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First-Year Honors Students and Academic Probation: What Went Wrong?

Brad Mueller

Honors Senior Project

Grand Valley State University

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Overview of Project

The purpose of my Honors senior project was to explore the challenges that led some, but not all, first-year Honors students to being placed on academic probation (AP) in the Frederik Meijer Honors College at Grand Valley State University (below a 3.2 grade point average). I worked with four first-year Honors students during the 2016 winter semester, primarily by reviewing what difficulties they had encountered during the 2015 fall semester, preparing for their current academics, and advising them on which classes to take (with specific attention to Honors courses) for the 2016-2017 academic year. I intentionally asked open-ended questions to focus any factors beyond the classroom that may be impacting their academic performance (especially with regards to the Honors living-learning community in which they lived). It is worthwhile to note that while the probation rate is lower for the Honors College than it is for the entire university, Honors students face unique challenges. I have also worked extensively with first-year Honors students during my undergraduate career, primarily as a Resident Assistant (RA) in our Honors living-learning community (LLC) for two years and as a New Student Orientation Assistant. Between these experiences and my own memories, I have witnessed the full range of issues that first-year Honors students face.

This project has not been without its limitations and challenges. Originally, this project was designed for me to work closely with a small group of 8-10 students during this semester to identify specific patterns or trends of what first-year Honors students struggle with and how that impacts their academics. Unfortunately, despite numerous attempts (via both personalized and generic emails) in January to invite first-year Honors students that

are on AP to participate in this project, only four students took advantage of this opportunity. While this resulted in more personal attention to each student, it also limits my ability to draw any conclusions or identify trends or patterns amongst this specific subset of Honors students. Instead, in this final report I will be synthesizing the conversations that I have had with students this semester with my experiences as an RA in the Honors LLC during the past two years to complement the review of literature that I have completed. The review of literature matches my anecdotal understandings of Honors students' characteristics and perceptions, as well as how a LLC forms and benefits these students. For the sake of anonymity, the names of the four students with whom I have worked this semester have been changed.

First, I will describe the characteristics of Honors students. Second, I will discuss the perceptions that Honors students have of themselves and their own abilities, as well as how they, as a subset of the millennial generation, are viewed from a societal lens. Third, I will specifically examine the role of the Honors LLC in creating an environment suitable for academic success. Finally, I will draw conclusions from the previous sections and provide some suggestions for how best to provide support in the future for first-year Honors students in order for them to be academically successful in their first semester. Throughout this report, I will intentionally focus on how the topics discussed may impact why some first-year Honors students are on AP after their first semester, and others are not.

Characteristics of Honors Students

"Honors college students retain a distinct constellation of characteristics, motivations, attitudes, and attributes that are often important to their success both in college and in life" (Cuevas, 2015, p. 21). The overarching and, I would argue, most

important detail about Honors students is that there exists almost no set of common characteristics across all students. “Gifted learners, on their part, differ not only in the degree but the pattern of their aptitudes and skills, as well as a multitude of background and personality variables” (Robinson, 197, p. 219). This is not to say that trends do not emerge amongst Honors students’ characteristics; rather, it indicates that attempting to unilaterally characterize Honors students as one type of student is detrimental to effectively aiding in their growth, including academically. This is especially true with attempting to force students to identify and contribute strongly with their academics or course load in Honors, as Cuevas (2015) notes “Findings are mixed, however, regarding honors students’ engagement in their own learning” (22). A more pronounced way to state this may be that Honors students are most often identified for their intellectual success, but not necessarily their intellectual curiosity (Decker, 2008).

It is true, though, that academics often make up a large proportion of one’s admission to an Honors program and, therefore, one’s classification as an Honors student. Honors students tend to have completed more of the traditional types of academic preparedness coming into the university setting, such as having dual-enrolled in a local community college or having taken Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate exams (Cuevas, 2015; Robinson, 1997). This was an extremely common theme during my time as an RA and New Student Orientation Leader. In my living center, it has not been uncommon for students, especially at the beginning of the year, to share a laundry list of exam scores and experiences. For example, Ben, one of my students in my project, could not bring in all of the Advanced Placement credits he had earned because of GVSU’s cap at

32 credits. Through Orientation, I know that bringing in a substantial number of credits to GVSU is quite common amongst Honors students.

