Strategic background

OSU’s Honors Program includes both recruitment and co-curricular activities, which are overseen by the Director of the University Honors and Scholars Center, and a huge variety of Honors courses and Honors research experiences, which are provided directly by individual departments and University faculty, with the support of the newly-named Associate Provost for Honors and Scholars Curriculum. Historically, the latter (academic or curricular) side of Honors has not been funded as a discrete entity at Ohio State—as, for instance, so-called “honors colleges” are funded at some other universities. Rather, the courses, research experiences, and so forth, that comprise the Honors experience at Ohio State have been funded by the colleges and departments that offer those courses and other experiences, with whatever portion of their overall budgets they felt it appropriate to devote to Honors education. What’s more, individual college budgets have never been set at Ohio State, so far as we know, with an eye towards rewarding or penalizing colleges and their departments for their Honors offerings or lack thereof.

As we contemplate a move into a new University budgeting system, it is imperative to think seriously about how Honors will be funded, and whether it will likely flourish or founder, in whatever new system the University adopts. This is not easy to do, of course, given that we do not yet know exactly what the new budgeting system will be like. Given what we do know, however, especially from the series of budget restructuring studies that culminated in “Budget Restructuring VIII,” we believe it is possible to say some things, at least, about how Honors might be threatened in any likely new system and what might best be done to ensure that it flourishes instead.

The challenge Honors faces and some alternative solutions

The principal threat to Honors in a revenue-based budgeting system is obvious enough: Honors courses, not to mention the one-on-one research mentoring that is central to the OSU Honors experience, are very expensive, because very personnel-intensive, and hence one can easily imagine that in a revenue-based system deans and department chairs will be tempted to decrease their Honors and Honors-research offerings in favor of more “lucrative” alternatives -- e.g., courses with unlimited enrollments in which faculty are replaced or assisted by modestly-paid lecturers and teaching assistants. (Honors courses at Ohio State must be taught by regular faculty and may not enroll more than twenty-five students in a class.)

There are, of course, as Budget Restructuring VIII notes, “very powerful non-monetary incentives” to teach Honors courses, not the least of which is “the desire of our faculty to teach bright students in small classes.” And no doubt the persistence of this desire in any
new budgeting system will ensure that some Honors courses will continue to be offered at Ohio State, regardless of how colleges and departments are funded in the new system. However, to suppose that desires such as this one will by themselves ensure the survival of our present Honors Program, much less allow it to flourish in a new system, would be unrealistic and naïve. The economic incentives pushing deans and chairs in the opposite direction will, we believe, simply be too strong, unless counterbalanced by other incentives and forces. The question is how to provide these other incentives in the new system.

One way would be to move to an Honors funding system like that used at institutions with discrete, and discretely funded, honors colleges: give the Associate Provost for Honors and Scholars a budget sufficient to enable him or her to “buy” appropriate Honors offerings from departments by paying for the teaching relief from non-Honors courses that is necessary when faculty teach Honors courses or direct research intensive research projects for Honors students.

We believe that this option should be resisted. The budget the Associate Provost would need would be enormous; it is not clear that courses (or faculty commitments) could be efficiently “bought” in this way in any case, at least over time (planning logistics would work against it, especially from chairs’ points of view); and it is not at all clear that anything would be gained by asking the Associate Provost to buy courses in this way rather than by paying for those courses in some more direct way—e.g., offering the relevant funds directly to chairs and deans rather than funneling it through the Associate Provost.

A second, initially more tempting option would be to fund Honors courses in the new system exactly as we will be funding all other courses in the system, except that in the case of Honors courses an “Honors premium” would be added to the relevant course-funding algorithm. Thus, if enrollments in a non-Honors course at a given level are rewarded with n dollars, identical enrollments in an Honors course at that level would be rewarded with n+m dollars, where m is whatever is necessary to cover the extra costs of Honors teaching and thereby provide an incentive for its continuation in the new system (over and above the non-monetary incentive discussed briefly above).

After a great deal of thought, and much consultation with colleagues across campus, we have come to the conclusion that this initially tempting option should also be resisted. One reason for this conclusion is that this option ignores the need to compensate departments for one-on-one research offerings, which are among the most costly academic services departments offer Honors students. Another reason is that the suggested funding mechanism would in effect create an incentive for the proliferation of “Honors” offerings that are not really Honors-quality offerings. To be sure, we could and would have to try to reduce the tendency to give in to this temptation by creating oversight or monitoring mechanisms that would attempt to ensure that all Honors offerings are indeed Honors-quality experiences. And since similar mechanisms would be necessary in any system, and are to some degree already in place in our present
system, it might be thought that this is not itself a too risky or too costly way of making the suggested mechanism work.

We believe, though, that when compared to a third way of funding Honors courses in the new budgeting system, this second option looks much less attractive. This third way treats Honors courses and Honors research mentoring as what we believe everyone recognizes they are: a unique contribution to undergraduate education that must be evaluated not simply in terms of numbers of credit hours taught but, much more importantly, in terms of the quality of the contribution the relevant courses and research opportunities make to the undergraduate experience at Ohio State. The latter must, of course, be measured in some way, or otherwise evaluated; but we believe it is extremely important to recognize from the outset that this “measurement,” or evaluation, will be largely qualitative, and hence largely subjective, and only incidentally quantitative in the way the preceding funding option appears to assume.

