

University Honors Program (UHP) Assessment Plan

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Submitted to the University Assessment Panel by:

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1. History and Context of Unit Mission

Historical Development

The University Honors Program at Northern Illinois University was developed in 1968 after a year-long study by the then Council on Instruction and was created in fall 1969. The central purpose of the University Honors Program has not fundamentally changed.

The founders of the University Honors Program considered two major approaches for honors programs: a program built on separate classes taught by exceptional faculty and a program based on enriched experiences within regular courses. Rather than select between the two options NIU consciously selected “a combination of both approaches.” NIU Honors students were required to complete some classes as separate, Honors-only classes. These were to include, both “special sections of existing courses and unique courses.” However, Honors credit also would be awarded via enriched experiences in regular courses. Finally, Honors students would complete an independent project, or capstone experience. In this way the Honors students would have challenging and enriching experiences, but regular students would not be deprived of the benefits of having Honors students in their classes. Initially the University Honors Program required 24 hours of Honors credits for graduation “with University Honors.” To ensure that Honors students would be intellectually well-rounded, in 1971 the Honors Council required that in order to receive “University Honors a student would be required to take twelve of the requisite twenty-four hours outside of the major.”

In its first year (1969-1970) ninety-eight students were enrolled in the Program. By 1971-1972 there were 439 students enrolled. It continued to grow throughout the decade and by 1980 the Director reported approximately 1,000 students were enrolled in the Program, and it was said to be the tenth-largest in the country. At that time, however, the University Honors Program did not have the resources to offer a sufficient number of stand-alone Honors seminars for its students. Stand-alone Honors courses were thus increasingly limited and the lack of resources was regularly cited as the major problem facing the program. Over the years the resource situation of the Program has waxed and waned with the fortunes of NIU.

In 1980 students were required to complete twenty-seven hours of Honors coursework (up from twenty-four), twelve of which were outside the major. At that time, the Program underwent a major revision. Emulating programs at other major US universities, the University Honors Program was divided into two phases: Lower Division Honors (for freshmen and sophomores) and Upper Division Honors (for juniors and seniors). The completion of Lower Division Honors required the completion of fifteen credit hours of Honors courses, including a 3 credit hour cornerstone (a stand-alone Honors course generally taken in the first year at NIU). Those students who successfully completed Lower Division Honors were then eligible for Upper Division Honors. Also eligible for admission to Upper Division Honors were those students who maintained at least 3.2 GPA while at NIU or a prior institution. The completion of Upper Division Honors required the completion of an additional twelve hours of honors credit, at least three hours of which are to be accrued through a faculty-directed independent study, or capstone project. Students who successfully completed both Lower and Upper Division Honors were awarded University Honors. The key to the revisions were both the division

of University Honors into two parts, and the focus on three unique experiences of the cornerstone, the Upper Division seminar, and the capstone project.

In response to University initiatives, the University Honors Program also switched from a graduate student advisor to a team of “peer advisors” led and trained by a professional staff member. The revisions also formalized the three current methods for offering honors courses: Stand-alone Honors courses (Cornerstones and Seminars); Mini-sections (a specially organized sub-section of a regular course for Honors students), or as part of regular courses (via individual In-Course Honors Contracts). However, it is worth noting, that “contract” Honors courses were to be used on a limited basis, when “sufficient Honors courses are not available for their needs,” and these were clearly not considered as a routine avenue for completing Honors coursework. This practice has been generally restricted to Upper Division Honors students. Although the In-Course Contracts were considered the least desirable of the three methods, during the period between 2005 and 2011 it became the norm for completing most upper division courses, threatening the integrity of the Program and its curricular offerings, as well as its mission and values. Beginning in the fall of 2014 a return to the original goals was instituted and a proactive method for requesting approval of In-Course Contracts was put in place and new policies were started that will better control their frameworks.

Recent Updates

Point system and co-curricular programming (implemented fall 2018). The UHP updated its program into a point system rather than number of credits achieved in honors courses. This was primarily to foster the inclusion of co-curricular requirements into the program. There is a growing sense in higher education, especially honors programs/colleges, that outside the classroom experiences are crucial to developing students’ soft skills and providing them with impactful learning in college. One can see from the last assessment report (2015) as well as from the learning mission and values of the program at that point and before that the UHP always valued providing students with out of the classroom engagement, with a view to career development, civic engagement, community-building, and a general broadening of perspectives. In fact, several of the assessment measures proposed (but not implemented) in 2015 had to do with measuring the satisfaction of students who engaged in experiential learning. The programmatic shift to require experiential learning in the form of Honors Engaged (six points for those pursuing Full University Honors and three points for those pursuing Associate University Honors) provides the program with more reason to facilitate these experiences for students on a meaningful level. In the first year of the new program, the co-curricular component was managed outside of the UHP through OSEEL and the Engaged PLUS program. Given the fact that Honors boasts approximately 1000 students, the rigidity of the Engaged PLUS system and the paucity of opportunities given the Honors demand, this was not a sustainable way to provide the co-curricular programming. In 2019, the UHP reinvented the system and took over the administration of it under the auspices of Honors Engaged. It both recognizes a wider variety of meaningful activities (e.g., study abroad *with* curricular credit) and now houses it. Partnerships with Career Services, Jobs PLUS, community partners and more have become possible in the last year. The two professional honors advisors manage the quality control of the Honors Engaged program.

