Fall 2018

The Value of Honors: A Study of Alumni Perspectives on Skills Gained Through Honors Education

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INTRODUCTION

Honors education is often marketed as a means to offer enhanced value to a collegiate education. This value has the capacity to bolster a student's academic experience, to add to his or her comprehensive skill set, to enhance a resumé, and to improve professional development. Ernest Pascarella argued that theoretical value without data is often used to justify collegiate programs such as honors and criticized those practices for lacking research and data to

validate the claim of enhanced value. The current research was designed to obtain validation by eliciting the perspectives of alumni from South Dakota State University's (SDSU's) Honors College on the value of their honors education. The data presented here sought to fill a gap in honors research by identifying what skills honors graduates value from their honors education and determining whether post-graduation value aligns with the SDSU Honors College's student learning outcomes.

Assessing the effectiveness and value of honors education is a challenge, heightened by the fact that no two honors programs are exactly alike. However, there have been attempts dating back at least as early as 1995 to assess the value of honors education. Among these attempts are studies on grade point average (GPA), student involvement, exposure to collegiate "good practices," student awards, and measures of emotional intelligence among honors students. These studies have largely been conducted with undergraduate students in an attempt to justify the value of an honors education, but these previous studies can help scholars assess where future research is needed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Grade Point Average

As recently as 2017, scholars have discussed the impact of honors education on a student's GPA. While GPA is often used as a predictor of success for high school students entering honors programs, participation in a collegiate honors program may not influence collegiate GPA.

In 2017, Mould and DeLoach sought to longitudinally examine measures of student success in an honors program and to compare them with high school graduation measures. Among the predictive measures studied, they found that weighted high school grade point average (HSGPA) was a significant predictor of success. In 2006, Frank Shushok, Jr., had cross-examined honors students with non-honors students who were honors eligible. At the end of the fourth year, the GPA among the two cohorts was similar, suggesting that honors had less impact on college GPA over the course of four-years.

While honors education caters to high-achieving students, honors colleges and programs do not necessarily seek to raise the grades of students who participate. Instead, programs are intentionally designed to enhance student education, making it more impactful and providing further value to the education students would have otherwise received. Thus, measures outside of GPA must be considered to determine whether honors outcomes are being attained.

Involvement

Several scholars set out to determine whether honors yielded value through increased campus involvement. In 1995, Raechel E. German found that honors students demonstrate a high level of involvement, defined as being involved in four or more activities outside of the classroom. However, limitations to this study included a low response rate, lack of a comparison cohort, and lack of attribution of responses to honors experiences. Additional scholarly endeavors have failed to connect honors education and higher levels of student involvement. Shushok found similar levels of involvement between honors and non-honors students after the first year of collegiate coursework. However, he also found that, after four years, male honors students were more likely to engage in activities outside the classroom that had an academic focus than non-honors males.

Other scholars have also observed a lack of influence of honors on student involvement. Seifert, Pascarella, Colangelo, and Assouline surveyed more than 3,000 students from eighteen institutions. Nearly 2,000 of those students were identified as honors students. This longitudinal study yielded further evidence of a similar level of involvement among the honors and non-honors cohorts. The large sample size and external validity of this 2007 study strongly suggests that students in honors are not inherently more involved than non-honors students.

Involvement offers a measure of value complementary to the academic realm. Involvement can certainly add value to a collegiate education, but the goal of honors education is not necessarily more involvement but more meaningful involvement. Thus, defining the value of honors based on a quantitative measure of involvement does not necessarily reflect the best route of measurement, and other methods should be examined.

Exposure to Good Practices

According to many studies, honors shines in what some may call "good practices" of higher education. Good practices may be evidenced by increased retention rates, and examples of good practices may include high-order questions and discussion of career goals with faculty. In 2007, Seifert et al. examined these forms of good practices and found that, while extracurricular involvement was similar among honors and non-honors cohorts, honors students had increased exposure to six areas of academic good practices in higher education: exposure to course-related interactions with peers, academic

involvement, use of high-order questions by instructors, prompt instructor feedback, number of assigned readings, and instructional clarity. In total, the authors examined twenty areas, which indicated that honors education excels in some but not all areas of best practices.