Additionally, high scores on standardized college entrance exams (like the ACT and SAT) and one's high school grade point average (GPA) are almost universally expected for admission to an Honors program, although these are not useful for predicting professional success (Scager et al., 2011, p. 20). "Although honors students may earn high grades, those high marks are not necessarily indicative of deeply engaged learning" and they "may not always be as well prepared for college as expected" (Cuevas, 2015, p. 24, 27). This is clearly evidenced by the fact that first-year Honors students have academic difficulties in their transition to the university classroom setting. This is due in part to many Honors students enrolling in higher-level and more rigorous courses in their first semester (which is permissible because of those high exam scores and GPAs). Personally, I have spent many evenings as an RA allowing a group of students to grumble extensively about the struggles they are having with all of their courses.

"When compared to the rest of the student body, [Honors students] are more academically confident, have greater intellectual interests, and are more willing to challenge their accepted values, beliefs, and ideas" (Kaczvinsky, 2007, p. 93). These and similar sentiments are echoed throughout the literature at different institutions (Cuevas, 2015; Decker, 2008; Robinson, 1997; Brimeyer, Schueths, & Smith, 2014; Scager et al., 2011). These characteristics are important to note as well, because they demonstrate that Honors students are not solely academically focused: they express and explore their giftedness in many ways outside of the classroom. Kim, another student that I worked with, exemplified these characteristics. In our first meeting of the semester, she described a

myriad of ways in which she had already expanded her academic and personal pursuits (including taking up boxing and joining a sorority), as well as how she was planning on continuing that personal development in the future (by studying abroad and having an internship). Taking on a variety of personal pursuits (both academic and non-academic) is quite characteristic of the Honors students that I have worked with as an RA as well.

In my personal experiences as an extremely involved undergraduate Honors student, I have noticed that it is very commonplace for Honors students to be some of the most influential and successful students outside of the classroom. Anecdotally, I have noticed, as one example, that they occupy a disproportionate number of leadership positions across the university (including RAs, Student Senators, and holding executive board leadership positions in student organizations). Additionally, on days when Honors students enrolled for classes at Orientation, there were hardly moments of silence in the small group setting because these students would be extremely interested in learning about all of the potential opportunities that GVSU offered. These observations about Honors students extend beyond this campus, however; research indicates that Honors students tend to be more engaged members of the student body (Cuevas, 2015).

While it is very important to encourage the development of first-year Honors students by being involved on campus, this may not help with the academic transition to college. As these students may not be as academically prepared as they think (and is expected by the Honors College and GVSU), adding an abundance of outlets outside of the classroom may unintentionally negatively impact their GPA by taking away precious time to accomplish the extensive amount of reading, writing, and researching that is often required for first-year Honors students. While this section by no means summarizes all the

necessary research on the characteristics of Honors students, it does provide a structural framework from which to conceptualize this unique group of undergraduate students.

Perceptions

A crucial aspect in predicting whether an Honors student will be successful is Honors students' perceptions of their own skills and abilities. Regardless of what area this is in relation to, such as intelligence, motivation, or similar attributes, is less important than to how a student actually views their own capabilities. In a 2010 study published in *Gifted Child Quarterly*, researchers found that "students' perceptions of their talent were positively related to their belief that natural ability contributes to high levels of performance for mathematics, writing, logical/reasoning, verbal, and leadership skills" (Siegle, Da Via Rubenstein, Pollard, & Romey, 2010, p. 97). Many Honors College students, in my experiences, display most of these abilities prominently. The authors go on to say, "Although these honors students relate high natural ability to high performance, they *do not* relate high effort to high performance in academic area" (Siegle et al., 2010, p. 97). This dissonance may be very difficult to overcome for first-year Honors students, as many of them admit that high school was easy academically. Coming into college, Honors students were often the center of academic success. Hearing that they need to utilize the Student Academic Success Center can be quite distressful to their self-perception, and is completely contrary to Honors students' states of mind about how to obtain scholastic success. If Honors students do not anticipate needing to exert a high amount of effort in order to obtain success, this may be the beginning of the downward spiral of their GPAs.

