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Disciplinary Affiliation and Administrators' Reported Perception and Use of Assessment

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Abstract: Using survey data collected from 269 participants in the fall of 2016 and the spring of 2017, this study examines whether any changes might have occurred within the last 20 years regarding the disciplinary affiliation of honors administrators. Additionally, we explored current assessment practices of honors administrators and possible associations between these practices and the administrators' disciplinary affiliation. Our study investigates disciplinary variation among honors directors in their attitudes toward and perceived effectiveness with outcomes assessment. While we mostly found similarities among directors/deans in their use of assessment, some significant differences occurred in attitudes toward and confidence with using assessment and program review. We discuss these differences and their implications for the National Collegiate Honors Council.

Keywords: administration, disciplinary affiliation, efficacy, perception

INTRODUCTION

As the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) celebrated its fiftieth year in 2015, we reflected on the history of the honors movement over the past century. From its origin, honors education has provided interdisciplinary training to its student participants, yet the connection between honors education and the humanities is undeniable. Frank Aydelotte, widely regarded as the father of honors education, was an English professor (Rinn).

In his *JNCHC* Forum essay titled "The Humanities are Dead! Long Live the Humanities!" Andrews pointed out that, of the 48 former presidents of NCHC since its founding in 1966, more than two-thirds have come from disciplines within the humanities. This interconnection between humanities faculty and honors education goes beyond leaders within the national organization and can be seen throughout the leadership of honors education around the country. Ada Long's (1995) survey of the NCHC membership in 1992 found that nearly half of the honors directors who responded were from the traditional humanities (59 of 130, or 45.4%). Shepherd and Shepherd, in their 1991 study of the ideological orientation of honors directors, surveyed a total of 173 honors directors, and at that time noted that 79 percent of the honors directors in their study indicated an affiliation with the fields of humanities and social sciences. No recent study, however, has examined the disciplinary affiliation of honors directors or whether the humanities disciplines continue to play such an influential role within the changing shape of honors education. Given the growth in the number and diversity of types of honors programs over the last twenty years, the question of disciplinary diversity within honors is worth another look.

In particular, disciplinary diversity may have implications for how directors teach or administer honors programs. Thus, we plan to explore the extent of disciplinary variation in one seemingly polarizing issue within higher education: the use of, attitude toward, and perceived effectiveness of outcomes assessment.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Honors programs are increasingly expected to provide evidence of added value to participating students, and greater implementation of outcomes assessment could be the best answer for honors programs. Assessment and evaluation in honors programs can serve multiple functions: for instance, programs can respond to concerns about and demands for accountability from internal and external audiences (Achterberg) and can acquire the information necessary for their improvement. Not all faculty and administrators in honors education are accepting of these practices, however. Digby argued against outcomes assessment in higher education, stating that her "goal is not to score or measure students against preconceived expectations but to encourage the unexpected, breakthrough response that is utterly new, different, and thus exciting" (4). The concern that student learning is not easily measured is one that remains prevalent within honors education despite the

long history of practice in outcomes assessment that evolved in the last half of the twentieth century, particularly taking root in the 1970s as pressure mounted that higher education function "as a means of increasing U.S. international competitiveness" (Stufflebeam 8).

Philosophical differences in educational approaches have always existed among the various disciplines within higher education; most notably, the focus on qualitative rather than quantitative methodology is characteristic of the humanities. Very little empirical research has focused on whether these differences have had an impact on faculty or administrator attitudes toward assessment. In 2011, Halonen and Lanier theorized that faculty from the humanities often "view measurement itself as a reductive, distasteful, and deadening enterprise" because they value "diversity in interpretation" and therefore do not feel the need to "establish quality through the hard numeric evidence of data" (235). On the other hand, they hypothesized that because "measurement is a fundamental principle in science and social science," the use of "measurable evidence to support claims of quality" are more widely accepted in those fields (234). Fields such as business and education have long histories of "accountability expectations" due to practices of accreditation in those areas, so they speculated that these disciplines would also be more open to assessment practices (234). While these hypothesized differences seem plausible, they remain largely speculative with no research to support the claims.