Shushok also reported positive findings regarding good practices. Notable good practices included a higher likelihood of meeting with faculty, discussing career goals with faculty, and discussing social, political, and world issues outside of the classroom. The study also suggested potentially higher gains in certain areas for males than for females. These good practices not only contributed to a student's success during his or her undergraduate tenure but could also contribute positively in the post-graduation years. Additionally, while good practices are not the only constituents of honors education, they do offer a tangible means toward the goal of enriching a student's academic experience.

Emotional Intelligence

A fourth, less researched area used to measure the value of honors education is emotional intelligence. In 1997, Mayer and Salovey defined emotional intelligence as perceiving, expressing, understanding, and regulating emotion to promote growth. In 2013, Castro-Johnson and Wang examined the correlation between emotional intelligence and high achievement in students. Two cohorts, one consisting of 300 honors first-year students and another of 230 non-honors students, were engaged in this study through a survey that examined multiple branches of emotional intelligence. Honors first-year students were found to display a higher understanding of emotion, and females in the honors cohort displayed a higher ability to perceive emotion than males in either cohort and females in the non-honors cohort. The study also found a positive correlation between emotional intelligence and SAT scores, and they concluded that high intellectual ability is positively correlated with emotional intelligence.

One of the key limitations of the Castro-Johnson and Wang study was that it did not look longitudinally at student growth in emotional intelligence but rather looked simply at first-year students. Thus, these findings do not indicate that honors education offers growth in the area of emotional intelligence. However, with further research among upper-level honors students or honors graduates, a correlation between honors education and growth in emotional intelligence may be discovered.

Limitations to Current Assessment of Value

Historically, the assessment of honors value has been limited to four main areas: GPA, involvement, good practices, and emotional intelligence. For each of these measures, the cohort used has always been undergraduate students. However, outcomes are not fully experienced by a student until after graduation, and the value of each individual outcome may not be fully realized until these valuable skills are applied beyond the undergraduate experience. Thus, if value is defined in terms of the outcomes of honors education, then assessing alumni perceptions of a program's impacts after graduation is imperative.

Honors Alumni Surveys

Until recently, little research was available on the use of alumni surveys to assess the value of honors education. In 2015, Marc A. Johnson and Tamara M. Valentine highlighted how an honors education has benefits that cannot be justified on paper but are obvious when honors student successes post-college are observed. Johnson cited a number of testimonies and examples of honors alumni to illustrate these benefits.

Several honors scholars—Pascarella in 2006 and Scott & Frana in 2008—articulated a continual need for assessment of honors and justification of its value. Innovative methods for assessing honors outcomes are needed, and alumni surveys are one area for this innovation. Alumni surveys can provide backing to claims of increased professional marketability for graduates, increased value in a collegiate education, and increased attainment of applicable skills through an honors program. Fully defining benefits could significantly increase the recruitment of high-achieving students. Finally, alumni surveys allow a program to learn whether its desired outcomes are achieved from graduates as they reflect on their experience. The feedback offered from alumni surveys allows for the continued betterment of programs to offer value to the students it serves and offers a solution to Pascarella's and to Scott and Frana's calls for continued adaptation and justification of honors programs.

With previous evidence providing justification of investment in alumni surveys and in order both to provide further evidence of the effectiveness of honors and to allow further program betterment in the future, we surveyed honors college alumni of South Dakota State University to determine their perceptions of the value of honors education after graduation. While our goals were not to provide a comparative and quantitative analysis of the value of

honors education, the questions did aim to provide an initial outline of what honors alumni value from their honors education as a starting point for future investigation into the precise value of honors. While the current literature on the value of honors education focuses on GPA, student involvement, good practices of higher education, and emotional intelligence, we have a dearth of information on the perspective of alumni regarding the value of skills gained through their honors education. This study is the first to explore this specific gap in our knowledge of the value of honors education.

