

## Honors Student Ambassador Prototype Report

### **Rationale**

The goal of my senior project is to help the GVSU Honors College become more distinctive and distinguished by making it more visible to potential student recruits. Through my Honors Junior Seminar (Design Thinking Class; Fall 2017), I worked with an incredible student team to identify this unmet need of visibility, and worked through the first 5 steps of the design thinking process. We researched, empathized, innovated, and developed a Prototype Concept of an Honors Student Ambassador Program. This senior project completes the design thinking process by attacking that 6<sup>th</sup> step—*testing* my team’s suggested optimum Prototype Concept!

Our research showed that to successfully make the Honors College experience more distinctive, the lack of visibility of the College among incoming students as well as those already on the GVSU campus, needs to be addressed. Many people—both prospective students, current students, and their families—have never heard of the Honors College at GVSU. There is limited presence on campus; no overt brand development and no general advertising. Too often students are enrolling at GVSU not knowing that the Honors College exists, and, even if they meet Honors enrollment criteria, they lack any tangible evidence that connects them to GVSU Honors. Our research also showed that when students *were* aware that Honors exists, they harbored many misconceptions that deterred them from joining. Such misconceptions include that Honors is too academically difficult, or that Honors Students are anti-social or an “elite club”, or that it’s a lot of extra work that isn’t useful to advancing your college or post-college career. This prototype concept aims to address these issues.

## **Process of Preparing for the Prototype Test**

The first step in this process was to reach out to my high school and make plans to present in an Advanced Placement (AP) classroom. Over the summer of 2018 I emailed my high school guidance counselor Robyn Weiss. I thought she was very helpful, but in mid-September, I found out that we had had a miscommunication. She put me on the schedule to present in the Career Center of my high school, which meant that interested students would have to leave class to come and hear the presentation. This proved to be quite an obstacle because if students had to take the initiative to plan and leave class, the very nature of the Prototype Concept being tested is different (presenting in AP classes). So, in order to overcome this obstacle, I contacted the teachers directly. I emailed all of the Honors English teachers at my high school, none of them responded. Next, I emailed all of the AP Science teachers. Only one responded, but he said there was no room in his schedule. Lastly, I emailed my previous AP Calculus teacher, Mr. Weingarden. He responded immediately and positively. It worked out that the exact day I had wanted to present was also the day of the school's homecoming pep rally, which meant that classes were shortened. Mr. Weingarden had not made any significant plans for that day and he said I would be welcome to present. Therefore, I was now scheduled to present to the AP Calculus classes on October 12, 2018!

During the time that I was emailing my prior and other AP teachers and scheduling plans, I was also creating the Honors Student Ambassador presentation. The presentation consisted of a PowerPoint and debrief questionnaire (see Honors Student Ambassador Kit). I made two appointments with the GVSU Speech Lab, the first of which helped organize and edit the actual PowerPoint. The second Speech Lab appointment gave me tips on the delivery of the presentation. I also practiced the presentation in front of friends, family, and roommates multiple times. Additionally, I did an official practice run for my advisor, Dr. Chamberlain, and the director of the Honors College, Dr. Roger Gilles which was very informative and useful. Practicing the presentation, and getting as many perspectives and as much feedback as possible before October 12th was a crucial part of the process.

Another concurrent part of the process was to create a video detailing life inside the Honors dorms. Interestingly, there are very few pictures and no videos of the interior of the

Frederik Meijer Honors College dorm rooms. Our research junior year showed that the dorms are one of the most attractive parts of the Honors College to prospective students, so I wanted to make sure they were highlighted. I worked with Robyn Toth, Office Manager of the Honors College, to send an email to Honors film students asking if they wanted to help make the video. I got several responses and after meeting with them, decided to work with a freshman named Allison Riley. I came up with the scenes and video script, and she filmed and edited the video. Preparation of the video was more rushed than I would have liked, but the video was usable, and therefore I integrated into the presentation.