Research on faculty perceptions of assessment has tended to focus on institutional practices and perceived benefits. Previous research has shown that faculty are more supportive of assessment when they see a connection between assessment practices and their own teaching and learning efforts (Hutchings; Welsh and Metcalf; Wang and Hurley). Whether the perceived benefits of assessment are influenced by faculty members' disciplinary affiliation has not been examined, nor has research examined what relationship disciplinary affiliation may have with views or attitudes toward assessment. Likewise, no research has examined the attitudes toward outcomes assessment among administrators in the field of honors education.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to investigate disciplinary variation among honors directors in their attitudes toward, use of, and perceived effectiveness in outcomes assessment. We explored current assessment practices of honors administrators along with potential associations between these practices

and the administrators' disciplinary affiliation. We also examined the current landscape of honors education and whether the disciplinary affiliation of honors administrators has changed since it was last recorded.

IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

This study contributes to a growing body of knowledge within honors education and higher education as a whole. It adds to existing knowledge about the role that the humanities have played in the development of honors education, and it also examines whether any changes might have occurred within the last twenty years in the disciplinary affiliations of honors administrators.

The study examines the relationships between disciplinary affiliation and administrator attitudes toward outcomes assessment, which could be valuable information for administrators who are trying to understand how best to approach faculty and administrators and encourage their participation in campus-wide assessment. If it is found that differences exist in disciplinary training that affect current practices, this information could be useful for academic leaders and administrators attempting to increase participation in outcomes assessment.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Has the academic disciplinary affiliation of administrators in honors education changed over time? In other words, is there a greater variation of academic disciplines represented within honors administration now than twenty years ago?
2. To what extent do differences exist in the responses of honors administrators to the value of outcomes assessment in the program planning process?
3. Is there a relationship between honors administrators' attitudes toward assessment and their academic disciplinary training (arts and humanities vs. social sciences, sciences, etc.)?
4. To what extent are there differences in assessment practices related to disciplinary affiliation?

METHODOLOGY

The current study examined the disciplinary affiliation, attitudes toward outcomes assessment, and other demographic characteristics for individuals

actively involved in the leadership of honors education. Specifically, an electronic survey consisting of 41 items was distributed using Qualtrics in the fall 2016 and spring 2017 semesters. The survey collected demographic data from respondents: age range, gender, race/ethnicity, and educational level. Respondents were asked to report their position within honors education as well as their institutional type, honors program type, honors program size, and years of experience in honors education as a whole. Finally, respondents were asked to answer a series of questions designed to assess their attitudes toward assessment, record their reported use of assessment, and document their perceived effectiveness of assessment.

Overview of study participants and recruitment procedures. Participants were recruited based on their experience and active leadership in honors education. Specifically, the survey was distributed to 838 participants, each of whom was listed as the current director or dean for an honors program or college affiliated as an institutional member of the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC). Of the 838 individuals invited to participate, a total of 269 completed the survey, for a response rate of 32 percent.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS AND EXPERIENCE OF PARTICIPANTS

Of the 269 total respondents, 136 (51%) were male and 133 (49%) were female. Regarding race and ethnicity, the majority (84%, f = 227) of respondents reported being white. The majority of participants (84%, f = 226) reported holding a doctorate or other terminal degree (e.g., JD, PhD, MD, EdD, MFA). Participants were asked with which academic discipline they affiliate but were not limited to one response, so some participants selected more than one discipline (see Table 1). Arts and Humanities was the area of training with which the greatest number affiliated, at 44 percent (f = 119). Thirty percent (f = 81) affiliated with the social sciences, making it the second most common area of training. Thirteen percent (f = 35) were affiliated with a STEM discipline. Eight percent (f = 22) identified education as their area of training while an additional 5 percent (f= 12) identified other professional disciplines as their area of training.