METHODS

Methods of Data Collection

A survey was composed with the honors alumni audience in mind. The survey began with demographic questions, which were followed by three sections, each section defining a set of 11 skills based on the student learning outcomes of the SDSU Honors College. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they had gained each of the skills from their honors experience and whether these skills affected them professionally, personally, both professionally and personally, or neither professionally nor personally. They were also asked to rank their top five professionally and personally important skills (1=Most Valuable, 5=Least Valuable). In addition, 17 items were included that related to alumni perception of various areas of honors education, covering statements regarding interactions with honors students and faculty, honors' impact on a participant's drive to achieve, and the willingness to repeat honors if given the opportunity. Alumni were asked to respond to each statement using a 5-point Likert scale (1=Completely disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Completely Agree). The survey tool was tested by an alumna of the SDUS Honors College as well as a faculty member trained in survey creation and validation.

Emails of honors alumni graduating between 2003 and 2017 were identified from records maintained by the SDSU Honors College and the SDSU Foundation. The electronic survey was approved by the SDSU Human Subjects Internal Review Board (IRB-1709002-EXM) and then distributed via email on 22 September 2017 and on 2 October 2017. Email reminders were sent on 11 and 20 October 2017. Data were collected between 22 September and 1 November 2017 via a QuestionPro (San Francisco, CA) survey tool.

Data Analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 25.0, was used for all analyses. The demographic data were descriptively analyzed. The percentages of the graduates who responded to questions about whether they gained the skills and whether the skills affected them professionally or personally were calculated. The percentages of the graduates for both professional and personal skills rankings were calculated. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to examine the association between personal and professional ranking of each skill. Additionally, male and female cohorts were analyzed by calculating the rankings of each skill for the personal and professional sections. Chi-square tests were used to examine the association between the rankings and these two cohorts. All significance levels were set at 0.05. Lastly, the percentages, means, and standard deviations of students' responses were calculated for each Likert question, and a difference of means test was used to compare the gender cohorts in this section.

RESULTS

Of 307 alumni contacted, 106 alumni responded to the survey, resulting in a 34.5% response rate. Almost 70% of the respondents were female and more than 90% were Caucasian (Table 1). Over 80% of respondents had a single major, and alumni from all six academic colleges at SDSU responded to the survey.

The percentage of participants who selected each skill they felt they had gained from their honors college experience is represented in Table 2. Every skill was credited to honors by at least 50% of respondents. *Communicate ideas and beliefs with clarity, civility, and respec*t was the most selected skill while *Analyze and integrate multiple sources of information* and *Demonstrate effective leadership* were among the least selected skills.

The breakdown of skills selected by respondents for personal, professional, both professional and personal, or neither professional nor personal affects is also presented in Table 2. Respondents most commonly indicated that each skill had affected them both personally and professionally. *Demonstrate effective written communication* was most commonly credited for impacting our alumni in their professional endeavors. *Communicate ideas and beliefs with clarity, civility, and respect* had high marks in this section as well, with over 75% of respondents indicating that this skill affected them both personally and professionally.

The ranking of skills, seen in Figure 1, reveals where respondents placed high value in their honors experience. *Demonstrate applications of critical thinking* was the most-selected skill for professional ranking. *Communicate ideas and beliefs with clarity, civility, and respect* was the most-selected skill for personal ranking and was the second-highest selected skill for professional ranking, demonstrating high value of this skill throughout the survey.

The attributed value of each skill within respondents' professional and personal lives, along with a statistical comparison between personal and professional ranking, can be seen in Table 3.

Five skills resulted in a significant difference in rank distribution between professional and personal ranking, including *Analyze and integrate multiple sources of information, Demonstrate applications of critical thinking,* and *Articulate personal values, beliefs, and self-identity.* The perceived value of honors and the distribution of professional and personal rankings for men and women were compared. Only one skill in the professional ranking, *Demonstrate effective written communication*, ranked differently among men and women (P= 0.025). No other distribution differences among gender were identified in either the professional or personal ranking, nor were any significant differences in mean detected in the Likert data.

