**2009 Honors Report**

**Step 1: Department/Program Mission**

The mission of the Albion College Honors Program is to produce a liberally educated body of graduates who are grounded in disciplinary knowledge, who have developed interdisciplinary skills, and who are well rounded, socially conscious, and capable of assuming leadership roles in our society. While completion of coursework and a thesis project are required to graduate with Albion College Honors, student access is measured by student outcomes such as participation by students in research, scholarship or creative activity, participation by students in projects on/off campus, and evidence of student leadership.  The program aims to recruit and achieve levels of participation from underrepresented populations at levels consistent with their enrollment at Albion. The Honors Program will continue to maintain high levels of enrollment and retention of students through graduation.

**Step 2: List goals/outcomes**

Honors graduates will:
(1) Demonstrate effective critical thinking and writing skills.
(2) Demonstrate an interdisciplinary perspective in their written work.
(3) Demonstrate effective research skills through class projects and a thesis project.
(4) Achieve a measure of distinction on a national scale
(5) Assume leadership roles and be socially conscious.

**Step 3: Identify program components**

(1) Demonstrate effective critical thinking and writing skills.

Assessed through:

Completion of projects in core Honors courses (Great Issues in Science/Social Science/Humanities/Fine Arts - all are required)

Completion of the Thesis Development Course (optional course for students, but progress for those who are struggling with a topic can be assessed)

Completion of the Thesis project

(2) Demonstrate an interdisciplinary perspective in their written work.

Assessed through:

Coursework in 4 "Great Issues" courses which span the curriculum (of particular interest is whether or not students who have taken more Honors class have a better grasp of interdisciplinary concepts in a new field; i.e., the 'intensity' or cumulative effect of our curriculum)

(3) Demonstrate effective research skills through class projects and a thesis project.

Assessed through:

Work done in the thesis development course
Thesis work

(4) Achieve a measure of distinction on a national/international scale

Assessed through:

Tracking numbers of students who apply for national awards (Fulbright, Marshall, Mitchell, Udall, Rhodes, etc.)

Tracking student participation at national meetings, as co-authors on publications with faculty members

Tracking numbers of students who complete competitive off-campus programs (REUs, study abroad experiences)

Focus groups and self-reporting by current students freshmen, current seniors, and alumni

(5) Assume leadership roles and be socially conscious.

Assessed through:
Participation of students in on/off-campus activities
Alumni survey to measure future engagement
Focus group results
Classroom exercises and faculty evaluation (formal and informal) of students in Honors classes
Self reporting: Surveys completed by freshmen at the annual retreat in comparison with surveys completed by seniors
Faculty evaluation of student leaders at the annual retreat and thorough the Honors Council (an Honors leadership group which meets weekly)

**Step 4: Select methods/data sources and instruments**

The Honors Program will gather data to assess learning outcomes of the program using the following direct and indirect measures of assessment:

-Senior exit surveys (done annually)

-Alumni surveys (done periodically)

-Surveys done at the annual Honors retreat

-Faculty assessments done as part of each course (all courses meet the Mode requirements for students; the program needs to be able to access results from these assessments to track overall success).

-Focus groups of current students (at least one per semester)

-Faculty assessment of students completing the thesis development course (a completed thesis is a blunt measure - we are working to develop a rubric for committee members to use for assessment purposes)

Although it is not a learning outcomes for individual students, we will assess the effectiveness of our program in working with underrepresented students by tracking enrollment and graduation rates of underrepresented students who participate in the Honors program versus those who do not.