It is also important to note that research clearly indicates gender differences in self-reporting studies, including this one. Understanding that males attribute natural ability,

rather than effort, to high performance more often than females may help comprehend why three of the four students that I worked with were male (Siegle et al., 2010). These students were also interested in the historically male fields of engineering, physics, and mathematics, which are fields that are often described by students as ones that males should naturally comprehend. Additionally, I noticed that from the small sample of Honors students on my floor this year, male students (regardless of major) seemed to struggle more significantly in the academic transition more so than females. While there are many factors that play into this, the perception that high effort is not necessary for high performance may be crucial to consider.

Perhaps one important, yet overlooked perception is who or what Honors students see as culpable when less than ideal grades appear (oftentimes for the first time in their life). In my experiences working with first-year Honors students, including listening to their well-elaborated criticisms of their courses, professors, and classmates, many times they will accuse factors that, at least on the surface, appear beyond any student's control but are still academically based. A study of over 200 first year students (who were predominantly white and female) at "two admissions-competitive universities in the northeastern United States" found that although students identified effort as being very important to performance (and a much more respected manner to attain high marks), they still made "ability attributions," including to explain why someone received poor grades (van Etten, Pressley, Freebern, & Echevarria, 1998, p. 114). Additionally, these students reported that "When they fail, [they] reported that it was much more likely to be explained as due to use of an inappropriate strategy or lack of time rather than lack of ability" (van Etten et al., 1998, p. 114).

Randy Moore (2007) frames this discussion in light of locus of control and academic persistence by saying,

Students having an internal locus of control feel that they control their own destiny; they believe that if they study more, they will make higher grades. In contrast, students having an external locus of control believe that their grades are controlled by external factors that they cannot control. (p. 48)

In his study of students across the educational spectrum at universities in Minnesota, he “found no statistically significant difference in the responses of honors students, regular students, or developmental education students [similar to the GVSU Oliver Wilson Freshman academy]...each group of students indicated an internal locus of control on about half of the questions, and an external locus of control on about half the questions” (Moore, 2007, p. 51). This does not seem to explain why many first-year Honors students who encounter their first negative feedback (generally the first major paper of their Honors freshman sequence) jump to the conclusion that this poor result is beyond their own fault. Amongst the explanations for this phenomenon, I surmise that because many Honors students have been reinforced into thinking that they have reached such noteworthy academic heights because of their natural ability, obtaining an undesirable grade results in a sort of cognitive dissonance about their academic prowess. This then may create an internal roadblock to correct whatever issue is impeding their success, such as a lack of effort on their part. As an outcome of being perceived by others (and perceiving themselves) as academically and intellectually gifted, not reaching that height of success calls into question their self-concept (and, surely, their own ego). This may explain why, even among my group of four students, two openly admitted to not reaching out for help

(from professors, tutors, etc.).

Additionally, there now exists a growing stigmatizing societal perception of millennial students, regardless of their Honors status, as being less resilient (especially academically) than previous generations. In an article published on Psychology Today, Dr. Peter Gray, a research professor at Boston College, laments that “Faculty also noted an increased tendency for students to blame them (the faculty) for low grades... Less resilient and needy students have shaped the landscape for faculty in that they are expected to do more handholding, lower their academic standards, and not challenge students too much” (2015). This may be a reflection of many issues that plague the current undergraduate population, including the aforementioned students’ perceptions that attaining high marks is outside of their control. While Gray (2015) also alludes to these issues resulting from a more pervasive societal problem of helicopter parenting, he also notes a larger-scale dimension to the issue of students blaming external entities (rather than their own study habits, use of academic resources, etc.) for their own academic downfalls.