Perceptions of alumni in various areas of the SDSU Honors College are reported in Table 4. The lowest mean came from the statement *During my undergraduate studies, I participated in foreign travel, a study abroad experience, foreign language study, and/or global studies* (mean=3.16$\pm$1.808). All skills had a mean greater than 3, with over 50% of participants marking "Somewhat Agree" or "Completely Agree" in all skills. Additionally, 11 of 17 skills had a mean greater than 4. The highest mean resulted from the statement *If I were to begin my undergraduate studies now, I would work to graduate with Honors College Distinction* (mean=4.79$\pm$0.534), with 83.7% of participants completely agreeing with this statement.

DISCUSSION

The data gathered from the study, while not offering comparative analysis between honors and non-honors students, offer valuable insights to honors educators and supporters. First, the skills sections of the current survey offer insight into what honors alumni most value from their honors experience. Most survey participants indicated that they valued communication skills gained through honors. In an increasingly complex world, that honors graduates are learning how to communicate their ideas and beliefs in a well-formed

manner is highly significant. Professionalism and critical thinking are two areas that were also highly ranked and attributed to honors education by survey respondents. As honors colleges look at what value they can add to an otherwise quality education, communication, professionalism, and critical thinking skills can be areas of focus if they are not already. Although the data cannot show that honors students are better communicators, professionals, or critical thinkers, they do demonstrate that graduates of the SDSU Honors College value their growth in these areas and that they further attribute this growth to their experiences with honors.

Table 1. Demographics of Survey Participants

Category	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Male	33	31.1
Female	73	68.9
Other	0	0.0
College		
Arts and Sciences	32	29.9
Agriculture and Biological Sciences	25	23.4
Pharmacy	17	15.9
Engineering	17	15.9
Education and Human Sciences	11	10.3
Nursing	4	3.7
Unknown	1	0.9
Major		
Single	87	81.3
Multiple	20	18.7
Race		
White, not of Hispanic or Latino Origin	99	93.4
Asian	3	2.8
Hispanic/Latino	2	1.9
Two or More Races	2	1.9
African American	0	0.0
Native American/Alaskan Native	0	0.0
Pacific Islander	0	0.0
Middle Eastern	0	0.0

Table 2. Percentage of Alumni Indicating Skills They Gained from Their Honors Experience at SDSU

Skill	Did you gain this skill from Honors experience?[1]		Did the skill affect you personally, professionally, in both ways, or in neither way?[1]			
	Yes	No	Personal	Professional	Both	Neither
Analyze and integrate multiple sources of information	63.9	36.1	1.0	38.1	49.5	11.3
Communicate ideas and beliefs with clarity, civility, and respect	81.4	18.6	9.3	7.2	76.3	7.2
Demonstrate effective written communication	58.8	41.2	1.0	47.4	42.3	9.3
Demonstrate effective verbal communication	69.1	30.9	Omitted[2]	Omitted[2]	Omitted[2]	Omitted[2]
Demonstrate professionalism in a variety of contexts	73.2	26.8	2.1	35.4	53.1	9.4
Demonstrate applications of critical thinking	73.2	26.8	1.0	25.8	66.0	7.2
Demonstrate effective leadership	63.9	36.1	4.2	27.1	52.1	16.7
Demonstrate self-reflection and inquisition	66.0	34.0	34.0	2.1	47.4	16.5
Articulate personal values, beliefs, and self-identity	63.9	36.1	39.2	1.0	45.4	14.4
Articulate the value of social awareness and civic responsibility	62.9	36.0	24.7	14.4	45.4	15.5
Articulate the value of diversity, inclusion, equity, and access	59.8	40.2	14.6	7.3	61.5	16.7

[1]Numeric values are presented as a percent.

[2]This skill was mistakenly omitted from the survey and thus could not be analyzed.

Figure 1. Number of Participants Who Ranked a Skill in Their Top 5, Indicating the Skill Was Highly Valued by the Participant