Admissions and qualification standards. In line with the university's inclusion and diversity missions, in 2019 the UHP adopted a holistic review process for Honors admissions, which includes GPA, admissions essay, and a review of extra-curriculars and work experience. For incoming freshmen, standardized test scores are no longer considered. The two-fold reason for these changes are as follows. One, standardized test scores are not predictive of academic success and unfairly marginalize underserved communities. Two, given the recent focus of the UHP on students completing the Honors Program, we wanted to collect applicant information that would show commitment (willingness to write an essay, for example) and the interest in involvement and engagement that would attract students with the right disposition to benefit from the program.

In addition, as part of the program overhaul in fall 2018, honors students must maintain a GPA of 3.3 at NIU (no longer 3.2). This was part of "right-sizing" what is a large program, compared to other institutions. With fewer students qualifying, we expected a bit of a drop in the enrollment, but it held with a strong incoming freshman class that had a higher number of qualified students than previous classes recently (note we did accept standardized test scores through fall 2020 to honor the outgoing criteria that had been published).

Honors Faculty Fellowship model adopted. Before 2019, honors courses including Honors Seminars were sought through a general call for courses by the Honors director to department chairs. Seminars, which are the crown jewel of Honors curriculum, were not vetted in any special way. It was a matter of whether there were willing participants. In an effort to have more curriculum vetting and encourage professors and syllabi to offer truly interdisciplinary and engaging seminars, the UHP established the Honors Faculty Fellowship competitive application model, where seminar proposals are vetted by the Honors Committee.

Advising staffing. In the last five years, there has been a further professionalizing of honors advising. While there are still peer mentors, they are no longer available in summer. There are now two professional advisors working in honors. This is a necessity with the new co-curricular model which requires more tracking, more advising and planning of schedules. Also, this allows for better use of retention and persistence tracking, including auditing student progress.

Major unit responsibilities, programs, and products.

- Administer the program that results in transcript notation at graduation.
- Provide an enriched and rewarding curricular and co-curricular environment for high-achieving students.
- Set the tone for undergraduate academic achievement at NIU.
- Provide added value for NIU admissions, retention, and graduation.

2. Mission, Goals and Objectives

Mission Statement

The University Honors Program transcends disciplinary boundaries to help students broaden their horizons while reaching their goals. As a program representing undergraduate students in every college at NIU, the University Honors Program's role is to mentor students and connect them with impactful experiences, so they graduate with the ability to adapt to life's ever-changing conditions.

Unit Goals and Objectives

Goal 1. The University Honors Program will provide curriculum that gives students access to and the opportunity for mentorship from top, award-winning faculty, in small and one-on-one settings.

Objective 1.1. Course sections of honors courses have smaller numbers of students than regular sections, and seminars are capped at 20 students.

Objective 1.2. Faculty provide enhanced learning opportunities in Honors courses.

Objective 1.3. Students complete and present high-quality capstone projects.

Goal 2. The University Honors Program will provide honors students with quality co- and extra-curricular experiences in a variety of important areas including, career development, leadership, civic engagement, and service learning.

Objective 2.1. The University Honors Program will provide Honors Engaged points in all areas listed in Goal 2 alone or in partnership with others robustly and sufficiently to meet the needs of honors students.

Objective 2.2. Where mentors are involved (e.g., externship program), employer or mentor reviews will speak to the positive growth in students observed.

Goal 3. The University Honors Program will aim to be a beacon of diversity and inclusion and inspire these values among honors students.

Objective 3.1. The University Honors Program will make efforts to reflect the university make up as a whole and reflect diversity and inclusion.

Objective 3.2. Honors students will be active NIU community members who embody the values of diversity and inclusivity.

Goal 4. The University Honors Program will meet the needs for enrichment of the honors population, which it will work to attract to NIU, retain while at NIU and graduate with an appreciation for NIU's and the University Honors Program's benefits.

Objective 4.1. Honors students will graduate at a high rate from NIU, and at least the national average with an Honors designation on their transcripts.

Objective 4.2. Honors students will remain engaged as alumni of the program.

Objective 4.3 Honors students will express satisfaction at graduation for the program's benefits.

Objective 4.4 Honors alumni will be satisfied with their graduate school and employment prospects within a year of graduation.

