park away from all of the usual distractions is often a shrewd strategy. Usually, students have to be encouraged to attend, not because they do not want to go but because their lives are so busy; furthermore, many honors programs have strict rules about leaving schoolwork, cell phones, and other potential distractions back in civilization.

## Honors Organizations

One of the ways to enrich an honors program is to participate in local, state, regional, and national honors organizations. Such groups can facilitate meeting other honors directors for the exchange of information or the development of academic alliances. They can also directly benefit honors students by providing opportunities to network, by offering scholarships and awards, or by sponsoring such activities as four-year college visitations.

If no local group exists, one could be started if the honors programs in the area cooperate and have good leadership. Honors programs need to consider membership in state, regional, and national organizations, particularly NCHC and Phi Theta Kappa International Honors Society for the Two-Year College.

NCHC is the most important national honors group for honors directors. NCHC publishes a monograph series, which includes this work, plus a newsletter delivered via email and available online. It also publishes a refereed journal dealing with the intricacies of honors programs called *Honors in Practice (HIP)*, a refereed scholarly journal called

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the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council (JNCHC)*, and the *National Honors Report (NHR)*, which is the organization's publication of official business. The organization's national convention has numerous sessions on all aspects of honors, including a growing number related specifically to honors in the two-year college. The Two-Year College Committee of NCHC also meets at the national convention held in the late fall to exchange information; honors directors, members of the honors faculty, honors students, and selected members of an honors committee will find a marketplace of ideas, brochures, and publications, and a vast network of cooperation. The conference program features workshops on *Beginning in Honors*® and *Developing in Honors*. In short, the NCHC convention is a great place to exchange ideas, focus the direction of the honors program, develop contacts with four-year colleges, foster relationships with local counterparts, and collect information on local, state, and regional honors meetings. NCHC has six autonomous regional affiliates that also meet annually. Attending a regional honors meeting will provide an excellent and relatively inexpensive place for students to present papers and meet with other honors students and for honors faculty and directors to meet colleagues and exchange ideas.

Phi Theta Kappa is an important national organization for honors students. With a history dating back to 1918 and with some 800 chapters, Phi Theta Kappa has had considerable experience with what works in honors at various levels of program development. By starting a Phi Theta Kappa chapter, the honors program will become part of an organization that prints numerous materials on how to enhance the success of the local chapter and the honors program in general; that publishes a newsletter and magazines; that offers millions of dollars in scholarships and other awards; that hosts a national convention attended by thousands of honors directors and students; and that sponsors an annual honors institute, honors topic, and service project. Obviously, the local Phi Theta Kappa chapter may help honors program recruitment.

### Four-Year College Alliances

One positive outgrowth of honors programs is furthering articulation agreements among institutions because the vast majority of honors students are capable transfer students. The increased flow of highly successful transfer students between institutions continues to drive the articulation process.

Significantly, this flow is just a beginning and very naturally encourages a myriad of other articulation activities. As the honors program director sets up the channels to enable a successful transfer, an important collegial relationship is established with the university honors director because honors directors, regardless of their institutional affiliation, share the same general concerns about maintaining a high-quality education for able students. This kind of inter-institutional contact often leads to a transfer alliance between honors programs that will generate scholarship opportunities as well. NCHC has a Two-Year to Four-Year Articulation Committee charged with examining the issues involved with smooth transfers for students and long-term inter-program agreements.

One of the more tangible benefits of such an alliance for students may be some form of guaranteed admission to the four-year school. With such an alliance in place, other kinds of articulation become easier. Disciplinary faculty-to-faculty meetings can establish common understanding on what is taught at the community college and at the university. Articulation becomes truly collegial when the two-year and four-year colleges' faculties can meet to discuss transfer issues. As they negotiate different aspects of an articulation agreement, members of each faculty will be able to share and dispel some of their concerns and also to share some of their best ideas and have them disseminated. As a result of these faculty-to-faculty meetings, many courses at the two-year college are recognized as fulfilling requirements at the university. Therefore, all transfer students at the community college benefit from this faculty-to-faculty negotiation.