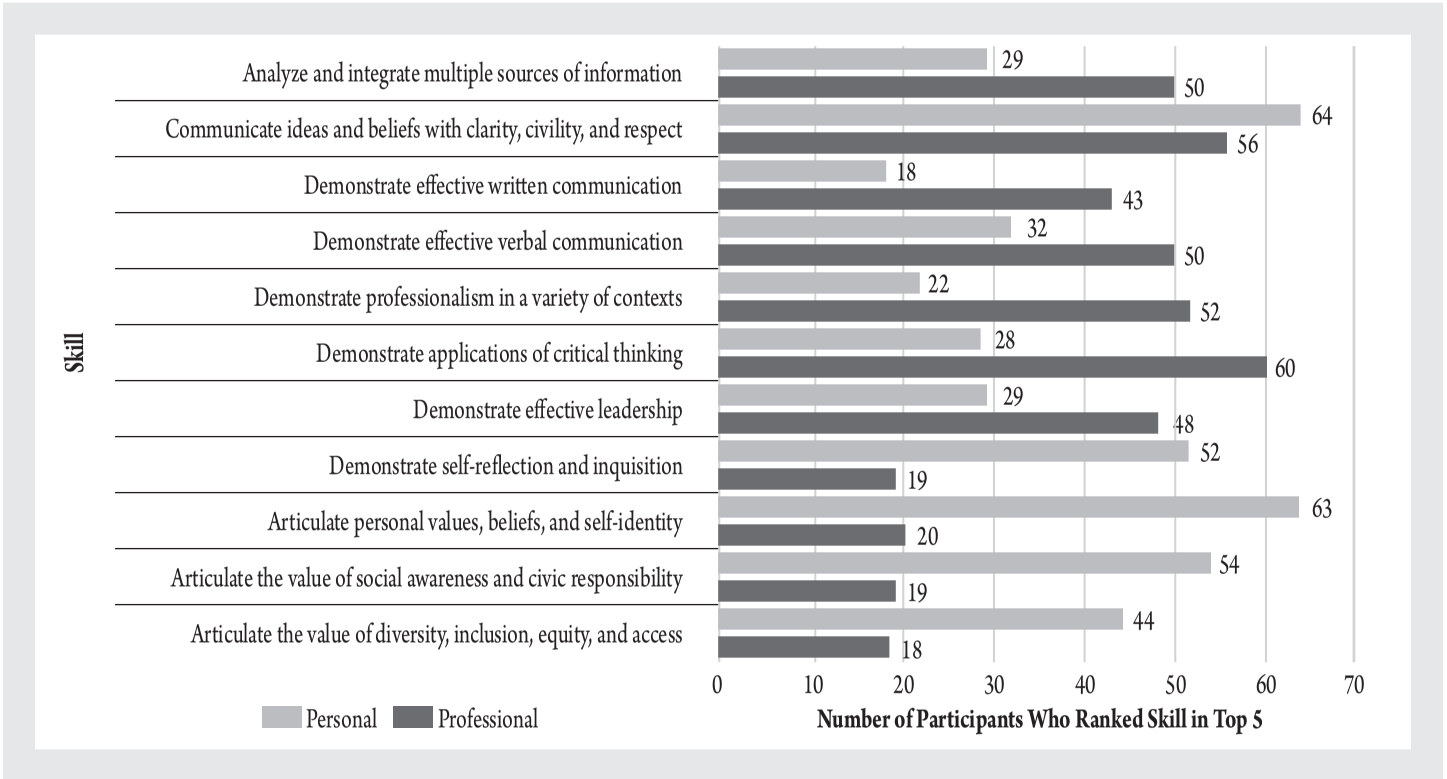

Table 3. Distribution of Professional and Personal Skills Ranking and Comparison of Distribution between Personal and Professional Skills

Skill	Usage	Percentage of Participant Ranking[2,3]					P-value[1]
		1	2	3	4	5	
Analyze and integrate multiple sources of information.	Professional	28.0	26.0	22.0	12.0	12.0	0.001
	Personal	10.3	20.7	27.6	17.2	24.1	
Communicate ideas and beliefs with clarity, civility, and respect.	Professional	14.3	14.3	19.6	28.6	23.2	0.746
	Personal	12.5	10.9	28.1	21.9	26.6	
Demonstrate effective written communication.	Professional	11.6	27.9	14.0	23.3	23.3	0.566
	Personal	22.2	11.1	16.7	44.4	5.6	
Demonstrate effective verbal communication.	Professional	20.0	14.0	24.0	22.0	20.0	0.255
	Personal	21.9	18.8	21.9	15.6	21.9	
Demonstrate professionalism in a variety of contexts.	Professional	23.1	15.4	15.4	19.2	26.9	0.019
	Personal	9.1	13.6	13.6	27.3	36.4	
Demonstrate applications of critical thinking.	Professional	21.7	35.0	15.0	11.7	16.7	0.010
	Personal	14.3	17.9	17.9	10.7	39.3	
Demonstrate effective leadership.	Professional	27.1	16.7	27.1	16.7	12.5	0.163
	Personal	17.2	17.2	10.3	31.0	24.1	
Demonstrate self-reflection and inquisition.	Professional	0.0	10.5	26.3	36.8	26.3	0.011
	Personal	40.4	21.2	15.4	11.5	11.5	

