
■ **2006-2007 Honors Student Focus Group
and Faculty Feedback Report**

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LOYOLA
COLLEGE IN MARYLAND

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This report prepared by The Office of First-Year Research
using data collected in student focus groups and from faculty written feedback.

2006-2007 Honors Student Focus Group and Faculty Feedback Report

Introduction

The Honors Program at Loyola College is a selective four-year program and admission is by invitation only. Students in Honors take 12 courses at the Honors level during their time at Loyola. Eleven of these courses can fulfill core requirements in the traditional humanities disciplines of English, Fine Arts, History, Philosophy, Theology, and Writing. Honors classes are small and most are conducted as seminars and emphasize effective speaking and writing. In their first semester at Loyola, the Honors students take an introductory writing class (HN 200 Freshman Seminar) and an interdisciplinary class that focuses on the ideas, literature, faith traditions, and history of the western world during a specific historical time period (HN 220 The Ancient World).

The program also has an extracurricular enrichment component, "The Honors Experience," which provides students with opportunities to participate in cultural activities on and off campus. Activities include plays, lectures, concerts, and exhibits in the Baltimore area.

In 2006-2007, there were 54 students (6% of the incoming class) who entered the Honors program as first-year students and six faculty who taught first-year Honors students. Overall, 60% of the first-year students participated in one of Loyola's four first-year programs.

Though the Honors Program is not technically a "first-year program" at Loyola, it is often included in assessments of Loyola's first-year programs. Like the other first-year programs, Honors provides academic enrichment and a social component for new students as they adjust to college life during their first semester. Students who participate in Honors are not eligible to participate in any of Loyola's other first-year programs.

In order to assess how well the first-year programs are functioning and what improvements could be made, focus group discussions were conducted with students in each of the programs. In addition, faculty and instructors teaching in the programs were emailed a set of questions about their experiences in the programs and asked for written feedback. This report provides results from the study on first-year Honors students and faculty only. Results from the Alpha, Collegium, and FE 100 studies can be found in separate reports available from the Office of First-Year Research.

Methodology

The feedback from the first-year Honors students was collected by holding a discussion group towards the end of the first semester. The goal was to have between 8 and 10 participants. To achieve this objective, 40 individuals were invited via email to the session (See Appendix A for a sample invitation). Invitees were selected randomly from all Class of 2010 Honors students.

The focus group was planned for December 6th from 5:00 to 6:30. Invitees were notified that dinner and two movie tickets would be provided to all participants. Thirteen students indicated that they would participate in the focus group but only twelve students attended the discussion. The focus group was facilitated by Jennifer Duffy Annulis, Coordinator of First-Year Research and Chinara Brown, Administrative Assistant. When students arrived at the focus groups, they helped themselves to dinner and introductions were

made. It was explained that there were no right or wrong answers and that students should feel free to voice their opinions. It was explained that the discussion would be taped for purposes of writing the report only; all comments would remain anonymous and no one else would listen to the tape. (See Appendix B for the discussion guide.)

Faculty feedback about the Honors program in the first semester was collected via email. It was decided that trying to hold a discussion group for instructors was too difficult due to the small number in the group and past history of scheduling difficulties. Faculty were sent an invitation from Dr. Ilona McGuinness, Dean of First-Year Students and Academic Services, and Jennifer Duffy Annulis, asking them to send in their responses to a select number of questions about their experience in the program (see Appendix C). All instructors were given thirteen days to respond, and they were assured that their written comments would be kept confidential. They had the option to mail in their comments anonymously if they did not feel comfortable using email to submit their replies. Five of the six faculty who teach first-year Honors students provided feedback.

Executive Summary

Expectations and Outcomes

- ◆ Upon starting the Honors program many of the students were nervous, expecting a competitive atmosphere, heavy workload, and a lot of tests. They anticipated having top-notch professors and engaged classmates.
- ◆ Some students did not know what to expect of the program because the information they received about the program was unclear or insufficient.
- ◆ The program has not met students' expectations in all areas.
 - Many students were glad that the professors were caring and trusted the students to do their work instead of using frequent tests and quizzes to check up on them.
 - Some thought there would be more opportunities and activities for Honors students than there are.
 - Some wished the class discussions were better and that people felt freer to express differing viewpoints.
- ◆ Several faculty members indicated that the program is meeting their expectations as far as the quality of the students and their enjoyment in teaching them.