**Step 5: Analyze and interpret the data (Due October 1, 2009 with preliminary data; due November 2, 2009 with final data for this assessment cycle)**

**Results from survey of students attending the First-year Honors Retreat – Fall 2009**

Each year, the Honors Program invites the incoming class of students to attend an optional first-year retreat. The retreat is organized by the Director, Associate Director, and Coordinator, and run by upper-class Honors students who volunteer to serve as retreat leaders. The annual retreat is held off-campus at the end of the first or second week of study in the fall semester (currently at Michindoh in Hillsdale County, Michigan) and currently lasts 1.5 days.  Attendance at the retreat is high (>90% of eligible students attend). Learning outcomes from the retreat include helping students to prepare for success in Honors courses, providing Honors students with opportunities for social engagement (meeting new students) and reflection (through sports challenges, games, ‘free time’, and bonfire skits), helping students learn about research and travel opportunities from engagement with senior Honors students in the program, an introducing the students to the Distinguished Honors Professor (a faculty members(s) selected to teach additional Honors courses each year [when budgets permitted, the Distinguished Professor also hosts outside speakers and lead the students on a book discussion or creative activity]).

Results from the Fall 2009 survey:

We received 75 responses to the optional retreat survey (response rate >95%). Details of the survey are shown in Appendix A. In general, Honors students were positive about the retreat (giving it a grade of 3.02 on a 4.0 scale). They felt that the most valuable components were the Question and Answer sessions with senior students (xxxxxx) and the Bonfire skits (short skits based on their college experiences and expectations). They were positive about other elements of the program, with the lowest score (mean = 2.99/5) about the Distinguished Honors Professor. In general, the thought the facility we used was appropriate (60 of 72 responses indicated we should use it again next year) and most expressed interest in being a retreat leader at a future retreat.

Responses to open-ended questions indicated that the most popular activities were the bonfire skits (20 positive comments), and opportunities to meet other first-year students in the program (34 comments). The biggest concerns were related to a desire for more structure in the program (20 comments) and some concern over the conservative nature of the retreat location (4 comments). Most students felt that the amount of ‘free time’ was appropriate (41 responses), but nearly as many felt that there was too much free time (32 responses; only 4 students felt that more free time would have been beneficial).

**Results of the Thesis Development survey – Fall 2009**

Each semester, the Honors Program offers a 0.5-unit course in thesis development. This optional course is typically taken by current Sophomores and Juniors in the program (who have completed most/all of the core Honors courses). Learning outcomes for students in the course include helping them to decide the importance of a thesis for their career plans/personal development, helping them to develop a thesis topic, helping them to develop a research plan for a thesis, and guiding students through the process of discussing potential thesis topics in conjunction with members of the faculty. To gather indirect assessment data on enrollment of students in the course and self-reports of their progress, we developed and carried out a survey of students in the course (n=16 respondents; Appendix B). The survey was delivered on September 29, 2009. Based on self-reported expected graduation dates, one student in the course identified him/herself as a Senior, 14 students identified themselves as current Juniors, and one student identified him/herself as a current Sophomore.

Main results from thesis development survey:

The Thesis Development course appears to be made up of two distinct groups of students – those who have already selected a thesis topic and are making progress, and those who are completely undecided. More specifically, when asked about the status of their thesis topic at the beginning of the course, 63% reported that they had already selected a tentative topic, 75% reported that they had already identified a potential advisor, half reported having prior discussions about a thesis with a potential advisor, but only 31% had done research on a specific topic.

When asked whether the status of their thesis project has changed at the result of the Thesis Development course (5 weeks into the semester), half of the students (8) reported that it had not at this point (in ALL cases, these students had indicated elsewhere on the survey that they had already selected a thesis topic/advisor before enrolling in the course). In six of these cases, students indicated that they had already chosen a topic and thesis advisor before enrolling into the course. The other two students who reported ‘no’ did indicate that the course had helped them build confidence in the thesis process and had helped them to develop a plan. Of the students who reported that the course had helped them with thesis development, nearly all wrote that course had helped them to consider ideas for a thesis, approach faculty members to discuss a project. Several also indicated that being held accountable in the course had helped motivate them to make positive progress. Others reported that the course had helped them narrow down potential thesis topics.