Honors Living-Learning Community

One important aspect of my work this semester was attempting to differentiate between the quality of living experiences within the North and South Campus Honors LLC (between Hills Living Center and Niemeyer Living Center, respectively) and the corresponding impact on academics. Unfortunately, a complete breakdown of this divide is beyond the scope of this project, principally because of the small number of students that decided to participate.

Having been a Resident Assistant for three years with Honors and non-honors students in distinctive living arrangements, I know that one’s living situation can

dramatically influence academics for a variety of reasons, especially within the first semester. This is especially important to consider as faculty and administrators often overlook the relevance of non-academic issues, such as on-going roommate conflicts, to academic success. Kim is a prime example of this, as she represents so many students who have recognized the impact of her living situation on her studies. She readily admitted that her living situation had significant impacts on her academics because she had two bad roommates that stressed her out “a lot. It’s really hard to feel good about anything when you come home and get dirty looks from people for being you.” Issues within one’s living environment often only exacerbate difficulties with academics, such as implementing and maintaining successful study habits. These issues are not unique to Honors however. They exist in all types of living situation, but can be eased with the creation of an effective and connected LLC.

“The honors living and learning community fosters social connectedness among like-minded students and establishes a sense of community and belonging for these students” (Cuevas, 2015, p. 34). I can say that, without a doubt, this is absolutely true. As someone who has been in a position to create and observe this environment, I wholeheartedly believe in the value of the Honors LLC for first-year students. I strongly doubt, however, that there is an equal quality of living experiences and sense of connectedness between first-year Honors students residing in either living center. This is crucial to consider, as Cuevas (2015) summarizes that “psychological sense of community contributed the greatest amount to the variance in thriving among all students, regardless of ethnic group or class standing” (p. 50). The differences that exist must be explored in order to ponder if the quality of the two halves of the Honors LLC also impacts a first-year

Honors student's likelihood of being on AP after the first semester.

Research has found that learning communities, in general, foster collaborative learning environments within supportive peer groups, and may lead to students interacting with others from diverse backgrounds (Soria & Mitchell, 2015). This only happens, of course, if students on the same floor or within the same building interact with each other and form a community. While many other factors are essential to building connections and relationships within a living center (including having a proactive and community-conscious RA), any sort of pre-determined association amongst students (especially one as distinctive as 'Honors students') is hindered by students not participating in group floor activities, which is further impeded when first-year students decide to disappear into the depths of their own bedroom. One of my students from this project, who also lives on my floor in Hills, blatantly said that living in Niemeyer "would've sucked. I have friends who live in Niemeyer...I don't like the whole anti-social part of it."

Related sentiments were raised by the other three students in my project, all of who lived in Niemeyer. While these students recognized many benefits to living in the same building as so many other Honors first-year students (including having access to Honors classmates down the hall and the Honors College Office in the building), they too expressed that it is easy to "not deal with anybody" by *intentionally* keeping to themselves and there was an increased need to seek new friends out (rather than being able to literally hear students walk by one's room, as happens daily in Hills). By being able to easily eliminating this community by separating one's self from the community, a live-in social and academic support system during the challenges of a first-year Honors student first semester disappears.

Many of these contentions arise from the physical layout of each building, which has strong implications for community development. The differences allow for significantly different amounts of privacy (Niemeyer has more square footage per student, including each student's own bedroom within the apartment, while Hills is a more traditional style living center, with a pair of roommates sharing every square inch of their room), resulting in a strong variance in interactions with other students on the floor. As someone who spent my first-year on campus in Niemeyer, I can safely assert that many of those students who lived with me have gone on to be extremely successful in their fields, and many are entering graduate study. However, I know this only through Facebook, as I was never grew close with them, to which I strongly believe the physical structure of Niemeyer contributed significantly. Anecdotally, I know that former Honors Hills residents have also been successful and maintained connections with their friends from the floor.