Characteristics of the Honors Students

- ◆ For the most part, Honors faculty describe their students as bright and intellectually engaged. The Honors students are more likely than other students to engage in conversations about ideas or about their professors' research.
- ◆ Some of the students, however, are very "grade conscious" or "rigid in their thinking."

The Jesuit Tradition

- ◆ Students expressed mixed experiences and ideas when discussing the Jesuit tradition at Loyola and in the Honors program. One student believed the Jesuit values were reflected in faculty members showing care for students, while another saw evidence of the Jesuit tradition and values in the interdisciplinary approach of the Honors curriculum.

Advising

- ◆ Students had mixed experiences with advising. Some described close relationships, saying their advisors were very helpful and approachable for any type of problem. Others had more formal relationships and wouldn't necessarily seek their advisor's help with certain issues.

Scheduling

- ◆ Because the Honors course sequencing restricts what classes the students can take and when they can take them, class scheduling is a source of much conflict and anxiety for the Honors students

Activities and Social Experiences

- ◆ The Honors students participate in activities such as trips to Center Stage, nights at the symphony, and an Honors dinner. Not all Honors activities are well-attended though.

- ◆ In general, students say there needs to be a better sense of community within the Honors program. Students often do not know the other Honors students outside their classes.

New Ideas

- ◆ Students recommended having more activities that would help create a sense of unity in the program.
- ◆ Faculty suggestions for the program include a thesis requirement, student presentations of scholarship, and the elimination of letter grades.

Detailed Findings

Expectations and Outcomes

Participants describe Honors as a small program for exceptional students who enroll in challenging classes. The Honors program classes are in the Humanities and most fulfill Core requirements. At the heart of the Program, is the four-course sequence of classes that take an interdisciplinary approach and are based on specific periods of time. In addition to the academic component, there are opportunities outside of the classroom for Honors students.

Before students started the semester, many of them were nervous about the Honors program and expected challenging courses, with a heavy workload and a lot of reading. One student “came in kind of terrified” and another said, “I came in dreading it.” Some students expected it to be very competitive and they anticipated a lot of tests and quizzes. A couple students mentioned that they expected top-notch professors would teach the classes. One student indicated that she was looking forward to being in class with other students who cared and wanted to be challenged.

Students overwhelmingly agreed that they did not have enough information about the Honors program ahead of time. Even the application itself seemed vague as to what it was exactly that they were applying. They received mailings about the Honors program over the summer, but felt that they were not written in plain language. Therefore, some of the students simply did not know what to expect of the program.

The program has not met the students’ expectations in all areas. A couple students explained that the professors place a lot of trust in the students and don’t check up on them through frequent tests and quizzes as expected. One student said, “The professors have been really nice and supportive and have made adjusting easier.” While some said they have other classes that are harder than their Honors classes, one student said, “For my Ancient World class, I work harder than all my other classes combined.” A few felt the outside activities weren’t what they’d expected. One said, “It sounded like there were going to be a lot more opportunities for us than other students.” Another person perceived that students in Alpha and Collegium have more outside opportunities than do students in the Honors program.

Some students also felt that there would be more discussion and exposure to different points of view in their Honors classes than there actually was. One student said, “In my course syllabus, my professor pretty much laid out that he had a lot more schooling than us, and if we disagree on a point with him, then we’re wrong and he’s right because he knows more than we do.” Furthermore, some students also felt that there was a right and wrong answer when it came to writing papers. They felt like they wanted to be graded on the quality of their writing and not on whether they had chosen the “right” topic to write about.

