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The University Honors Program at the University of Texas at San Antonio serves an ethnically diverse, often underprepared, and commuter student population with special courses and support. The success of the Honors Program to date is a testament to the importance of strong support and effective leadership at all levels within the institution.

Honors in a Diverse Metropolitan Context: The Role of Leadership

The metropolitan context has shaped the honors experience at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) in significant ways. On a daily basis, we find ourselves tailoring our program to meet the challenges inherent in the metropolitan setting. We attempt to meet the academic, intellectual, and practical needs of a highly diverse group of students and build community on a commuter campus full of students with substantial work and family obligations, in a context where inadequate funding is an issue more often than not. The UTSA experience illustrates that the value of honors in the metropolitan university lies primarily in its ability to encourage students to move beyond what they imagine to be possible, and that achieving that value requires administrative leadership.

The University of Texas at San Antonio

The University of Texas at San Antonio is the only four-year public university in San Antonio. The institution serves approximately 17,000 students, including about 15,000 undergraduates. Established in 1969 as an academic component of the University of Texas System, UTSA enrolled its first undergraduate students and opened its doors on its main campus in 1975. In 1997, after years of conflict over the location of the original campus (14 miles from downtown, on the suburban, wealthier edge of San Antonio), UTSA opened the first phase of its new downtown campus.

Close to 70% of UTSA's students come from San Antonio or Bexar County and only 4% from out of state or overseas. In the Fall of 1998, slightly more than half of UTSA students were members of minority groups: 49.1% were white; 40.5% were Hispanic; 4.4% were African American; 3.7% were Asian; 0.5% were American Indian; and 1.9% were international students. UTSA ranks eighth nationally in the number of bachelor's degrees awarded to Hispanic students. As is typical of metropolitan universities, UTSA enrolls a large proportion of first-generation college students, two-thirds of its students receive financial aid, and over 60% are nontraditional in age. UTSA is also a commuter campus, as only 2,000 students live on campus.

Four strategic directions, developed in 1992, guide growth and change at UTSA. Those strategic directions call for UTSA to: (1) move toward national recognition as a model of the new comprehensive, metropolitan university; (2) become a national center of excellence for the education of Hispanics, especially at the master's and doctoral levels, and to assume leadership in research on Hispanic issues; (3) become a center for international programs, with particular emphasis on inter-American programs; and (4) become a center of excellence for the use of information technologies to strengthen teaching, learning, research, and creative activity, to foster effective internal and external communication, and to ensure quality service, content, and delivery to each of its constituents.

Origins of the University Honors Program

In Spring, 1998, 255 students were enrolled in the UTSA Honors Program. Honors students are a diverse group and mirror the demographics of the general enrollment of UTSA: while only 15% of honors students are nontraditional in age, 35% of the most recent graduates were nontraditional. Almost half are members of minority groups. To graduate with "University Honors," students must complete a minimum of 24 honors hours, have a minimum GPA of 3.25, and write an honors thesis. The 24 honors hours must include six hours of honors seminars and three hours of world civilization. Honors students can earn honors hours by taking honors sections of courses in the core curriculum, by taking honors seminars, by enrolling in "Honors Thesis," or by completing "Honors Contracts" to earn honors credit for regular university courses.

The University Honors Program at UTSA had somewhat unusual origins. While most honors programs at metropolitan universities arise out of a desire to attract talented students to an institution (e.g., see Freyman, this volume), UTSA's program arose from an initial concern about serving the San Antonio community. Shortly after the creation of UTSA, the Vice President of Academic Affairs conducted a study of community needs and decided that the institution was particularly well suited to identify and serve gifted high school students. This led to the development of the UTSA Gifted and Talented Student Program, which later became the Honors Program for Young Scholars (HPYS). Although there was some interest in recruiting the "Young Scholars" to UTSA, the program's primary concern was serving the diverse community of San Antonio by helping gifted high school students prepare for higher education.

HPYS began with a group of 75 young scholars in the summer of 1980. The scholars attended the campus for summer term, taking one of eight different three-credit courses in the morning and a team-taught, one-credit humanities course two afternoons a week. The philosophy behind the program was that offering two types of courses—specific and general—was the most effective way to demonstrate the two kinds of learning that characterize higher education. The discipline-based course encouraged students to look carefully at one area of human knowledge; the humanities course directed them to look at the interconnectedness of all knowledge. To ensure that financial need would not keep talented students from participating in the program, a community group called the Friends of the Young Scholars was formed to provide the program with scholarship support. The Friends were drawn to the Program by the notion of supporting excellence among disadvantaged youngsters and helping them gain admission to premier universities at the relatively low cost of \$150 per student. With the friends' support, HPYS had grown to include 125 Scholars and courses in 11 disciplines by 1984.

