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University Honors Program: Enhanced Learning Experiences

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The role in any university honors program is to provide an enhanced learning experience. Students who are enrolled in the honors program could gain hands on practical experiences and can be utilized in the real world. Additionally, honors program students can participate in research projects and potential internship approaching graduation. With these opportunities in mind, The GSU Honors Program seeks to expands its initiatives focusing on three strategies: connection, engagement, and long-lasting professional relationships with its alumni (Chaney et al., 2020).

The purpose of this paper is to establish a framework correlated to the role of the University Honors Program's strategic plan. Throughout this process, details to these following questions are addressed: *What impact does the University Honors Program have on its students, and how are Honors Program students connected and engaged throughout their academic career?*

This question will address the significance of an honors program throughout its own strategic planning process and how these strategies can be incorporated in the future. Examining the literature will provide the necessary framework for understanding the purpose of an honors program, proceeded by strategic plans and goals established by the National Collegiate Honors College and how the GSU Honors Program can utilize these goals in its own strategy.

Literature Review

This literature review will focus on impact of an honors program, engagement throughout a student's academic career, and maintaining professional alumni relationships (Dollinger & Lodge, 2019). Diving into these concepts, each topic may discuss how it may positively affect the reputation of this academic program.

Impact of a University Honors Program

Institutions seek to cultivate a culture of high achieving students (Chaney et al., 2020). Students who become engaged in their coursework and have an overall positive satisfaction are two times as much as likely to graduate with a solid professional working and research background (Cognard-Black & Spisak, 2019). Thus, begs the question on what activities or overall culture help increases a positive impact for a student in the honors program.

For any new college student, a sense of belonging becomes an emotional human need to have a sense of purpose and do well in academic coursework (Baik et al., 2019). When sense of belonging is answered, honors program students begin to build a living and learning community amongst their peers. Students are then likely to stay with a university and overall help retention rates (Cognard-Black & Spisak, 2019). Furthermore, new honors program students begin to build a sense of identity where he or she can build connections and experiences during their academic career (Laidlaw et a., 2015).

The impact of a university honors program helps strengthen relationships with those who have graduated with university honors. These types of students can be defined as those who have become involved with clubs or organizations, volunteerism, sports, honor societies, or living on campus. These types of experiences provide a positive impact and increases one's sense of belonging and achievement (Bahls, 2020).

In contrast, the impact of an honors program is greatly influenced by initiatives established by the academic program. Forward-thinking strategies must be established and investigate the future of what potential students may be appealed by. The following section will focus on how honors program students stay connected and engaged with their fellow peers and colleagues.

Connection and Engagement

University Honors Programs are held accountable to boost enrollment and maintain retention rates for those enrolled in the program (Deka, 2020). Recruitment and planning become a top priority to achieve the goals. While activities vary with each student population and period, events such as teambuilding activities, socials, and retreats significantly contribute to a program's success to keep the busy student population connected and engaged. Regardless of how long students stay connected, their engagement in the honors program impacts their own success and the program's reputation. In essence, students will see the fruit of their labor based on their level of participation. On the other hand, students may join an academic program, yet not choose to participate in any program initiatives or events. This is an important aspect as these types of students may dropout or dissociate from the honors program. As a result, he or she may lose their sense of belonging or connection to the university (Kool et al., 2016). The question then asked is: What are effective means of connection and engagement with a highly active academic program?

As stated by the NCHC (2021), a consensus of communication and professionalism were deemed important. Honors Program students need various ways of communication, rather than an old-fashioned email. Students want to be notified through social media outlets such as Facebook and Instagram, or through an SMS text messaging system. When it comes to professionalism, honors program students want to hear what the workforce is like based on their chosen academic major. Additionally, students want to know how they can start gaining experience now rather than waiting for graduation.

Building Professional Relationships

After successfully graduating with University Honors, it is crucial to maintain professional relationships with these individuals. Not only does it portray a positive image for the academic program, but it may open potential opportunities for other honors program students to follow suit. Alumni can be motivated to stay connected with the university by enhancing the alumni experience (Kool et al., 2016). This may include serving as a guest speaker at special honors program events, establishing a LinkedIn Social Media connection, or by featuring the honors alumni academic success and future goals with a follow-up after a period has passed.

Instrument

In this qualitative narrative research instrument, students will participate in a semi-structured individual interview. The purpose is for the student to discuss their experiences in chronological order such as interest in joining the honors program, achievements, obstacles, and what can the honors program develop to improve initiatives and connections. That narrative interview will take place virtually over the Zoom meeting platform, lasting for about 30 minutes. Interviews will also be recorded which can be used for reference in data analysis.

Data Analysis

Data will be analyzed utilizing a restorying process. Through restorying, common themes or narratives will be developed based on these zoom interviews (Creswell & Guetterman, 2021). Throughout the duration of this analysis, member checking may occur throughout the study to ensure the validity and accuracy of the report. This step will involve researchers closely collaborating with the participants that have provided the narratives. Thus, students would be invited to look over the restorying data that has been analyze and may help revised or reshape the final storying being told in the narrative.

Timeframe

The timeframe of this study will occur in the span of two months. In weeks 1 through 2, after the target population has been identified students will be sent an invitation email to participate. With each email correspondence, a copy of the informed consent will be attached to the invitation email. In weeks 3 through 4, a reminder email will be sent to eligible students who may participate. Weeks 5 through 6 will conduct the narrative research interviews. Each interview should last about 30 minutes. In weeks 7 through 8, narratives will go through the restorying process and may involve collaboration of the student to ensure validity and credibility of the final narrative. The final step in this research study may fluctuate as needed.

Results and Recommendations

Many studies describe the traits and characteristics required to be admitted into a university honors program. Additional studies also discuss potential stressors and barriers that honors program students may face, thus, resulting in low retention rates and loss in the sense of belonging to an honors community. Research can be developed on how honors program students can be supported by other peers, colleagues, and faculty members. This study would help close honors program achievement gaps and increase student retention rates for graduating with honors distinction.

Avenues for Further Inquiry

New studies show that implementing peer mentoring programs for incoming freshmen significantly increase a student's GPA and is maintained throughout a student's freshmen and sophomore year. These peer mentors are college juniors and seniors that help provide academic support and co-curricular interventions. The primary motive for including these supports was to build a sense of belonging and community amongst honors program students. This is done

through honors program housing, professional development workshops, and social events to keep the honors program population connected and build upon their network.

Summary

The purpose of this paper is to establish a framework correlated to the role of the University Honors Program's strategic plan. Throughout this process, details to these following questions are addressed: *What impact does the University Honors Program have on its students, and how are Honors Program students connected and engaged throughout their academic career?* Current research findings show that a sense of belonging, and community engagement help make an honors program successful in a student's academic career. This paper has discussed areas and means of improvement within the impact of honors, engagement, and improving alumni relationships.

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