The reasons for choosing the Honors program were varied. As mentioned above, some students weren’t sure exactly what they were taking on when they applied to the program. A few students applied because they wanted to be in class with other talented students. One student said he had taken Honors and AP classes in high school; therefore, joining the Honors program seemed like the natural thing to do. Another student spoke about how she probably would not have come to Loyola had she not been accepted to the Honors program. A couple of people mentioned that they had also tried to sign up for Alpha, not realizing that Honors students aren’t permitted to take Alpha classes. Some said Alpha sounds like more fun and that the college makes “it [Honors] sound a lot better than it is.”

Students discussed the quality of learning in their Honors classes and whether there were academic benefits to being in the program. Opinions were mixed. For the most part, the Ancient World course was viewed more positively than the Freshman Seminar course. One student, in fact, talked about how much smarter he feels after each Ancient World class. In speaking about the Freshman Seminar class, students indicated that they were taught *how* to write, but many students expressed the desire for more interaction in the class and more opportunities to actually practice their writing. One person indicated that that she's learned more about writing in some of her other courses.

Some students did provide examples of how being in the Honors program influenced their academic performance in the first semester. They related specific examples of how their Ancient World class was relevant to what they were learning in other classes they were taking simultaneously, such as Political Science, Greek, or Economics.

Several faculty members indicated that the program is meeting their expectations as far as the quality of the students and their enjoyment in teaching them. For example, one professor said, "As a group, the students are highly committed, very able, and a pleasure to work with." One professor, however, noticed that while some students seem to be motivated by the pursuit of ideas, others seem to be more motivated by having the Honors experience on their resume. One professor mentioned his/her disappointment in other Honors professors, saying specifically, "I've found interest in and respect for my discipline and teaching process quite lacking in my colleagues despite a record of student success."

Characteristics of the Honors Students

In speaking about their first-year Honors students, all of the faculty agreed that the Honors group are bright and intellectually engaged. Faculty used phrases such as "intellectually alive," "more diligent," and "astute, interested, and willing to speak in class" when describing them. One professor noticed that Honors students ask faculty about their research and publications more often than do other students. Another noted that students "benefit intellectually and personally from association with their highly motivated peers." Still another compared first-year Honors students to "upper-level Writing majors: curious about books, ideas, willing to follow-up on suggested readings, etc."

While most of the feedback was extremely positive, some professors did provide some criticisms. One professor noted that the Honors students are "more grade conscious/anxious than their counterparts." He/she also noted that a "small minority of the population can be rigid in their thinking." Furthermore, it was mentioned that sometimes students in the sciences or business don't fully appreciate the writing course and view it similarly to non-Honors students. A different professor noted that there is always a large percentage of Honors students who "are not especially creative or intellectually ambitious; they regard all reading and writing as 'homework,' and when they attend colloquia, etc. it seems to be under a cloud of some duress."

The Jesuit Tradition

A discussion about how the Jesuit tradition was woven into their Honors experience or into their experience at Loyola in general revealed mixed experiences and ideas. One person pointed out that Theology is part of the Ancient World class but then realized that's not really an example of the Jesuit tradition. Another student said he thinks it's more evident in his Ancient World class than his non-Honors classes because of the interdisciplinary approach. He said he feels encouraged to learn for the sake of learning. Finally, one student sees Jesuit values in action when faculty encourage her to think for herself and show that they really care about their students.

Advising

The first-year Honors students have one of their Honors professors as their advisor. The students' experiences with their advisors were mixed. Some of the students described close relationships in which they'd feel comfortable seeking advice for various types of problems. Others described more formal relationships in which they would not feel comfortable seeking help for a problem. One student said she has a much stronger relationship with her Ancient World professor than she does with any of her other instructors. She described him as being very helpful with his guidance. Someone else said hers was "the opposite." She described a high-strung advisor who was not all that helpful and had a tendency to blow things out of proportion. Another student indicated that she would have preferred that her advisor be from her major.

Scheduling

A topic that arose during the discussion that seemed to be an issue of concern for many of the students was class scheduling. In a very lively discussion many students described extreme difficulties in planning their course schedules. One person said it was so bad she "considered dropping out of the Honors program." Another said that she is trying to get her Bachelor's and Master's in five years and is finding scheduling impossible. She said her mother wants her to drop out of Honors. It seems that the course sequencing restricts what the Honors students can take when. It was clear that this is a great source of anxiety for these students.