Articulate personal values, beliefs, and self-identity.	Professional	15.0	5.0	35.0	15.0	30.0	0.009
	Personal	33.3	28.6	22.2	12.7	3.2	
Articulate the value of social awareness and civic responsibility.	Professional	21.1	31.6	15.8	15.8	15.8	0.671
	Personal	13.0	29.6	20.4	20.4	16.7	
Articulate the value of diversity, inclusion, equity, and access.	Professional	27.8	5.6	11.1	33.3	22.2	0.715
	Personal	11.4	18.2	15.9	27.3	27.3	

[1]P-value is calculated for the difference in distribution between the overall distribution of frequencies within professional and personal rankings.

[2]Ranking of 1= most valued skill, ranking of 5= fifth most valued skill.

[3]Reference Figure 1 for total number of participants ranking each skill.

Table 4. Likert Questions Using a 1–5 Scale, Presenting the Scoring Percentage, the Mean, and Standard Deviation of Each Statement

Statement	Percentage of Participants[1]					Mean	Standard Deviation
	1	2	3	4	5		
Skills I gained from interactions with Honors students prepared me for future professional interactions.	0.0	5.8	8.1	45.3	40.7	4.21	0.828
Skills I gained from interactions with Honors faculty prepared me for future professional interactions.	0.0	0.0	0.0	22.1	77.9	4.78	0.417
Being challenged in Honors enhanced my ability to overcome challenges in my career.	0.0	2.3	12.8	31.4	53.5	4.36	0.796
My honors independent study experience added to my repertoire when interacting with potential employers and/or grad schools.	3.5	5.8	19.8	24.4	46.5	4.05	1.105
My honors independent study experience helped me grow in seeking current, credible, and comprehensive information.	1.2	3.5	9.3	51.2	34.9	4.15	0.819
My honors independent study experience helped grow my ability to develop solutions to complex problems.	1.2	10.5	11.6	50.0	26.7	3.91	0.953
My honors experience has contributed to my current level of productivity.	0.0	4.7	22.1	37.2	36.0	4.05	0.88
My honors experience has contributed to my current level of success in my career.	1.2	3.5	19.8	37.2	38.4	4.08	0.91
My honors experience has contributed to my current level of emotional awareness.	3.5	5.8	29.1	37.2	24.4	3.73	1.011
My honors experience has contributed to my current level of empathy.	3.5	8.1	26.7	40.7	20.9	3.67	1.011

Honors increased my drive to achieve.	0.0	5.8	11.6	37.2	45.3	4.22	0.873
During my undergraduate studies, I participated in foreign travel, a study abroad experience, foreign language study, and/or global studies.	36.0	4.7	8.1	9.3	41.9	3.16	1.808
As a result of my honors experience, I now have an enhanced understanding of diverse domestic and global customs, practices, and belief systems.	7.0	9.3	27.9	39.5	16.3	3.49	1.093
As a result of my honors experience, I now have highly proficient writing and speaking skills.	1.2	5.8	20.9	43.0	29.1	3.93	0.918
My honors experience has prepared me for my chosen occupation or profession or graduate/professional school study.	0.0	4.7	16.3	44.2	34.9	4.09	0.835
My honors experience has encouraged me to be a socially responsible and engaged citizen.	1.2	2.3	9.3	52.3	34.9	4.17	0.785
If I were to begin my undergraduate studies now, I would work to graduate with Honors College Distinction.	0.0	1.2	2.3	12.8	83.7	4.79	0.534

[1]1=Completely disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Completely Agree.