This is not to suggest, however, that there exists so deep a divide in community (and, correspondingly, academic success) between the North and South Campus Honors LLC that living in Niemeyer is a social death sentence with uncertain negative academic outcomes. Rather, I am suggesting that, within the context of the Honors LLC, there exists a divide in quality of the community between Niemeyer and Hills. Decker (2008) concluded that Honors students living in Niemeyer "reported significantly higher levels of connectedness and participation in activities outside the classroom as compared to honors students living off-campus" (p. 38). It is noteworthy that Niemeyer was the only Honors LLC option at the time of her thesis, as she also concludes that where an Honors student lived, so long as it was on campus, did not significantly impact their connectedness or involvement in extracurricular activities (Decker, 2008).

To illustrate the difference between Niemeyer and Hills, I will offer this example that, as I type this, just walked onto my floor. Today, a mother surprised her daughter (who lives in Hills) by bringing five puppies to campus. Very quickly, word spread amongst students on the floor that special guests had arrived (some literally heard the shouts of elation from down the hall), and a small (but excited) group congregated in the lobby to enjoy the company of the six-week old pups. By evening, the majority of the floor (which has about 60 residents) knew about the visitors, largely because of the friendships that the residents had made with each other over the course of the year. Although there were many factors that spread the news of the puppies, it can be safely understood (as the residents cooing over the puppies agreed) that this would not have happened in Niemeyer. On South Campus, had a mother arrived with visitors, it is likely that they would have enjoyed each other's company in their own spacious apartment, without the need to utilize the lobby because of the abundance of space for everyone.

While living comforts offer many benefits for many students, I argue that they hinder a starting point for community building. The arrival of the puppies in Hills can be expanded to any number of other situations that students share together in a close LLC: good/bad grades, difficulties in a course, roommate issues, homesickness, successes in a new student organization, etc. In the past month alone, I have watched many students from different social groups on the floor helping each other with homework and test preparation for a number of subjects, even when some students were not planning on completing their work at that time. This sort of in-house, impromptu academic assistance is notable for its sense of community, which has been cultivated over the course of the year. By, in a sense, not being able to escape one's neighbors, the North Campus Honors LLC offers students a

more intimate community and a starting point to feeling connected on campus, which can have significantly positive impacts for their academic success.

Conclusions and Suggestions

Kaczvinsky (2007) argues that Honors students are different from their non-honors colleagues because “they are quirkier and more engaged, unconventional but also subject to the same problems, frustrations, and anxieties as their non-honors counterparts” (p. 88). I would argue that this is true except that their “problems, frustrations, and anxieties” are heightened and exaggerated by being an Honors student. Not only do Honors students expect more of themselves oftentimes, others do as well (especially family). All of a sudden, not performing well in a class (for the first time in one’s life) does not just hurt their future career plans, but it can bring about a series of self-doubting questions. This is only compounded with other layers of issues that most first-year students experience: homesickness, struggles with independence, lack of social connectedness, etc.

While eliminating the accumulation and aftereffects of poor grades for every student is beyond the scope of a university’s Honors program (as these issues often are related to study skills and self-perceptions developed in pre-university environments), the intentional prevention of these academic difficulties can be formulated. For example, because many Honors students do not relate high effort to high performance, only half attribute success to internal factors, and many seek to blame external problems for troublesome marks early in their first-year, but are more willing to challenge their beliefs and attitudes more than other students on campus, administrators can encourage co-curricular programs that explain how an internal locus of control and growth mindset can significantly benefit their studies. This proactive programming and knowledge could very

easily be added to “The Honors College Survival Guide: Complete Direction for the Honors Freshman,” an Honors senior project completed by my first year Resident Assistant, Joey Courtade (2009), that addresses many key difficulties that first-year Honors students face. Perhaps by infusing some of Courtade’s suggestions with intentional discussions about locus of control and/or self-perception, this could be a preventative measure to poor academic performance in the first semester for new Honors students. If these were implemented through RAs or other university/Honors personnel with whom the students will interact often, this can also have a side effect of building a successful Honors LLC (on both ends of campus) in which students can thrive.