Explanation of Assessment Methods Table

Assessment Method	Description	Assessment Level Target	When data will be collected	Person responsible	Goals/ objectives addressed
End of program student survey/ Indirect	Survey measures students' perceptions of degree to which program, courses, co- and extracurricular activities provided worthwhile content and growth opportunities.	Minimum of "good" by 80% of those surveyed on 80% of given responses	December and May of each year	Director	1.2, 4.3
Capstone rubric/ direct	Rubric measuring originality, social impact, quality of writing, and dissemination of project	Average score 3.5+ out of 5 on all measures	December and May of each year	Associate Director	1.3
Capstone mentor evaluation/ direct	Mentor evaluation on problem, methods, knowledge/expertise.	Minimum of 90% "average" or better.	December and May of each year	Director	1.3

Capstone grades and completion/direct	Grades earned/ projects begun that are completed	95% of projects are completed successfully (min B-); at least 70% of projects earn A or better.	December and May of each year	Associate Director	1.3
Diversity percentages data/direct	Percentage of students by ethnicity, first gen status, etc. in UHP versus NIU in incoming classes.	Increasing diversity each fall, with ultimate goal for underserved communities in Honors to mirror NIU population. E.g., if 30% of NIU's student body is black/non-Hispanic, 30% of UHP should be as well.	Fall each year	Director	3.1
Persistence comparison (Honors vs. non-Honors)/ direct	Graduation rates in 4-6 years, comparing Honors, Honors eligible and non-Honors NIU undergrad student body.	Positive effect on graduation for those in Honors, by 5-10% over both the other categories.	Summer each year	Director	4.1
Program completion rates/direct	Rates at which students who begin the UHP complete with a graduation transcript notation.	Honors students will complete the UHP program at a rate similar to the national average, or about 50%.	Summer each year	Director	4.1
Cultural competency/civic engagement survey	Students who complete the Honors Connect or another UHP civic engagement/cultural competency program will be asked a series of questions to assess their attitudes towards cultural competency.	80% of students will either agree or strongly agree with statements that signal values consistent with inclusion and civic engagement.	Upon completion of specific program	Assistant Director	3.2
Honors Connect data	Number of students engaging in civic engagement and cultural competency activities. While Honors Connect is built around	Grow number of engaged students every year by 5-10%.	Summer of each year	Assistant Director / Advisor	3.2

	this principle, Honors Civic Engagement Project and other similar programs will also be counted when run.				
Externship site assessment/ direct	Externship site mentors rate the professionalism of extern and willingness to continue participation in program	80% of site mentors rate performance of externs as “good” or better across 90% of criteria; 80% of mentors willing to host students in future	Through year, as experience ends	Director/ in conjunction with Career Services Director	2.2
Alumni survey/ direct & indirect*	Short survey about alumni employment and/or graduate school status and satisfaction	80% of alumni employed or in grad school; 80% of alumni satisfied with status.	Once per year, when graduates have been out 6 months to 1 year.	Director/ in conjunction with Alumni Association	4.4
Co-curricular opportunities/ direct	Number of Honors Engaged opportunities in each category; please note that there is a system in place to judge whether something merits co-curricular credit or not	Growth of 10-20% per year till 300+ Honors Engaged points are awarded per year across leadership, career development, civic engagement/cultural competency, research, campus involvement	End of summer yearly	Honors advisors	2.1
Alumni engagement data/ direct*	Number of alumni involved in mentorship, networking etc. with current students (through events, externship sites, scholarship assessment)	Growth of 5% per year.	End of academic year	Director/Alumni Association - Director of Alumni Volunteering	4.2

*Note: Most of these assessment methods exist and have been employed. The alumni survey needs to be created, and alumni engagement numbers need to be collected systematically. We do know, for instance, that 49 alumni participated in scholarship rating in 2019-20 as opposed to 42 the year before (which was first year in which the program occurred), and we will keep count of all the participants more robustly through collaboration with Alumni Association.

ASSESSMENT METHODS-BY-OUTCOMES MATRIX

Assessment Method	Goal			
	1. Curriculum & mentorship	2. Co- and extra-curricular experiences	3. Students will reflect and exhibit inclusivity and diversity	4. UHP will offer enrichment to help attract, retain, and graduate happy future alumni.
End of program survey	S, I			S, I
Capstone rubric	S, D			
Capstone mentor evaluation	S, D			
Capstone grades/completion	S, D			
Diversity data			S, D	
Persistence comparison				S, D
Program completion rates				S, D
Cultural competency/civic engagement survey			F, I	

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Honors Connect data			F, D	
Externship site assessment		D, S		
Alumni survey				S, I, D
Co-curricular opportunities		D, S		
Alumni engagement data				D, S

Note. F=formative assessment, S=summative assessment, D=direct assessment, and I=indirect assessment