On the survey, students were also asked to respond to a series of statements related to thesis project/advisor selection. Responses were recorded on a scale from 1-5 (1=Strongly Agree; 2=Agree; 3=Neutral; 4=Disagree; 5=Strongly Disagree). Their responses to various statements were as follows:

1.      “The thesis development course has helped me decide on a thesis topic” Mean + s = 2.7 + 0.9

2.      “Finding a thesis advisor is not difficult” Mean + s = 2.6 + 1.2

3.      “Finding a thesis topic is not difficult” Mean + s = 3.4 + 1.0

4.      “Completion of an Honors Thesis is important to my career plans” Mean + s = 1.8 + 0.9

5.      “An Honors Thesis is important to my personal development” Mean + s = 1.8 + 0.5

To summarize these results, students were mixed about whether the course had helped them, whether or not finding an advisor/topic were difficult or not. In looking at individual responses to these questions, they were strongly bi-modal and consistent with their responses on the status of their theses at the start of the course. Specifically, students who entered the course with a thesis topic and advisor already chosen tended to respond that selecting advisors and topics was not difficult. Conversely, students that had not chosen topics/advisors at the beginning of the course or at the time of the survey (not surprisingly) reported that the selection process was difficult. It is worth noting that respondents felt quite strongly that a thesis project was an important part of their career plans and plays an important part in their personal development. The fact that students had self-selected enrollment into the course makes it difficult to know how the general population of Honors students feel about the thesis process (this will have to be surveys as part of our larger senior survey and alumni survey).

*Response to a question about a new Thesis Development course for incoming students*

In recent years, we have considered offering a thesis development course (0.5 units credit/no-credit) to first-year Honors students. The rationale for this course is that it might help students begin to consider how to develop a thesis project before they reach the ‘panic stage’ in their Junior year. The course would also expose students to work done by upper-class thesis students. On the survey, students were asked to consider whether or not they would have benefited from such a course (0.5 units of ‘thesis development’ – a specific course description was not given). Considering that the students we surveyed had already elected to enroll into a thesis development course (mostly as Juniors), we expected that this population might be predisposed to be positive to such a course, or any efforts at thesis development.

Responses to the question about a first-year thesis development course were mixed. Fewer than half of the respondents (43%) reported that they would have been interested in such a course. Nearly all of those who indicated a reasons for a negative response stated that they would have been intimidated or overwhelmed at the prospect of contemplating a thesis project as first-year students (one could argue that this might be a reason for offering such a course, but their responses suggest that these students would not enroll!) Of those who responded favorably to the idea of a first-year course, they indicated that such a course would help expose them to thesis topic ideas at an early stage  - in time to help them plan for future course selection and research directions.