Students also benefit from this kind of relationship in more direct ways. One component of the relationship may be special orientations for students in the alliance, and these orientations can be tailored at the community college's request to the needs of the students transferring from the two-year honors program. Departmental counselors at the university can speak on departmental retention strategies and how students can be more successful. Students who have already transferred can talk about what affected their transfers, how rough or easy their transfers were, and what would have made a difference for them.

Such agreements may also include a guaranteed admission policy so honors students can enter their choice of majors upon transfer or receive special consideration for scholarships, campus parking, housing, or jobs. A transfer agreement can also lead to special counseling services, priority registration, library privileges, and free tickets to sporting and cultural events on the four-year college campus.

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Beyond these student prerequisites, creating four-year college alliances will generate other advantages; for example, such alliances can lead to meetings with other directors from two-year colleges that have developed similar alliances. These alliance meetings can become an important forum for the exchange of ideas. Alliances can also initiate faculty-to-faculty dialogues, better inter-institutional support services, and better communications with the counseling and admissions personnel at four-year colleges. In various ways, special alliances formed via the honors program will also bring the honors program closer to its feeder high schools since high school instruction and guidance personnel and students will be interested in knowing about these agreements with four-year institutions.

Of course, some people may resist the idea of an alliance, fearing that such agreements would reroute their potential freshmen to community colleges; however, most four-year colleges will not feel threatened. They will, in fact, like the idea that honors programs at two-year institutions are recruiting people for their institution, and they will see such alliances as guaranteeing that they will enroll the best transfer students: the graduates of the honors program. Initiating alliances with the four-year institutions to which honors students transfer may be a top priority for honors directors and honors committees.

To initiate an alliance, the honors director or the appropriate member of the honors committee should contact one or more of the following people at the colleges to which the honors program sends students: the admissions director, the articulation officer, the director of relations with schools or inter-institutional programs, the director of the honors program, or the college president or provost.

### **High School Alliances**

Over and beyond a university articulation role, an honors program can encourage broader institutional articulation: 2+2+2 articulation—the last two years of high school, two years of community college, and two years at the baccalaureate-granting institution.

As was pointed out earlier, these articulation efforts take place because of the natural inter-institutional contact that an honors program engenders. Increased outreach to the feeder high schools produces better communication about the college to the high schools. Because of the impetus toward articulation, the directors of gifted and talented education at feeder high schools may be willing to serve on the honors program committee. When they do serve on this committee at

the two-year college, they assure that the honors program is sensitive to the needs of its students. For example, if the high schools cannot offer an honors summer experience for lack of funding or lack of sophisticated scientific equipment, perhaps the community college can do so and can thereby encourage gifted, talented, and high-achieving high school students to consider the local two-year college seriously. Thus, the entire college benefits from this inter-institutional contact.

Developing a close relationship with feeder high schools will enhance recruitment and should eventually become an integral part of the honors program. The fact is, no matter how good the honors program, some of the more academically advanced students in high school will opt for going directly to a four-year college. While that choice is wise for many students, often it results from the pressure of peers, teachers, parents, and counselors who are unfamiliar with the benefits of attending a community college and of joining the local honors program. An honors director can help students fine-tune their decision by developing close ties to those groups that influence students and by spreading the word about honors at the two-year college.

## **Newsletters and Other Publications**

A newsletter can be an important vehicle for staying in touch with students, faculty, alumni, and administration. The format of the newsletter will depend on the honors program's size and needs. Newsletters often include information on scholarships and transfer deadlines; program meeting dates and other calendar matters related to program activities; comments from the honors director, an administrator, a counselor, or perhaps the president of an honors society; a faculty profile; general program information; articles on how students can enhance their participation in the program; transfer information; and information on related organizations like Phi Theta Kappa. Newsletters can easily be enhanced with graphics and colored paper. Inventiveness and active honors student participation may make the newsletter one of the best elements of the honors program.

