

## Value Added

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With more than a thousand honors programs or colleges in the United States and that number growing every year, defining the value of honors is a significant undertaking. Honors seems to have become an obligatory upgrade that no college or university president can afford to be without, but there is more than institutional trending to be considered, or at least there should be, so the real issue is defining the value that honors adds—for students, for faculty, for staff, and for the larger community we serve. When it comes to budgets and governing boards and all the constituencies the university is responsible to, the way that each of us determines the value added is going to be different. Some best practices are consistent across the whole range of colleges and universities where honors education goes forward, but the real value added is in how we apply those best practices to make the most of each institution's distinctive character and strengths, and how we turn good ideas into conscious practice.

Let's start with who we are. At Wayne State University we pride ourselves on a history of academic excellence and opportunity that reaches back almost

150 years. Wayne State is a comprehensive university with more than 380 degree and certificate programs. We have Michigan's most diverse student body, with an enrollment of more than 27,000 in our thirteen schools and colleges, including more than 18,000 students in our undergraduate programs. We have 245,000 living Warrior alumni. WSU is one of only 108 institutions in the United States to receive the highest rating for research productivity from the Carnegie Foundation (Research University/Very High Activity). Along with Michigan State University and the University of Michigan, we are partners in the University Research Corridor (URC), which is advancing research, moving new technologies to the marketplace, helping create new jobs, and giving a boost to the state's economy. According to a report released by Anderson Economic Group LLC, the URC contributed \$16.6 billion in 2012 to the state's economy—a 30% increase from the first assessment in 2007. Wayne State is Michigan's only urban research university, located in the heart of Midtown Detroit. We are proud to be one of a limited number of institutions nationally to hold the highest Carnegie classification for both research and community engagement. Our vision is to become a preeminent public, urban research university known for academic and research excellence, success across a diverse student body, and meaningful engagement in its urban community.

Communicating to students the distinctive character of Wayne State University and making our vision a reality to them is an important part of our mission, not just during recruitment but all the way through their baccalaureate experience. The Irvin D. Reid Honors College has an important role to play in communicating this vision. Honors is a marquee for the best WSU has to offer to undergraduates and a means of engaging them, consciously, in the special opportunities that set this university apart. In keeping with the university's vision, the honors college is city-based and service-oriented, with an enrollment of more than 1,800 this past academic year. Honors students choose to major in any of the 126 available options, which means that the college is not tied to any particular academic discipline; instead, it represents the virtues of a liberal education that reaches across departments, schools, and colleges. For our students, the aim is to integrate the specialized—and essential—knowledge of the disciplines into a broader understanding of themselves, our community, and the world. With understanding comes engagement. The honors experience at Wayne State is based on four pillars—community, service, research, career—which define the curricular and co-curricular elements of our program and also highlight the distinctive strengths of this university, at

the same time making real the value-added, high-impact practices that define the very best of undergraduate education.

Entering freshmen participate in a year-long course on the city and citizenship, with a special emphasis on Detroit; they are part of a learning community that foregrounds group work, interdisciplinary research, and freshman seminars. The aim is to ensure that students become active members of a community and that they also take full advantage of the community where we live, with a Detroit Passport that includes trips to cultural and entertainment venues that are integrated into the first-year course. In the second year, students apply what they do in the classroom to service-learning projects, facilitated by the office for *CommunityEngagement@Wayne*, which is part of the honors college. In year three, the emphasis is on research. The office of *Research@Honors* provides workshops and advising to help students develop independent research projects in order to take full advantage of the resources provided by an RU/VH institution. In year four, students undertake a capstone project, preparing their senior thesis, which is a summing up of what they are capable of achieving, as they embark on their careers. Whether students pursue a general university honors curriculum or departmental honors, the goal of honors is the same: to add value by challenging students to ask more of themselves and providing the resources they need to succeed.

Faculty also become self-conscious partners in the value-added project, in keeping with the mission of the honors college to be both a marquee and also a workshop and laboratory for new ideas. High-impact practices start in the two-semester course on the city and citizenship that all entering students take, an interdisciplinary course sequence that emphasizes problem-solving, group work, and active engagement with our community. The faculty who are seminar leaders in the first-year course are recent PhDs starting out on their careers, and honors provides them a good start in a setting where they work in teams with senior WSU colleagues. If the kind of interdisciplinary, problem-based thinking that informs the first-year curriculum is to define the future of liberal education, which seems a real and welcome possibility, then the value-added strategy of honors needs to extend beyond the first-year course to members of the WSU faculty at large, so the honors college has undertaken, through its Faculty Fellows Program, to award faculty incentive grants that promote the use of high-impact, cutting-edge pedagogy in the classroom. These grants, which are being designed in partnership with the WSU Office for Teaching & Learning, will build on current junior/senior level-seminars with new courses designed to integrate practices, enhance the

learning process, and expose students to the most current topics in a wide range of academic disciplines.

The four pillars of honors—community, service, research, and career—are also central to the experience of staff, who benefit by becoming members of a community of professionals. Staff serve in multiple roles: they are advisers and teachers, they oversee learning communities and co-curricular projects, they engage in service and service learning through the WSU Office for Community Engagement, and they are hands-on collaborators with each other and with students in the whole range of activities that define our honors college programs. Staff are encouraged to develop career paths in honors education in order to take full advantage of the opportunities afforded by a research institution such as ours: through professional training, by participating at regional and national meetings, and through their own research projects. Currently, two staff members have made the honors curriculum the subject of doctoral research projects—one on the value-added impact of service learning and the second on best practices in general education.

In keeping with our status as an RU/VH institution, the honors college has undertaken an ongoing, longitudinal study of value-added outcomes in honors. This emphasis on research finds a place in the national conversation about honors education as the founding dean of our college, Jerry Herron, assumes the presidency of the National Collegiate Honors Council. Together with his colleagues, he is working to promote the role of value-added research as the basis for a larger national conversation about the importance of liberal education. “[T]he world lies no longer a dull miscellany and lumber-room, but has form and order,” Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, in “The American Scholar,” where he sets out what it means to become a scholar. “[T]here is no trifle; there is no puzzle; but one design unites and animates the farthest pinnacle and the lowest trench.” Our challenge, as scholars, is to puzzle out the design that animates understanding and makes sense of all that we can know—now more than ever.

Maybe it is best to think about honors not in terms of an end result but as an ongoing conversation about value added and all the ways that this institution and our students, faculty, and staff work to achieve excellence to benefit our whole community. There is surely no better place than this city and no better time than now to be having this conversation. This indispensably American place, Detroit, is embarked on a comeback unprecedented in our history yet representative of all we have accomplished as a people and all we have left to do if we are to live up to our high ideals. The university is central to

this good work just as honors is central to the conversation about the range of possibilities that define the best in higher education. From the beginning, the mission of our honors college has been to showcase our distinctive address so that students, parents, members of the larger community, and we ourselves know what it means to be here: all that we get to do and must do well because of who we are and where we are. There is no finer work than this, especially when our students tell us that we have succeeded. As a recent graduate, Erika Giroux (class of 2014) kindly wrote, “In short, the Honors College expands education to the best and fullest sense of the word: academic, social, cultural, and interpersonal consciousness and understanding. This empathic potential is why I chose Wayne State Honors, and I simply cannot imagine my life any other way.” We are proud of students like Erika, just as we are proud she chose to come here for her education. Such outstanding scholars demonstrate the value that honors adds and how much that means—to all of us.

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