**APPENDIX A: PERCEPTIONS AND RESULTS OF THE SURVEY GIVEN TO EVALUATE THE 2009 FIRST YEAR RETREAT**

**Scores range from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent); means are shown in [ ]**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Retreat Event [Mean Score]** | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** |
| **Opening Session [3.36]** |   | 6 | 42 | 21 | 6 |
|   Comments | ·         Opening icebreakers·         Good intro info | ·         Short and sweet·         Not much info |
| **Distinguished Professor Seminar [2.99]** | 12 | 16 | 29 | 10 | 10 |
|   Comments | ·         Focused only on their interests (7)·         Liked the art·         Dull (6)·         Interesting and very informative (2)·         No purpose (2)·         Too long (4) | ·         Nice to hear about art·         Informal and uninteresting (2)·         Hard to hear/see (3)·         Unengaging·         Too advanced/tailored (3) |
| **Free Sports Time[3.63]** | 3 | 11 | 19 | 21 | 22 |
|   Comments | ·         Need more Structure (9)·         Nap time·         Puzzles·         Coloring·         Frisbee and volleyball were fun (2)·         Got stranded on the lake and read·         Liked having no structure·         Leaders should organize activities | ·         Too easy to hang with people we already knew·         More activities needed (2)·         Too much free time (2)·         More indoor activities (2)·         Canoes were fun·         Offered time for mixing·         Better if warmer (2) |
| **Bonfire Skits [4.23]** | 2 | 2 | 12 | 26 | 36 |
|   Comments | ·         Best Part·         Some skits too long·         Some skits too dirty·         Took nap·         Too cold (5)·         Fun (3) | ·         Funny (8)·         Consider changing name (sounds like talent show) (2)·         Smores (3)·         More time by fire·         Bigger bonfire (3) |
| **Mock Honors Seminar [3.35]** | 1 | 7 | 24 | 16 | 6 |
|   Comments | ·         Very beneficial·         Leader seemed outcasting·         Just chatted·         Liked small groups·         Helpful (3) |
| **Q&A Student Session  [4.26]** |   | 3 | 14 | 20 | 40 |
|   Comments | ·         Liked Dual Degree Talk·         Ryan was great, helpful, and comical·         Ryan was helpful·         Brandan was quite adept·         Mark did a great job (2) | ·         Lengthy·         Everyone fun and energized (2)·         Good info (4)·         Make sure everyone is present·         Everyone was nice and helpful (5) |
| Free Time | Too Little | Just Right | Too Much |
|   | 4 | 41 | 32 |
|   Comments | ·         Frisbee·         Weird increments (2)·         Lots of time to relax·         Forced one to meet new people·         Less free time and leave early (2) | ·         Weather inhibited many outdoor activities (2)·         Need more structure (3)·         More activities (4)·         Too long·         Too easy to hang with people you already knew |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|   | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** |
| Rooms [3.87] |   | 7 | 17 | 33 | 21 |
| Food [3.19] | 5 | 12 | 33 | 22 | 6 |
| Meeting Rooms [4.12] |   | 1 | 10 | 45 | 22 |
| Location [3.97] | 1 | 6 | 15 | 33 | 24 |
|   Comments | ·         Too much Jesus (2)·         Workers rude·         Too conservative (2)·         Spiders in room·         Give for warning about all free time or organize more activities·         Need more to do·         Bad food (2)·         Great location·         Ok food·         Snack at night·         More fun if better weather (3)·         Nice place (2)·         Would have liked to be closer together·         Great just cold (3) |

Should we use the facilities again next year?

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Yes | No |
|   60 | 12 |

Nice but more group activities are needed (ie euchre)

The best thing:

·         Iceburg

·         Spoons

·         Apples to apples

·         Free Time (7)

·         nap

·         No ice breakers

·         My counselor (2)

·         Mark

·         Bonfire (17)

·         Schim Schimmel (4)

·         Paintball

·         Breakfast

·         Night time

·         Q & A (6)

·         Sleeping (3)

·         Skit

·         Meeting new people (34)

·         Food (3)

·         Canoes (2)

·         Location

·         Frisbee (3)

·         Mentor bonding (2)

Things to change:

·         Do retreat before classes start (2)

·         Wouldn’t Go

·         Skit topics

·         Schedule (3)

·         More co-ed activities

·         More Mixers (9)

·         Leave earlier (4)

·         More info beforehand

·         Skit needed smores (6)

·         Bigger fire

·         Different speaker (3)

·         More time at fire (2)

·         More activities (10)

·         Better food (2)

·         Map for students

·         More organized (20)

·         Shorter Lecture (2)

·         Small group meetings instead of lectures

·         Break up happy un time

·         Consider a small allowance for coin operated machines

·         Less free time (8)

·         Later breakfast (2)

·         More free time (2)

·         Location (5)

·         Less structure

·         Friday to Saturday instead

·         Condense speakers and put some on Saturday

·         Take photo on Saturday

·         More structure

·         More snacks

**Overall Grade for the Retreat [3.02]**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 0.0 | 1.0 | 1.3 | 1.7 | 2.0 | 2.3 | 2.7 | 3.0 | 3.3 | 3.7 | 4.0 |
|   |   |   | 2 | 4 | 7 | 13 | 16 | 21 | 15 |   |