Once the newsletter is in place for a while, a journal or other publication may enrich the honors program. Such a publication, perhaps done only once a term or year, might include essays related to an honors topic or perhaps art or poetry, whatever proves to be most advantageous to the two-year institution. The important thing is that the honors program has created another vehicle through which bright students can express themselves and develop their potential.

## **Cultural, Social, and Educational Events**

Having the students and faculty of the honors program participate together in social, cultural, and educational events can be an important means of creating close ties among the participants of the honors program and between the honors program and the community. Such activities can also become important fund-raising events and recruitment sessions.

Outings can include visits to a museum, perhaps utilizing the expertise of a local art instructor for the tour, or a potluck dinner hosted by one or more faculty members, or even a sporting or cultural event at one of the four-year colleges in the local area. (Complimentary tickets may be in order if the event is at a four-year institution to which the honors program sends quite a few transfer students.)

Events at the local two-year campus may provide cultural or social enhancement without the possible added investment of time and other resources involved in a long-distance field trip. In fact, the honors students can help to bring events to the local campus through fund-raising and other offers of sponsorship and help. A speakers program could be devised in conjunction with interested students, student government, or the debate club. The honors program could sponsor a scholastic competition and solicit contributions for scholarships as rewards from the two-year college's foundation, student government, or the college board. In short, the honors director can devise ways that students can get together to have fun, meet other students and faculty, develop their intellects, and maintain the visibility of the honors program. Such activities will likely generate goodwill among faculty towards the honors program and encourage honors students to become actively involved.

## **College and Community Service**

For several reasons, many honors programs have a service component as part of their requirement for membership. One reason is that it instills in honors students a sense of social responsibility. Another is that many four-year institutions are not interested in giving scholarships to students who simply have a high GPA. Instead, they are looking for well-rounded individuals who have participated in school or community activities and who are willing to give something of themselves to their community and college. In addition, having honors students volunteer at the two-year college or in the community is another way to make the honors program visible and to distinguish honors

students from other students. Requiring some sort of service will make honors students feel involved and enable members of the honors faculty, honors committee, or the honors director to write strong letters of recommendation.

## **Scholarships and Awards**

To enhance the recruitment and retention aspects of the honors program, scholarships and awards to honors students should be as plentiful as the efforts of everyone associated with the honors program can make possible. The honors program can accomplish this goal, in part, by joining groups such as Phi Theta Kappa, which offers many scholarships and awards, or the honors program can raise money to offer its own awards. To do the latter, the honors program should have a representative approach various groups on campus for financial support, among them the student government, the college's foundation, and the local governing board. Also, local businesses may want to participate in enhancing their community by giving scholarship contributions. For specific expenses, the honors program may want to consider car washes, bake sales, and raffles, as well as other money-making activities the students can do. Fund-raising is another area in which students from the honors program may be able to cooperate with students from other programs or student organizations.

## **International Education**

Participation in international education is yet another way to enhance the honors program. Students are excited by the prospect of international travel, and honors students are no exception. That the honors program may provide access to international study programs may appeal to students. The philosophy behind international education has many of the same goals as an honors program. Certainly, honors students will benefit from participating in an international education program, and affiliation with such a group will likely help the recruitment efforts of the honors program both in the high schools and on the two-year college campus.

## **Conclusion**

The suggestions listed here are by no means exhaustive. Once the initial honors program is in place, the honors director might consider expanding the program to include one or more of the honors models

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discussed earlier in this monograph. The key is to remain flexible and take from different models those components that best suit the needs of the local population. Often, the best resources for developing the honors program further are close by: the honors committee, alumni, and, of course, current honors program students. These constituents may have helpful opinions about the different honors models as well as the evolution of the honors program. An honors mentality will no doubt enjoy the occasional inexpensive experiment, and while some of the experiments will not prove to be successful enhancements of the honors program, the purpose is to differentiate the honors program from the non-honors program, to enhance the honors students' experience, and to improve their chance of success in the future.

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