

# A Tradition unlike Any Other: Research on the Value of an Honors Senior Thesis

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## INTRODUCTION

If you are a fan of golf and, more specifically, the Masters Golf Tournament, then the title of this article should sound familiar. As an avid sports fan and an occasional golf player, when I hear those words I immediately think of green grass, Tiger Woods's first green jacket, and the soft-spoken Dr. Condeleeza Rice as the newest member of the Augusta National Golf Club (home of the Masters for non-golf fans). The Masters is the first of four major U.S. golf tournaments played each year, a tradition going back to 1934. What makes this tournament quintessential to the sport and distinguished from other tournaments is its unique course; always held at this particular golf club, the invitational format ensures a small number of players.

Similar to the uniqueness of The Masters, an honors senior thesis introduces students into a world of scholarship and professional activity in a way that no single course, either semester- or year-long, can do (Anderson, Lyons,

and Weiner). Many honors educators consider honors thesis work to be the defining honors experience. For graduate schools, employers, and the students themselves, nothing demonstrates the value of an honors education quite like the senior thesis.

The National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) understands the value and tradition of the honors senior thesis, listing it in the Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors College and recently publishing a thesis handbook in the latest addition to the monograph series (Anderson, Lyons, and Weiner). That said, as the association begins to focus on research in honors, prioritizing initiatives and defining the terms of such research, I would like to make a case for research on the honors senior thesis. Data about the thesis should be informative about more than best practices, also correlating with data on honors completion, retention, and student persistence as well as identifying the distinction and meaning of “graduating with honors” at member institutions. We should be tracking students who drop out of an honors college or program to avoid completing a senior thesis but still persist to graduate, just not with honors. We need to know how many institutions regularly assess their senior thesis requirement through surveys administered to students, faculty, and thesis advisors/directors. We should know how many NCHC institutions require an honors senior thesis to “graduate with honors” and how many do not require it but still give their students the distinction of “graduating with honors.” As the thesis coordinator for the University of South Carolina Honors College (SCHC), I am trying to track these data on our campus and can present the data that has been collected. I can also speculate how further research, quantitative or mixed-methods, might offer insight into a tradition that many of us have on our campuses. Further, I can offer an example of using a mixed-methods approach based on our initiatives at SCHC while offering recommendations for future research.

## **RESEARCH ON THE HONORS SENIOR THESIS**

In the lead essay for this series, George Mariz says that “research in honors is another species altogether [than disciplinary research;] . . . there are no archives, bodies of scientific knowledge, established procedures, or information-rich data sets.” Peter Sederberg details the struggles of surveying honors colleges in the NCHC monograph *The Honors College Phenomenon*. In the summer of 2004, the NCHC Ad Hoc Task Force on Honors Colleges distributed a survey to 68 self-identified honors colleges affiliated with the association. The response rate was low; only 38 responded while three

indicated that they were incorrectly identified as an honors college. Other survey issues involved honors colleges that were left off the list and still others that may have been misidentified as honors colleges. Based on these problems, the task force committee considered the results a subset of a subset of a subset (Sederberg 27). Nevertheless, the results currently provide the only national data that indicate the value and importance of the honors senior thesis, which was the most common requirement for earning honors distinction (65.7%).

In search of quantitative data on the number of institutions that have an honors senior thesis, we used NCHC's *Official Online NCHC Guide to Honors Colleges and Programs*. Out of the 176 institutions listed in the table of contents, 72 mention having an honors senior thesis as part of their honors requirements. Notable differences occur in the wording about an honors senior thesis, specifying "required" or "optional," for instance, with the latter referring to various ways of graduating with or without having to complete a thesis. Without further information provided in the guide, our initial research stopped here; it could be continued, however, by taking an in-depth look at each institution online or making verbal contact.

Other research related to the honors senior thesis fits into the category of best practices, not so much on data collection. A review of articles published in *Honors in Practice* and *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* yield themes such as mentoring honors students in the thesis process, use of pre-thesis workshops, re-visioning the senior thesis, and preparing honors work for publication (Buckner; Vila; Briggs; Coey & Haynes). While this information is beneficial in revealing recent trends on the honors senior thesis, it provides only a snapshot of the way an honors senior thesis functions at an institution and does not contribute to a national conversation on theses.

Research on the senior thesis process involves the difficult task of defining a valid research question for such study. Joseph Maxwell states that a research question must explain what a study will attempt to learn or understand. The dangers of developing research questions too focused or broad exist in any study, but in the case of the honors senior thesis, convolution is an imminent threat given the different types of honors colleges and programs and different meanings of "graduation with honors." In the choice of a quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods approach, I propose a mixed-methods approach based on the data collected in the South Carolina Honors College. While I agree with Mariz that data used for honors research must be sufficiently longitudinal and far more comparative than it is currently, mixed-methods

research provides strengths that offset the weaknesses of both quantitative and qualitative research (Creswell and Clark). Quantitative research can limit understanding of the setting in which people talk and, by definition, does not include the voices of participants (Banks). While qualitative research compensates for this weakness, its observations and interpretations are typically subjective. Combining the strengths of both approaches counteracts their respective weaknesses and provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone (Creswell and Clark).