Activities and Social Experiences

Students discussed the different types of activities that they participated in with the Honors program. They mentioned trips to the symphony and an Honors Dinner. One person said the best activity was trips to Center Stage. Someone else had positive comments about a visiting professor that the Honors program co-sponsored. The film series was mentioned but people said it was not well-attended. In fact, students said that although the Honors program does provide a number of events, the participation level is just not what it should be. They feel that this is because there is not a strong sense of community in the Honors program. They can't just show up at an event and assume that they'll know others there; they have to make sure they bring a friend with them. One student said she thinks that the advertising for the Honors events is sometimes insufficient. Finally, students spoke about a mandatory trip to New York. Many students were not pleased with the 6:00 a.m. departure time or the fact that it conflicted with the Student Activities-sponsored trip to the Navy/Notre Dame football game.

It was discussed whether the Honors program helped the students feel connected and eased their transition to college. Responses were mixed. A few students mentioned that it was nice to start the year being involved in a smaller community within the larger campus community. Others talked about how nice it was to move in a day early and how that allowed them to meet some fellow Honors students. A couple students, however, said that they had more friends in their dorm than they did in the Honors program.

Students also spoke about Honors housing and why they did or did not choose to live there. A couple of people chose Honors housing because they wanted to be in a double rather than in an apartment. One person thought it might be quieter in Honors housing, although she admitted that it turned out to not always be the case. A few people didn't want to live with the Honors students because they wanted to meet more people outside the program. One student who adamantly did not want to live in Honors housing said he figured the Honors students would be studying all the time and he didn't want to live in that environment.

New Ideas

The majority of students would like to see more unity within the program and more events with the other Honors sections and upperclass students. As one student said, "The program itself isn't close as a whole; individual classes are friends, but I don't really know anyone outside of them." A number of students said that the scheduling difficulties need to be addressed. Others said that the program requirements need to be made clearer to students before and after they apply to Honors. Other suggestions included bringing in more speakers and having more cultural trips to Baltimore and Washington, DC.

A couple of the faculty members made various suggestions for the program. One professor suggested a thesis requirement or student presentations of scholarship. Another professor had a suggestion to eliminate letter-grade evaluations in favor of a pass/fail system. He/she says that "it would encourage students to focus more fully and freely on learning, and it might help break, for some, the obsessive concern with GPA." In addition he/she proposes a "system of yearly student re-appointments to the Honors program."

Summary

When asked to list the best aspects of participating in the Honors program the most popular responses included the Ancient World class, the Ancient World professor, the four-course sequence, and the interdisciplinary approach. Some students also mentioned their fellow Honors students.

Commonly cited negative aspects of the program included course scheduling difficulties and a lack of unity within the program. In addition, students believe the program requirements need to be made clearer.

Faculty enjoy working with the Honors students, whom they describe as intellectually engaged and bright. Some faculty cited the students' willingness to participate in class and their interest in their professors' work and research.

Appendix A: Honors Focus Group Invitation

Dear Name,

The College is interested in what students think about their experiences in the Honors program. As your first semester comes to a close, we are hoping that you will help us by sharing your views of the program.

The Office of First-Year Research is holding a discussion group from 5:00 to 6:30 on Wednesday, December 6th in Champion Tower 115. You've been selected as one of only a small group of students who are being asked to attend.

We are giving a gift of two free movie tickets to each student who participates, and we will also provide pizza and refreshments during the discussion.

This is an excellent chance to let your voice be heard at Loyola. Feedback about your experiences as an Honors student will help the College know how to improve the program for future students. Please join us. Space in the group is limited to 10 students, so please reserve your space quickly. You can reserve your space in the group by replying to this email.

Thank you. We look forward to seeing you on the 6th.