**Would you consider being a Retreat Leader next year?**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Yes | No |
|   44 | 27 |

Comments:

No if location remains

No if schedule doesn’t change

**APPENDIX B: Survey given to students in the Honors Thesis Development Colloquium**

**Fall 2009                                                                                             Thesis Development Survey**

As part of our ongoing efforts to assess the effectiveness of the Prentiss M. Brown Honors Program, we would appreciate it if you could complete this short survey. Your responses will be treated as anonymous. If you feel uncomfortable answering any question(s), please feel free to leave the response section(s) blank. Results for the class will be compiled by the Associate Director (Dean McCurdy) and only a summary of responses will be shared with the instructor. Thank you for your assistance!

 1. What is your expected year of graduation? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

 2. Please respond to the following statements based on the stage of development you were in at the BEGINNING of this course. At that point, had you…….

selected a tentative thesis topic?                                                       Yes                   No

 identified a possible thesis advisor?                                                   Yes                   No

 discussed a thesis topic with a faculty member?                               Yes                   No

 worked on a project that you felt could become a thesis?                Yes                   No

 3. Has the status of any of your answers to the questions above changed as a result of the thesis development course? Please explain.

4. Please circle your responses on a scale from 1 to 5 (1=Strongly Agree, 2=Agree, 3=Neutral (neither agree or disagree), 4=Disagree, 5=Strongly Disagree)

                                                                        (1=Strongly Agree…….5=Strongly Disagree)

The thesis development course has helped me decide on a thesis topic.     1       2       3       4       5

 Finding a thesis advisor is not difficult.                                                      1       2       3       4       5

 Finding a thesis topic is not difficult.                                                          1       2       3       4       5

Completion of an Honors Thesis is important to my career plans.              1       2       3       4       5

An Honors Thesis is important to my personal development                      1       2       3       4       5

5. What expectations do you have for this course? In other words, what do you expect to achieve at the end of the course?

6. Thinking back to your first semester at Albion, would you have been interested in enrolling in a 0.5-unit Honors research/thesis development course taught to students in their first year of study? Why/why not?

7. General comments/observations?

If you have any questions about this survey please feel free to contact Dr. Dean McCurdy (Biology Department) at dmccurdy@albion.edu or x0290. **THANK YOU FOR YOUR ASSISTANCE**

**Step 6: How will the data collected be used for decision-making, strategic planning, etc. (Due October 1, 2009 with preliminary data; due November 2, 2009 with final data for this assessment cycle)**

**Analysis and interpretation of results**

First-year Honors retreat

Based on the survey results for first-year students who attended the Honors retreat, it appears that the mix of activities done at the retreat is appropriate and is meeting the main learning objectives for students (see Step 5). Specifically, students felt that the information sessions were helpful and that they greatly enjoyed the organized ‘bonding’ activities (e.g., campfire skits). Although the scores for the Distinguished Professor seminar were quite high, the relatively lower score of this component compared with other elements of the retreat might be accounted for by the fact that it came at the end of the day, and this activity was less structured than in previous years (budgets for activities that used to be organized by the Distinguished Professor, such as a common reading experiences and outside speakers, have been cut completely). The Distinguished Professors this year also come from a division that fewer students initially identify with on entry to the college (Fine Arts). It’s worth noting that many students did feel that this seminar was a highlight of the retreat (the speakers were overwhelmed with student inquiries at the end of their session!) and that this component has received strong, positive evaluations at other retreat events.

Since nearly all first-year students attend the annual retreat, it would be difficult to evaluate whether or not they. The fact that most students wished to return as retreat leads in a future year suggests that it was a valuable experience for them.