The University Honors Program grew out of the commitment to the young scholars. During the 1983-84 academic year, a group of faculty, including the young scholars faculty, met to decide what a University Honors Program should look like. HPYS became the model for the program. The committee agreed that the honors program should offer honors sections of courses from the general education requirements (GER) to encourage the taking of an honors approach to a specific discipline. The core of the program would include the completion of an honors thesis, 6 hours of world civilization, and 6 hours of honors seminars that, like the HPYS humanities course, would emphasize interdisciplinary approaches to knowledge. Honors students would be able to substitute the honors seminars for GER courses in social science, fine arts, and economics. The committee had hoped to have a larger honors core with more differences from the university's GER, but a conservative university assembly and the departure from the university of key academic leaders left the program without the advocacy and support needed.

The honors program grew slowly at first. A description of the UTSA honors program appeared in the 1984 catalog, but the first honors seminars ("Values and Ethics" and "Modern American Culture") were not offered until the fall of 1985, with a total of 13 students enrolled in the two classes. The first honors section of world civilization and one honors section each of English and history were offered in spring 1986, so the first graduates of the program completed only 3 of their 6 hours of world civilization in an honors section.

Early growth of the honors program was hampered by structural and financial constraints. Unfortunately, the program's founder and first director left the institution as the first honors courses were offered. Although HPYS had by then garnered strong faculty and community support, the fledgling university honors program had not acquired the same level of dedication. New academic administrators had other priorities, and few faculty members wanted to serve as honors director in exchange for a one-

course release from teaching (from a three-course load). Thus, between 1987 and 1990, the honors program had three different directors and was housed in three different faculty offices. With no sign identifying the program office, it was virtually impossible for students to find the program, much less accidentally discover its existence.

New Leadership

By spring of 1990, faculty involved with the program convinced a new vice president for academic affairs that the honors programs should be consolidated under the direction of one individual, myself, who would be responsible for both the university honors program and HPYS. My own involvement with honors mirrored the development of honors education at the institution. Unlike many honors directors, I did not come to honors because of a strong philosophical commitment to liberal arts education or with a clear understanding of what an honors education would look like. I was, however, enthusiastic about HPYS as I saw extraordinary things happening in classrooms in which the best students from disadvantaged school districts were mixed with the best students from more prosperous districts. HPYS was the only summer program I knew of that allowed high school students to earn college credit and where low-income (predominantly minority) high school students shared a college experience with their wealthier (predominantly nonminority) peers.

I quickly realized that the university honors program could provide similar opportunities to HPYS for an equally diverse group of college students. I also came to see the value of honors programs for students within the metropolitan university: the development of close relationships with professors through smaller classes and research experiences; the growth that occurs when individuals are pushed to go beyond their narrow interests; having someone who is aware of their talents and aspirations to ensure that they learn of and have access to a range of opportunities; and nurturing a community of individuals who care about the same intellectual pursuits they value.

The program began growing, but that growth accelerated with a new president's arrival, his commitment to honors education, and his creation of the Presidential Honors Scholarship program. The first 20 four-year Presidential Honors Scholarships (\$1,000 each) were awarded in fall of 1992, and 20 additional scholarships were added in each of the next three academic years. The 80 students who receive Presidential Honors Scholarships (and the 20 to 30 who receive other, smaller honors scholarships) form the core of the program.

Impact of a Diverse Metropolitan Context

The primary mission of the UTSA honors program is to stimulate highly talented students toward greater challenges and greater achievements. That the program is housed in a comprehensive, metropolitan university has shaped that mission and how it is achieved in a variety of ways. The two attributes of a metropolitan university that have had the greatest impact on the UTSA honors program have been the type of students the metropolitan university attracts and the metropolitan university's relation-

ship to its community. Diversity in the age of students, their prior educational preparation and experiences, their diverse ethnic backgrounds, and the demands of family, work, and school, as well as the metropolitan university's role in working with the community, has often pushed the UTSA honors program to adapt and to expand its definition of an honors education. At times, those changes have been small, as in developing new seminars that address minority experiences in society (e.g., "Multicultural Poetics," "Race, Gender, and Class") or offering honors options for community service. At other times, however, recognizing student or community needs and experiences has led to the development of new programs and new definitions of what constitutes an honors experience.