The last step of the process was the actual presentation. Though I am usually confident in my public speaking skills, I was for some reason exceptionally nervous to present. I went earlier than necessary to the school because I was anxious sitting at home, which turned out to be a really good thing. I arrived during the student lunch period, and was therefore able to converse with the students I would be presenting to beforehand. This greatly calmed me down as I had an opportunity to establish rapport with some of the students. The presentation got started on time and lasted exactly 20 minutes as planned. It went extremely well. After presenting I read through all of the responses to the debrief questions which were completed by the students at the end of the presentation. I was elated! Most of the class said they would be considering applying to the Honors College at GVSU after the presentation. I considered my work a success!

## **Takeaways**

One thing I learned from this process is the importance of effective communication. I know that communication is crucial to success, however, I learned that I have to talk to more than just one person to avoid obstacles. Another takeaway from conducting this prototype is that I needed more time for the presentation. I had originally allotted 20 minutes for the presentation, which is what I told Mr. Weingarden. But after several practice runs, I realized I would need closer to 30 or even 35 minutes. Because the class was shortened, I knew I would not be able to take more than 20 minutes, so I had to condense the presentation, which left less time for answering questions, and less detailed explanations. In doing the presentation again, I would ask for at least 30 minutes.

Furthermore, I learned the debrief questionnaire is an important component for getting student feedback. Through the questionnaire, many students were able to think of questions to submit on the debrief questionnaire, but they did not ask very many during the presentation (on the slide asking for questions). Many of the students complimented my presentation skills on the debrief. Many said the presentation was very thorough, but there were of course suggestions. Some suggestions were to go through the slides a little more slowly. Someone also wrote that I should work on saying “like” less, which is very helpful feedback and I will keep that in mind for all future presentations! Another thing that confused some of the audience members was my description of the relationship between Honors and the rest of GVSU. I tried to explain it throughout the presentation, but I did not want to spend too much time talking about GVSU in general because that wasn’t the purpose of my visit. However, after doing the presentation, I have found that it may be helpful for the students to have more general information about GVSU before explaining Honors. This could be in the form of a pamphlet, or just working with admissions to make sure someone from GVSU has already introduced GVSU at the high school before the Honors Student Ambassador presentation, so students have some background knowledge.

## **Recommendations**

For future iterations of the presentation, I suggest the following:

- I would make sure to reach out specifically to teachers, not counselors, principles, or office workers in order to avoid confusion and have a more direct route to the classroom.
- I would suggest that future ambassadors read the debrief questions provided by the students before leaving the classroom. This provides the opportunity to answer any questions that students may have been hesitant to ask during the presentation. To do this, make sure that you have enough time.

- Practice the presentation all the way through, timing yourself before you give the teacher an estimated length. From my experience, a thorough presentation will probably be around 30 minutes or more, but it could change from school to school.
- Additionally, there is a need for a more detailed video of the dorms, with a 360° view. The Honors dorms are one of the most appealing parts of the Honors College. Less could be shown about the academic building. This was further proved accurate in the feedback I received from the debrief. I would suggest that an Honors film student make a more detailed video that really captures what it's like to live in the Niemeyer dorms for a possible future senior project. This is such a crucial aspect of reaching out to prospective students!

## **Conclusion**

This project tested a Prototype Concept for an Honors Student Ambassador program, and because of the success of this first Prototype, I would argue that developing an Honors Student Ambassador program would play a crucial role in making the Honors College at GVSU more distinctive, distinguished, and visible. The number of high school students who expressed interest in joining the Honors College after being introduced, provides evidence of the significance of an Honors Student Ambassador program. Through my Design Thinking team's research, we discovered that word of mouth is the best way to increase visibility and interest in any topic. This Prototype Concept provides the opportunity for the Honors College to be discussed in high schools to students making college decisions, making it more visible, and dispelling rumors and misconceptions.

My next step in the development of this Prototype Concept will be to work with Robyn Toth, asking her to send a survey to all Honors students about whether or not students would be interested in being Ambassadors. Assessing the level of interest will be very telling as to how sustainable an Honors Student Ambassador Program might be. I am also considering reaching out to Live. Learn. Lead. professors and speaking to their freshman classes about the opportunity of participating as an Honors Student Ambassador. It would be great to kickstart the

development of an Honors Student Ambassador program because of the successful testing of this Prototype Concept. An Honors Student Ambassador program will build on and sustain the foundation laid in completing this project.