Appendix B: Honors Student Focus Group Discussion Guide

- I. INTRODUCTION AND WELCOME (5 min)
 - a. Who we are
 - b. Why we asked you here tonight
 - i. Focus on Honors program
 - c. What is a focus group and ground rules
 - i. Enjoy the food
 - ii. Opinions, no right/wrong answers
 - iii. Tape recording (no full names used)

- II. SELF-INTRODUCTIONS (3 min)
 - a. Which dorm they live in
 - b. Where they're from

- III. EXPECTATIONS AND OUTCOMES (20 min)
 - a. We're new to Loyola. What would you want to tell us about the Honors program? How has the Program been this semester?
 - b. What were your expectations of the Honors Program?
 - i. Did the Program meet those expectations?
 - ii. Has participating in the Honors Program helped you with other courses? How?
 - iii. How would you describe the quality and level of learning in your Honors classes in comparison with other classes at Loyola?
 - iv. Describe the influence Honors had on your academic performance this semester. Writing? Critical thinking/analytical skills? Discussion skills?
 - c. Why did you decide to apply for the Honors Program? If you hadn't applied for Honors, was there another first-year program you would have been interested in?
 - d. Do you feel like the Jesuit tradition was woven into your Honors experience? How about your experience at Loyola in general?

- IV. FACULTY/ADVISORS (15 min)
 - a. Let's talk about your Honors professors for a few minutes. How would you describe your relationship with your Honors professors?
 - i. Compare this relationship to your relationships with non-Honors professors. Do you think the relationship was different than your non-Honors friends' relationships with their professors?
 - b. Tell us about your advising experience.

- V. ACTIVITIES/SOCIAL (15 min)
 - a. What types of Honors activities did you participate in outside of the classroom? Which were the most meaningful? Which were not so meaningful? Why?
 - i. Community service (if not already mentioned)
 - b. Did Honors influence your transition to college life here? Do you think this transition would have been different if you hadn't been in Honors?
 - i. Did the Honors program help you feel "connected" at Loyola? Did it help you make connections with friends, the college, the larger community, etc.?
 - c. Do you live in Honors housing? If so, how has that experience been?
 - i. If so, has living on the same floor contributed to your academic experience?
 - ii. If not, why did you opt not to live in Honors housing?

- VI. CLOSING (15 min)

- a. When you talk with friends or relatives who are at other schools, what do you hear about that you would like to see at Loyola College?
- b. Now, before you leave, I want you to do one last thing. Write down for me the best and worst aspects of the Honors program. Imagine you could let those involved in the program know what should be kept as is and what should be changed and write those things down.

Appendix C: Honors Faculty Questions

Dear Honors Faculty Name,

As a faculty member teaching a first-year Honors course, your feedback is important as we plan for a new cohort of Honors students next year. In the past we've attempted to gather faculty together for group discussions about the program but we found that, because of challenges with scheduling and availability, we were only hearing from a small segment of the faculty. This year, in an effort to hear from all of the Honors faculty, we'd like to get your written feedback on a few focused questions. You can simply reply to this email with your comments. Responses will remain confidential and no responses will be linked with any names. If you would prefer to submit your feedback anonymously, you can print your responses and send them via campus mail to Jen Annulis, Coordinator of First-Year Research, in Xavier Hall 105a.

Your comments to the following questions will be combined with the feedback that we have received from first-year Honors students during focus groups and will be used for program planning to ensure that the Honors program is a distinctive high-quality, experience for first-year students at Loyola. Thus, your participation is extremely important to us.

1. In what ways is the Honors program meeting or not meeting the expectations that you have as a faculty member teaching in the program?
2. How would you describe the first-year Honors students in your class relative to non-Honors first-year students you may know? Do you notice a different level of intellectual growth in your first-year Honors students as compared to students you teach in other first-year courses?
3. In what ways, if any, is your relationship with the first-year Honors students you teach and advise different from your relationships with other first-year students?
4. In your conversations with colleagues at other institutions, have you learned about aspects of their Honors programs that Loyola should consider adopting?

Please submit your responses no later than Friday, March 23rd.

Thank you in advance for your participation. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact either one of us.

Sincerely,

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