Survey implementation was once acceptable as the primary quantitative measure of student data; however, focus groups, document analysis, interviews, and personal observations can also provide information for an enhanced data-analysis process (Brannen). The quantitative data collected can provide numbers, e.g., number of institutions with an honors thesis requirement or percentage rates of honors completion, but qualitative research helps us understand the meaning of the data and influences on participants' actions, e.g., what effect an honors senior thesis has on postgraduate careers and whether we are using best practices in the thesis process. A mixed-methods approach suggests the following research questions that can be useful to the NCHC as the organization establishes its research agenda:

- Are honors completion and graduation related to completing an honors senior thesis?
- What effect does an honors senior thesis and the process of completing it have on students' ability to persist to degree completion?
- What is the role of assessing an honors senior thesis in determining the significance of an honors education in the twenty-first century?

## **SOUTH CAROLINA HONORS COLLEGE: A CASE STUDY**

The South Carolina Honors College (SCHC) holds to the tradition of an honors senior thesis, dating back to its founding in 1970. The senior thesis process allows a student to complete a creative project or traditional thesis, applying the knowledge gained in the major(s) and demonstrating a practical command of research techniques and writing while proving the student's ability to work independently. We encourage our students to be creative with their projects; we avoid constraining them to topics only within their discipline as they work with the best faculty on campus to produce a thesis that exemplifies the value of an honors education. While our students write and

create interesting and original senior theses, their work is rooted in writing and researching a topic.

When I arrived at the SCHC in the fall of 2013, the department was in the midst of a staff transition, and a newly hired associate dean was fulfilling the role of thesis coordinator. When I became thesis coordinator, I reviewed the results from the May 2013 senior survey that, among other questions, asked students to comment on the senior thesis process. In a ranking scale of negative, neutral, and positive, the majority were neutral. The students provided valuable critiques and feedback, the common themes being a lack of communication and organization, a need for flexibility, and a lack of clarity in the process.

To address some of these issues, I used a qualitative approach to answer questions that the data could not tell me. I asked questions not just of our staff but also of students currently writing a thesis. I contacted faculty who were or had served as thesis directors and a few colleagues on campus who worked with our department. My primary question was “Why complete an honors senior thesis?” I believed that the responses would not only help students and thesis directors deal with the challenges of an honors senior thesis but also inspire and encourage those who would continue the SCHC tradition of writing a thesis. The sample was small, but the responses indicated that this tradition leads to tangible benefits for the student and university, serving as the capstone of an SCHC education. For instance, a quarter of our students’ senior theses result in articles published in national journals; others are related to innovative research conducted with a faculty member leading in his/her field; some students explore their creative side in writing anthologies, novels, or poems for future publication; and still others develop thesis topics that may transition to entrepreneurial opportunities.

Since 2013, the number of students in an entering class who have completed the required SCHC curriculum, including a senior thesis, and graduated with honors has increased from approximately 70% to an expected 80% by August 2016. The numbers tell a story, give us hope, and allow us to say “job well done.” Nevertheless, challenges exist at the institutional level that reflect issues for research in honors on the national level. We need to address the following questions:

- What counts as research when students can choose between a traditional thesis or creative project such as writing a play or book?
- How can honors support students who choose a topic outside of their discipline?

- How can thesis guidelines be written to ensure quality and consistency for every type of thesis?
- How can honors induce faculty to work with students on a thesis when the work and the kind of research involved do not count in the tenure/promotion process?
- Is requiring that the thesis be connected to the student's academic major the best strategy to produce high-quality research?

The assessment and research methods employed on our campus to answer these questions will be different from those of our peer institutions depending on the academic disciplines of the researchers, the purposes and uses of research, and the definitions of what constitutes research.

## CONCLUSION

Our present and future assessment at SCHC is only one example within the national landscape of the honors senior thesis. A mixed-methods approach in a survey of honors colleges and programs across the country could illustrate the value of an honors senior thesis numerically and perhaps also answer why the thesis is valuable. We depend on our intuition and experiences to handle the challenges of an honors senior thesis, which can include lack of enthusiasm among thesis writers, unavailability of faculty to serve as advisors, and inadequate course preparation for the thesis. However, we need strong research to supplement our intuition and experience in order to assure the tradition of the honors senior thesis as an essential component of honors education. Research on this topic would be a beneficial contribution to the body of literature on the value of honors education.

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