Table 1 shows that the study sample matches quite well that of the 2016 NCHC Census of U.S. Honors Programs and Colleges (Scott, Smith, and Cognard-Black) in disciplinary representation among honors directors and deans. The percentages of honors heads within broad areas of disciplinary

training (i.e., field of highest degree) for the study sample are within only a few percentage points of those for the NCHC Census. These data also show little evidence of change in the makeup of honors administrators in the last twenty years. Shepherd and Shepherd (1996) reported that 79 percent of honors administrators in 1991 were from the humanities and social sciences. As Table 1 shows, those two combined groups made up about 74 percent of the study sample described here, but that difference is not statistically significant at either the $p < .05$ or the .10 levels. Shepherd and Shepherd did not provide more precise disciplinary detail within that 79 percent, and so there is no evidence from that comparison alone of change within those two areas of training (i.e., fewer humanities and more social sciences). Moreover, comparing the distribution in our study sample with results presented by Long (1995) leads to the same general conclusion of no substantive change in disciplinary diversity. Of the 130 cases in her survey results with valid discipline data, 45.4 percent (59 out of 130) were in the humanities, nearly identical to the 44.2 percent responding to our survey. These data demonstrate that the disciplinary training of honors administrators has not changed significantly over time and that the humanities and social sciences still represent a majority of the disciplinary backgrounds of honors administrators.

RESULTS

Table 2 reveals few significant differences across broad disciplinary areas in attitudes about outcomes assessment in honors with a few notable exceptions. Some of the most noticeable differences in attitudes appear to be related to the respondents' highest degree in education. Those with their

Table 1. Comparison of Respondent Field of Training for Study Sample and the 2016 NCHC Census of U.S. Honors Programs and Colleges

	Study Sample		NCHC Census		Percentage Point
Area of Training	n	Percent	n	Percent	Difference
Arts & Humanities	119	44.2	211	47.1	-2.9
Social Sciences	81	30.1	130	29.0	1.1
STEM	35	13.0	74	16.5	-3.5
Education	22	8.2	28	6.3	2.0
Professional	12	4.5	5	1.1	3.4
N	269	100.0	448	100.0	

Note: Percentages for the NCHC Census appeared in Scott, Smith, and Cognard-Black.

primary training in arts and humanities or social sciences were significantly more likely than those with education degrees to report that administrators focus too much on outcomes assessment. In contrast, those with education degrees reported stronger agreement than those in arts/humanities with the statement that they would do outcomes assessment "even if it was not required" ($p < .05$). The numbers reflecting attitudes about assessment do not appear much different for honors directors from the humanities, social sciences, or STEM fields.

Despite any disciplinary differences in attitudes about assessment, Table 3 shows little disciplinary difference in the assessment behaviors measured, and analysis of variance revealed no significant differences. However, there may be some disciplinary differences in the perceived background necessary to execute outcomes assessment. Table 4 shows a comparison of means for five broad disciplinary areas in various levels of confidence related to carrying out assessment activities. Those from arts and humanities backgrounds reported that they felt significantly less prepared by their graduate school training to administer outcomes assessment than those in education, STEM fields, and social sciences. However, honors directors/deans trained in arts and humanities reported similar levels to those in other fields of relevant knowledge, proficiency at interpreting assessment evidence, and ability to implement change based on the program review process.

It is worth noting that the overall numbers for everyone are low for the item on assessment-relevant skills acquired during graduate training, and they appear to be especially low for those trained primarily in the arts and humanities; this may translate into lower levels of confidence (i.e., proficiency at interpreting evidence) for those in arts and humanities, but that difference does not reach conventional levels of significance.

CONCLUSION

As Halonen and Lanier speculated, this study confirmed some disciplinary differences in attitudes toward outcomes assessment. Specifically, those in the arts and humanities or social sciences were more likely to think that too much importance is placed on assessment and that they would be less likely than those in education to participate in outcomes assessment if it were not required. We attribute this difference at least somewhat to the differences in graduate school training, as those from arts and humanities backgrounds reported their training prepared them significantly less to administer outcomes assessment than those in education, STEM fields, and social sciences.