Considering the structure of the retreat, two clear suggestions emerged from the survey. First, participants valued the free time during the retreat, but many (nearly half) felt that there was too much free time and many argued that the retreat lacked structure. To address this issue, we plan on reducing the length of the retreat by at least 2-3 hours beginning next year. We are also looking into changing from a 2-day to a 1-day retreat, although this would likely eliminate some of the most popular activities (e.g., bonfire skits). In any case, we also plan to assist the student retreat leaders in developing a retreat plan that brings more structure to the event (for years, students complained that the retreat was too structured – we suspect the pendulum might have now swung back the other way). Given continued cuts to our budget, we also need to re-think the role of the Distinguished Honors Professor so that the position continues to have meaning.

Thesis Development Course

Perceptions of students in the thesis development course were dependent on their experiences prior to enrolling in it. For many students (nearly half), the course provides support for projects that they have already begun (in one case, causing a student to re-think his/her topic completely). For the remainder of the students, the course provides them with an opportunity to plan and discuss thesis topics with potential faculty advisors. Both groups of students indicate that the current course is valuable, although those taking it to initiate a thesis project felt it to be of greater help.

Given increased demand for the thesis development course, we are considering pre-screening students for enrollment into the current course or perhaps dividing the students into different groups. One possibility would be to run a fall course for students who are ‘lost’ or are having trouble developing a project, finding an advisor, or deciding of whether to pursue a thesis. A separate course could then be run for students who are working on existing projects (perhaps catering to the more advanced needs to these students). We plan to discuss this issue further with our current thesis students and the Honors Committee (a group comprising the Director, Associate Director, Coordinator and faculty members from each Division of the College) and we will include an update in the November Assessment Report.

Of particular interest to us has been the possibility to running a thesis development course for entering first-year students. However, the fact that fewer than half of the students in the current development course (a group of students who would appear to be highly motivated to pursue a thesis and take courses on it since they’ve already enrolled in such a course) indicates that the new course might not be the best use of faculty time. We plan to address this issue with other Honors students and perhaps consider the possibility of broader ‘research opportunities’ couse for first-year students (something which anecdotal evidence from the retreat suggests to us is of great interest to incoming students). Early assistance with research opportunities would also appear to benefit the College’s plans for career development and FURSCA’s Student Research Partners initiative.

**Going Forward - Updates to Assessment Plan - November 21, 2009 (not part of our fall report)**
Moving into the Spring 2010 semester, we have several assessment goals for our program. Most importantly, we are planning to use a new tool to directly assess thesis work done by Honors students. This instrument consists of a written survey to assess critical thinking and writing skills, the ability of the writer to take an interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary perspective, research skills of the writer, and knowledge of the writer in the chosen content area (all learning outcomes of our Honors Program). The instrument will be given to all members of College and Departmental thesis committees and they will be asked to use it to assess the written thesis work done by their students. This tool combined approaches used at Washington State University and the University of Maine to evaluate learning outcomes of thesis work and we have obtained permission to use/modify their tools. McCurdy (Associate Director) participated in a thesis assessment workshop at the recent National Collegiate Honors Conference in Washington, D.C. where he discussed the use and interpretation of such assessment tools with Honors administrators from other colleges and universities. We are hopeful that this will address a need for direct assessment of a key product of our program.

In late Fall 2009 or early Spring 2010, we will also be holding a focus group with Honors students to obtain informal feedback about the program. This session will be open to all students in the program and led by students (the Director and Associate Director will stay for the first few minutes to answer questions and then leave - notes will be taken by students and sent to the Coordinator, who will verify that responses are anonymous before forwarding them to the Director and Associate Director). Although student-led, we have selected several elements of the program for the students to discuss (e.g., thesis development, Honors course work, connections between Honors and majors, social opportunities through Honors, research opportunities in conjunction with Honors). Results from the focus group meeting will be included in our Spring report.

We are also working to gather data from students graduating from the program in May 2010. All graduates will be asked to fill out a survey for to evaluate various aspects of the program. We have tracked down similar data-sets from prior years in the program and we expect to be able to compare responses longitudinally. In the spring, we plan to work on the development on an alumni survey as well.