Student Characteristics and Honors

The attribute of the metropolitan university that has had the greatest impact on the evolution of UTSA's honors program is the diversity of its student body. San Antonio and South Texas' ethnic diversity led to the incorporation of a special goal into the honors program's mission statement to ensure that the university honors program adequately supports the educational development of traditionally underrepresented minority students and that minority enrollments in the program reflect minority enrollment in the institution. Yet diversity in the age and educational backgrounds of UTSA students has had an even greater impact than ethnic diversity on program operations.

It was clear, for example, that some of UTSA's most successful nontraditional-aged, first-generation, and minority college students would not have been accepted into a program that relied wholly or even primarily on test scores for admission. Thus, no minimum test score or high school average is required for admission into the honors program. Although program materials include guidelines for combinations of high school grades and test scores (e.g., an SAT score of 1,000 with a class rank in the top 10%, a college GPA of 3.4 or better), the Advisory Committee considers each case individually. Students must submit a list of high school and college activities, two letters of recommendation, and an essay. When a student does not meet the guidelines, the committee looks closely at those items. The policy of deciding admission on a case-by-case basis has resulted in the last few years of a profile for first-time students of an average SAT score of 1180 and a first-semester mean GPA of 3.46.

Options for Transfer Students

That almost 75% of UTSA graduates begin their college educations at other institutions has also shaped the honors curriculum and the options students have for earning credit. Meeting the needs of these transfer students was a top priority when the Honors Advisory Committee met in 1994 to decide how the honors program should accommodate a new, revised core curriculum for the whole university. The major changes in the university's core included expanding the language and science requirements to four and two semesters, respectively, and adding a six-hour interdisciplinary studies requirement. These changes (and others) increased the number of hours in the

core from 42 to between 54 and 65, depending on a student's foreign language placement. With a core that large, few majors left much room for electives. Thus, the honors advisory committee decided that most honors hours would have to fit into the core or the major. Fortunately, the goals of the two required honors seminars were similar to the goals of the new core curriculum requirement in interdisciplinary studies. Thus, the honors advisory committee convinced the core curriculum committee to allow the honors seminars to be listed as options for meeting the requirements in "diversity of thought" and "diversity of culture" within the domain of interdisciplinary studies. At the same time, the committee reduced the world civilization requirement to one semester, both to make an honors degree attainable without students having to take additional hours and for another practical reason, the small number of faculty available to teach world civilization.

Although the number of hours in honors decreased, the overall number of honors hours required for honors graduation was increased from 12 to 24. Yet that also created a problem for transfer students, many of whom entered UTSA having completed most of the core curriculum except for the interdisciplinary studies requirement. Typically, transfer students needed only 15 hours of available honors courses: six hours of honors seminars, three hours of honors world civilization, and six hours of honors thesis. While incoming freshmen could earn the other nine hours in core courses, transfer students needed another option. Thus, we developed a "contract" program by which honors students can form a contract with a professor in a regular course, detailing the additional work the student will need to do to earn honors credit for the course. While the program was devised with transfer students in mind, it has had at least two unanticipated benefits. It has helped students form closer relationships with a wider range of faculty (and in some cases, led students to a thesis advisor), and it has also increased the honors program's appeal to students in professional programs such as business and architecture. Students in preprofessional programs have pushed for honors courses that fit into their majors, but we have had difficulty finding faculty in the college of business, for example, who have been interested in developing courses that also meet the interdisciplinary objectives of the seminars. Being able to earn honors hours in their major has helped students in preprofessional areas develop the relationships with faculty in their academic fields that they were looking for. No innovation is without problems. However, we have just begun to realize that some students (particularly those in preprofessional programs) may be taking honors scholarships and meeting the scholarship requirement of one honors course per semester by doing only honors contracts.

The Challenge of Student Preparation

The fact that many UTSA students do not come from backgrounds where learning is valued for its own sake, rather than for the rewards it might bring, has also challenged the honors program. Many current and potential honors students are cautious about entering courses that require them to engage in discussion, critical thought, and analysis in areas where they may not feel completely at home. In addition, their

lack of familiarity with scholarly research often makes them view the honors thesis as an insurmountable task. Thus, while we now routinely admit 75 to 100 students per year, only about 20 per year complete a thesis and graduate with university honors. Encouraging more honors students to complete the honors thesis is one of the greatest challenges the program faces. On the assumption that the barriers to beginning and completing an honors thesis have included lack of information and inadequate emotional and financial support, we have instituted several programmatic changes. To encourage students to begin thinking about the thesis earlier in their academic careers, we have added an honors independent study course to give them an additional semester in which to explore potential research topics, organized workshops on how to approach the honors thesis, and asked students working on their thesis to present their work in a formal research colloquium. To provide students with emotional and financial support, we began requiring thesis students to meet as a group three times per semester to share their progress and problems, and also convinced the administration to fund a small Undergraduate Fellows Program that provides students with small grants of \$300 to \$450 for research expenses. To date, however, these programmatic changes have had only minimal impact, perhaps because we have not done an adequate job of assessing what students really need or why so many students choose not to pursue a thesis.