Table 2. Attitudes toward Assessment among Honors Directors and Deans, by Primary Area of Training

Survey Item	Arts & Humanities	Social Sciences	STEM	Education	Professional	All Respondents
Positive Attitudes toward Assessment						
I would participate in outcomes assessment activities even if it was not required to by my college or university.	3.41	3.58	3.77	4.19	3.45	3.57
Outcomes assessment is a valuable component of student learning and should guide . . . program changes . . .	2.97	3.10 [a]	3.11	3.52	3.09	3.08
Outcomes assessment is a valuable component of the program improvement process.	3.60	3.67	3.80	4.05	3.64	3.69
Negative Attitudes toward Assessment						
Outcomes assessment is not a true reflection of program effectiveness; therefore, assessment should not carry much weight . . .	2.78	2.69	2.60	2.29	2.55	2.68
Academic administrators are focusing too much on outcomes assessment.	3.59	3.59	3.20	2.86	3.36	3.47
The time invested in developing and maintaining an assessment program is not worth the information gained.	2.89	2.75	2.54	2.43	2.91	2.77
N	116	81	35	21	11	264

Notes: Numbers presented here are means for Likert-type measures of agreement, with responses coded 1 = "Strongly Disagree," 2 = "Disagree," 3 = "Neither Agree nor Disagree," 4 = "Agree," or 5 = "Strongly Agree." Analysis of variance revealed few differences across disciplines; however, there were significant ($p < .05$) F tests for items 1 ("I would . . . even if not required") and 5 ("administrators are focusing too much on outcomes assessment"). Tukey post hoc tests indicated that the source of the significant F tests were differences between those with education degrees and those with arts and humanities degrees, as well as, in the case of item 5, those with social sciences.

[a] The Social Sciences n for this item is 80.

Table 3. Assessment Behaviors among Honors Directors and Deans, by Primary Area of Training

Survey Item	Arts & Humanities	Social Sciences	STEM	Education	Professional	All Respondents
Outcomes assessment findings are used in the analysis of program policies and procedures.	3.49	3.55	3.71	3.58	3.45	3.54
My honors program has defined learning outcomes that exist as part of a programmatic outcomes assessment.	3.57	3.47	3.26	3.74	3.91	3.52
My department uses outcomes assessment data to guide the majority of our program changes.	2.90	2.95	2.83	2.89	3.09	2.91
With what frequency does your department participate in discussions of programmatic outcomes assessment?	2.94 [a]	3.09	2.81	2.85	2.78	2.96
N	113	77	35	19	11	255

Notes: Numbers presented in the first three rows are means for Likert-type measures of agreement, with responses coded 1 = "Strongly Disagree," 2 = "Disagree," 3 = "Neither Agree nor Disagree," 4 = "Agree," or 5 = "Strongly Agree." Numbers for the bottom item on frequency of discussion are means for data coded from an open-ended question. There were 118 unique open-ended responses that were coded from 0–4, with higher numbers indicating greater frequency: 0 = "Never/infrequent," 1 = "Every three to five years," 2 = "Every two years," 3 = "Yearly," 4 = "Two or more times/year." Analysis of variance revealed no significant differences across disciplines for any of the four items in the table.

[a] The sample n's for this item are, in order from left to right, 103, 67, 31, 13, 9, and 223.

Table 4. Confidence and Preparedness in Assessment among Honors Directors and Deans, by Primary Area of Training

Survey Item	Arts & Humanities	Social Sciences	STEM	Education	Professional	All Respondents
I am knowledgeable in the process of creating program-related outcomes.	3.84	3.90	3.77	3.57	3.73	3.82
I am capable of gathering appropriate evidence to be used to assess program-related outcomes.	3.97	4.15	4.00	3.81	4.09	4.02
I am proficient in interpreting evidence gathered through the process of outcomes assessment.	3.74	4.01	4.09 [a]	3.90	3.73	3.88 [b]
I am adequately prepared to implement change based on evidence gathered in the program review process.	3.83	4.04	3.85 [a]	3.86	3.64	3.89 [b]
The skills I received in my graduate/disciplinary training effectively prepared me to administer outcomes assessment.	1.80	2.60	2.71 [a]	3.14	2.18	2.29 [b]
N	115	78	35	21	11	260