Details of this third option will need a great deal of thought, but in essence it involves the following very simple idea: base budgets for colleges engaged in undergraduate teaching should be determined in part by the quality of the contribution a given college and its departments make to the Honors experience at Ohio State, both for majors enrolled in that college and in other important respects (e.g., contribution to Honors GEC offerings, contribution to advanced courses needed by other colleges’ majors, contribution to interdisciplinary Honors offerings, and so forth). Determining the extent and evaluating the quality of a college’s contribution to the Honors experience, and advising the Provost about these matters, would be the responsibility of the Associate Provost for Honors and Scholars Curriculum, who would be expected to discharge this responsibility with appropriate faculty assistance. Details to one side, the basic idea is to make a college’s relative contribution to the undergraduate Honors experience a key part of the Provost’s funding decisions for that college, for all colleges engaged in undergraduate teaching.

For this option to work, several things will be essential. First, and perhaps foremost, the President and the Provost will have to make it clear that funding for colleges engaged in undergraduate teaching will be based in part on the quality of a college’s contribution to the University’s Honors Program. Secondly, it will have to be made clear, by the Provost, what counts as a high-quality contribution to the Honors experience and how and by whom this will be measured. In this connection, it will be important for the Provost, in consultation with the Associate Provost for Honors and Scholars Curriculum, and after discussions with college deans, to set specific goals for colleges judged to be doing less than what is desired for Honors, and to be consistent in rewarding colleges that meet these goals and in penalizing colleges that do not meet their goals. Thirdly, we believe that the proposed system will not be taken seriously unless the Associate Provost for Honors and Scholars is known to have a central role in advising the Provost on the relative contributions of individual colleges to the University’s Honors mission: the Associate Provost must be, and must perceived as being, a key player as the Provost makes funding decisions for individual colleges. And, finally, it must be clear, as we approach the rebasing process that the new budgeting system is expected to involve, exactly how much money is available, overall, for merit budget allocations for Honors
contributions, or what percentage of annual revenues will be available for this purpose, so as to minimize the probability, otherwise not insignificant, we believe, that inadequate funds will be set aside for Honors, even as the importance of Honors funding is being trumpeted across the University.

As we have indicated, a great deal more thought and detail will be necessary before this broad outline of a funding process for Honors will be more than an abstract idea. We believe, though, that more thought and discussion along these lines is the direction in which we ought to proceed, as we move towards a new budgeting system for the University. We also believe that proceeding in this way is not only consistent with the University’s mission and goals, but will also be strongly supportive of that mission and those goals. As Budget Restructuring VIII notes, the primary objective of the new budgetary model is “best expressed in terms of President Kirwan’s four goals” for Ohio State: Research Excellence, Quality of the Undergraduate Experience, Outreach, and Diversity. OSU’s Honors Program clearly contributes to all four of these goals and is in fact essential if all four are to be effectively realized. Most obviously, Honors is enormously important to the quality of the undergraduate experience at Ohio State: it enables us to recruit many of the very best high school seniors in the state of Ohio and across the nation; it raises, thereby, the national profile of our undergraduate population and, as a result, our national ranking as an undergraduate institution; and it provides, most importantly, classroom and research opportunities for our undergraduates that are unparalleled in the state of Ohio and that are matched at only a few other institutions in the United States. Honors clearly serves our other central goals as well, however: it supports faculty research excellence by making Ohio State an attractive choice for serious researchers, offering, as it does, the opportunity for sharing research with extremely talented students; it promotes diversity, especially, though certainly not exclusively, with its new Scholars component (the Mount Leadership Society being an excellent example); and it is a leader in outreach, with, among other things, its work with local elementary schools and with recruitment across the counties of Ohio.

Other challenges

It should not be thought that the only challenge for Honors, as we enter the new budgeting system, is the challenge we have been discussing above. If we think of the discussion above as addressing the question of how the extraordinary success of our current Honors Program will be maintained in the new system, or, alternatively, of how basic funding of core Honors activities is to be achieved in that system, we might think of another very important challenge as constituted by the question of how we will be able to continue to stimulate and support new Honors ideas and enterprises in the new system. In the present system, this kind of stimulus is provided, however adequately, by the Academic Enrichment grants that Honors has won and that have enabled us to develop a process whereby new courses, especially advanced and interdisciplinary courses, can be developed and tried, for a limited period, as we continually experiment with new ideas for Honors research and teaching. Funds of this sort, directly controlled by the Associate Provost for Honors and Scholars, will be essential, we believe, in addition to the funds
provided in the regular budgeting process described above, if Honors is not only to continue in its present strong state, but to continue to flourish and to grow in new and as yet unimagined ways. The current level of funding for this purpose, at $100,000, is, we believe, inadequate, supporting, as it does, the development of just five or six new, two-year experimental offerings each year. We believe that something like three or at least two-and-a-half times the current funding will be necessary, if the Associate Provost and her or his faculty advisors are going to be able to stimulate new experiments in undergraduate research and teaching of the sorts that will be essential to continued enhancement of the Honors Program.

**Conclusion**

As the University becomes more selective in its admissions, and selectively invests in departments and colleges as a means of promoting excellence in research and in the quality of undergraduate life, Honors is the logical place to continue the process of improving the quality, effectiveness, and ranking of the University. There is, however, nothing in "Budget Restructuring VIII" that promises clear incentives for the continuation of Honors, much less for its enhancement. The evolutionary principles that apply in the natural world also apply here: as “Budget Restructuring VIII” moves towards a Darwinian model, the question is whether Honors will have the strength or the fitness to survive. The concern that Honors cannot survive on goodwill alone has been expressed by both the Senate Fiscal Committee and by the Ad Hoc Senate Oversight Committee on Budget Restructuring and is expressed here by the members of the Senate Steering Subcommittee on Budget Restructuring. Unless the University chooses to act now, and forcefully, to protect and support the program, Honors will become extinct as an academic enterprise. The loss to the University will be incalculable.

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