In order to help first-generation and minority students who might find research intimidating, the honors program also applied for and obtained a grant from the Department of Education to support a Ronald E. McNair Scholar Development Program at UTSA. The McNair Scholars Program is designed to prepare first-generation, low-income, and minority students for entry into graduate school. It provides juniors and seniors with information about, and skill development useful for, graduate study (including preparation for the GRE) and with a summer research experience with a faculty mentor. The McNair Program typically helps only six to eight honors students per year to start their thesis, but it also has opened honors activities to other first-generation, low-income, and minority students and has the added benefit of introducing those students to a portion of the honors experience.

Honors and the Community

Because of the metropolitan university's traditional emphasis on university-community relations, the UTSA honors program also has attempted to build community connections and to serve the community, albeit in limited ways. Built into the original mission when HPYS and the honors program were consolidated within one office was the idea that the office would contribute to honors experiences for individuals at all levels of education. By 1996, however, it was no longer feasible to offer the summer honors program for high school students. When tuition and fees increased 150% in a six-year period, the Friends group could no longer raise enough in scholarship dollars to ensure that all qualified applicants could attend the program. The university administration was also reluctant to continue devoting a significant portion of the summer

budget to fund faculty salaries for HPYS. Thus, the university honors program discontinued HPYS, replacing it with the concurrent enrollment program. Although the Office of Admissions had always allowed high school seniors with an SAT-R of 1100 or higher to enroll in UTSA classes, Concurrent enrollment extended that opportunity to sophomores and juniors as well. Concurrent enrollment was both an effort to offer some of the best students previously served by HPYS to take courses at UTSA and a response to frequent calls from parents of high school students seeking college-level opportunities for their very gifted children.

The honors program has been more successful in extending honors experiences to the community through a yearly symposium for high school students and an annual lecture series, co-sponsored with the Development Office. The Development Office invited the honors program to become involved with the lecture series both to highlight excellence at the university and to draw on the expertise of honors faculty. Topics for the symposium and the lecture series come from honors seminars—e.g., “What Makes America American?,” “Creativity and Imagination,” and “Language, Love, and Lore.” Both programs highlight the honors program for different constituencies. The former is in part a recruiting device and the latter a fund-raising vehicle, as many of the guests who attend the lecture series are donors to the institution.

The institution’s relationship to the community has also pushed honors to extend itself in ways we had not originally imagined. Because of the growing emphasis on community service and university-community relationships both in higher education in general and at UTSA specifically, in 1995 we instituted a voluntary, community service option for honors students. Honors students can now earn one hour of honors credit for completing 45 hours of community service and writing a paper addressing the value of community service for college students. In addition, the University Honors Student Association sponsors a minimum of four community service projects per year. Yet the community service options and the fledgling university honors student association suffer from a lack of commitment among students. Because so many of our students work one or two jobs and live far from campus, few seem to find the extra time that community building requires.

Final Thoughts

What does the UTSA experience with honors illustrate? Most importantly, our experiences demonstrate the importance of leadership to the development of honors in the metropolitan setting. Not only is a successful honors program dependent on a strong director, but without a clear message from the president about the importance of honors to the institution, even the most dynamic director may not succeed. Our experiences also demonstrate the challenges that metropolitan universities face in offering an honors education to students. At UTSA, we need to do a better job of nurturing a commitment to the honors community and the honors experience among our honors students, a task that will probably include providing them with even greater support through the process of writing an honors thesis. We need to develop better ways of

evaluating what we do and how we do it to ensure that our program is meeting its objectives. We need to make decisions concerning how large and how fast we can grow without sacrificing our commitment to students' individual development, or convince the institution to provide more resources.

Despite these challenges, most of us who work in honors in a metropolitan university would not wish to be elsewhere. The greatest challenges and the greatest satisfaction come from urging students to take an extra step toward something they had not contemplated and perhaps did not even know existed—to consider an honors education, to take courses outside their area of expertise, to major in the liberal arts rather than a preprofessional program, to consider graduate study, to apply for prestigious national scholarships, and above all to see the university experience as a chance to create scholarly knowledge and not just absorb it.

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