Notes: Numbers presented here are means for Likert-type measures of agreement, with responses coded 1 = "Strongly Disagree," 2 = "Disagree," 3 = "Neither Agree nor Disagree," 4 = "Agree," or 5 = "Strongly Agree." Analysis of variance revealed few differences across disciplines; however, there were significant differences in means for the item asking whether graduate/disciplinary training effectively prepared the respondent to administer outcomes assessment. Tukey post hoc tests indicated that the source of the significant F test were differences between those with arts and humanities degrees and those in the social sciences, those in STEM fields, and those with their highest degree in education. Those from arts and humanities backgrounds reported significantly less agreement with that item than those from the other backgrounds ($p < .01$).

[a] The STEM n for these items is 34.

[b] The sample n for these items is 259.

Table 5. Types of Outcomes Assessment Incorporated into the Honors Program, by Primary Area of Training

Item	Arts & Humanities	Social Sciences	STEM	Education	Professional	All Respondents
Theses or undergraduate research	47.6	54.1	51.5	47.4	18.2	48.8
Capstone projects	43.8	45.9	27.3	52.6	54.5	43.4
Portfolios	28.6	24.3	24.2	36.8	54.5	28.5
Written compositions or research papers	39.0	41.9	42.4	47.4	45.5	41.3
Individual student assignments	55.2	55.4	39.4	36.8	54.5	51.7
Internships/field experiences	29.5	35.1	27.3	36.8	27.3	31.4
Exams	14.3	14.9	6.1	26.3	27.3	14.9
N	105	74	33	19	11	242

Notes: The question stem for all items here was, "Indicate which of the following categories of outcomes assessment are incorporated in the honors program where you serve. (Select all that apply.)" Numbers indicate the percentage selecting a given category of assessment. The last three items were constructed from an open-ended option specifying, "Other (please indicate)." Analysis of variance revealed no significant differences across disciplines for any of the items in the table.

This result is not unexpected given the focus on qualitative rather than quantitative approaches that is characteristic of the humanities. The lack of experience with specific kinds of assessment-relevant training seems to have at least some impact on attitude toward assessment, but it does not seem to have much impact on the actual use of assessment, likely because faculty have to remain in compliance with the demands of their institution.

Despite some disciplinary differences, we should not overstate the difference. One key finding from these data is the many similarities among directors/deans in their use of outcomes assessment and program review. Though the overall attitude toward and confidence with assessment were lower for those in the arts and humanities, they nevertheless reported similar levels, in comparison to other fields, of relevant knowledge, proficiency at interpreting assessment evidence, and ability to implement change based on the program review process. One possible explanation for this promising finding is that only those arts and humanities faculty with a predisposition toward assessment are being selected to run honors programs. However, we think a more likely explanation is that honors deans/directors, regardless of discipline, are getting similar support from their institutions and from professional organizations such as the NCHC to meet the demands of program assessment.

Across all disciplines, we found areas in need of improvement with regard to increasing confidence of the directors/deans in their use of assessment practices. Further training could probably be helpful for deans and directors who may not feel confident implementing assessment. While directors and deans are reporting that their programs are participating in discussions of outcomes assessment as well as reporting that they are prepared to interpret evidence and implement changes, one area in particular that stood out as an area in need of improvement across disciplines was that the majority of deans and directors reported that outcomes assessment data were not being used to guide the majority of program changes. These findings, seen in Table 3, show that honors directors report an average just below "neither agree nor disagree" that assessment data "guide the majority of our program changes," which is somewhat less than the averages found for other items in the survey data. While other factors certainly could be influencing and guiding program change, one possible reason that honors directors and deans are not using outcomes assessment in this way is that they lack the proficiency to use the information they have and translate it into necessary action. NCHC could focus its efforts on providing support in this area, specifically in training

directors and deans to implement changes based on the evidence gathered in the assessment and review process.

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