The importance of the living space cannot be underestimated, especially when students intentionally decide to live together in Honors housing. An Honors “program has the responsibility to make sure that a student’s academic record predicts meeting that [academic] standard. This kind of prediction becomes more important if honors has a rich social structure and residential community” (Kelly, 2013, p. 26). Currently, GVSU’s Meijer Honors College does a remarkable job blending the living and learning aspects of the community. I would strongly advise that as many first-year Honors students as possible be placed together in an intentional LLC on North Campus in order to increase the psychological sense of community, which is one that often bonds around academics. Additionally, because connectedness only arises from relationships with others, I believe that the number of residents per RA must be lowered in an Honors LLC. I have had 64 residents each of the last two years in Hills, and similar numbers are reported for RAs in Niemeyer (albeit with spatial differences strongly impacting those numerous interactions). The construction of the newest living center on North Campus opens a new opportunity for

academic success to be a communal undertaking for first-year Honors students because it reflects a traditional living center style: less space per resident, more interactions with others on the floor, and plenty of opportunities to build connectedness.

Perhaps one of the few themes that arose from my work with my students this semester, and that can potentially fit in very well with Honors students' self-perceptions and the Honors LLC, is the questionable role of the Honors mentor. Currently, the Honors mentor is an upper class Honors student that works with a small group of first-year Honors students for the first few months of the first semester. The first-year students are often grouped together according to an intended major that matches with their Honors mentor. While this role has the potential to be a worthy endeavor, for three of the students with which I worked, the Honors mentor had little to no impact at the beginning of their collegiate career. One of my students, Ben, remarked that while it was helpful that his mentor was also an engineering student, she had no significant impact on him. Ben recalled that his mentor "had to go to training halfway through [the Honors College Welcome Days] and we got put with another group," and that throughout the semester nothing substantial came about. This reflects the feedback that I have received and observed from my residents for the past two years in Hills. That is to say, there is a general lack of connectedness between the first-year Honors students and their mentors, which brings about no positive outcomes for the student in any light (academically, connectedness to GVSU or Honors College, etc.).

From an RA's perspective, Honors mentors have the opportunity to offer a concentrated amount of help to first-year students, but have the difficult task of attempting to do so without overstepping the role of the RA. The first few weeks are crucial to an RA to

build a sense of community on the floor, which requires building a personal relationship with each resident. This is an enormous task in-and-of itself, let alone when a different student leader is potentially taking that student out of the building (and away from their Honors LLC which is being developed by their RA).

Additionally, mentors represent an additional challenge during Welcome Week beyond the Transitions Leaders, who have similarly concentrated and short-lived roles in the lives of incoming freshmen on campus. If there was more collaboration between mentors, Transitions Leaders, and/or Resident Assistants, the results could be much more engaging for the Honors LLC. Currently, these three groups have minimal interaction, and each has its own difficulties to overcome at the beginning of the year (especially Transition Leaders). If, for example, a combination of these upper classmen taught first-year students about the aforementioned perception and locus of control issues of first-year students or shared their own personal accounts of difficulties with the academic workload, desired outcomes within the Honors LLC, such as creating collaborative learning environments, could be more effective earlier in the year (Soria & Mitchell, 2015).

To conclude, I offer this quote: “many students who enter honors will lack the desire or ability to graduate from the program, but this is no reason to automatically assume that honors has failed these students” (Kelly, 2013, p. 25). To be clear, the number of factors that influence a first-year Honors student’s poor academic record stretch well beyond the scope of this senior project, and this does not mean that the individual has failed as a college student. Success is defined in many ways around a university, and, in my experiences, Honors students are often the diligent students who set those standards quite high for the rest of the student population, even in this first year on campus. Although I

have been disappointed for a variety of reasons with the production of this project, most notably the lack of participants, I have thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to interact with first-year Honors students in this refined manner. While I did not act as a cure-all for their academic and personal ills, as is always the hope in a mentoring/advising role (and comes second nature to me now after having been an RA for three years), I can hope and pray that the time we spent together throughout the semester helps them perceive their own potential success, and how much of that future achievement may very well live within themselves and their living center.

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