Furthermore, our data indicate that a strong majority of alumni believe their honors experience added value in a personal and professional context. At least 80% find value in each skill when indicating whether a skill impacted them personally or professionally. This set of results contributes positively to determining whether the SDSU Honors College is meeting its current goals for its graduates and delivering on the promise of high standards of honors. From social awareness and civic responsibility to valuing diversity, inclusion, equity, and access as well as communicating both in written and verbal contexts, graduates find value in skills gained from their honors education.

Additional indications of value from honors came from the Likert ratings. With all statements averaging above a mean of 3, the results from this section provide further evidence that the SDSU Honors College is reaching desired outcomes in a meaningful way for graduates. Shushok observed that honors students were more likely to have meaningful interaction with faculty, and our study aligned with these results. Faculty interactions are highly rated, and all participants indicated that they "Agree" or "Completely Agree" in this area. Honors strives to have highly engaged and innovative professors, and our results indicate that honors faculty are positively engaging in ways that prepare students for the future. Another highlight comes from the question regarding whether study participants would pursue graduation with honors distinction if given the opportunity again. This statement offered the highest mean (4.79) and is an extremely positive indicator that the SDSU Honors College gave the large majority of students enough value that they would be willing to put in the effort to graduate with Honors College Distinction if given the option again.

In regard to areas for improvement, global exposure is one area that has room to grow. Historically, the SDSU Honors College had not made global exposure an explicit goal. However, recent amendments to student learning outcomes promote global exposure and study abroad programming. Thus, if it is a goal within an honors college to improve global exposure, then the honors college should be intentional in its design to expose students to this area.

Our data showed less difference in a comparison of the gender of students than did some other studies, such as those of Shushok and Castro-Johnson and Wang. With no significant differences in the skills section outside of professional written communication, as well as no significant differences in the Likert questions between men and women, our study suggests that the SDSU honors experience is providing similar outcomes for its male and female graduates.

A strength of the present study is that alumni data from fifteen years of graduates were gathered and analyzed. This long range allowed for extrapolation of results for both recent and older graduates. Other strengths include analysis of difference in value between genders and in impacts of honors on graduates from professional and personal perspectives. Finally, to the best of the authors' knowledge, this study is the first of its kind in the honors education literature and lays the groundwork for future studies to further examine the outcomes of honors education from the alumni perspective.

Limitations to the study include small sample sizes in some demographic areas such as race and individual areas of study, which limited statistical analysis of these areas. Perhaps the most obvious limitation to the research is its study of only one university's honors college; this limits the study's external validity and applicability to other honors colleges and programs as the study design was based on the outcomes of the SDSU Honors College. However, the SDSU Fishback Honors College is representative of the Basic Characteristics that the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) attributes to a Fully Developed Honors College and is intentional in addressing the NCHC characteristics of an honors course. Therefore, the results of this study may be representative of the value attained from other honors programs or colleges that subscribe to the NCHC Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program. Additionally, this research provides a successful model and approach for gathering alumni feedback regarding their perception of the value of their honors experience. The goal of the study was not to point toward higher levels of the areas studied for honors alumni. Rather, the aim of the study was to evaluate where honors graduates perceive the value of their honors education lies, and the study was successful in this area.

CONCLUSIONS

The current study provides a framework for conducting alumni surveys on the value of honors education. The results of the study also begin to fill a gap in the literature through a meaningful study of honors alumni. The SDSU Honors College is contributing meaningful value to graduates in their post-graduation years. Our results outline that the ways honors offers value to men and women alumni is similar. Most importantly, the study contributes to Pascarella's and to Scott and Frana's calls to justify honors with innovative studies that move beyond theory and allow for program adaptations. The data presented here point toward the justification of an honors education and demonstrate that while there is room for improvement, the current value of

honors goes beyond undergraduate education by actively contributing to the lives of honors alumni both professionally and personally.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to Hanna Holmquist and Valerie Albert for their assistance in the survey validation. Additionally, thank you to Timothy Nichols, Jacob Ailts, and Nicholas Arens for their critical review.

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