Using an honors program to engage undergraduate students in research

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University Honors Programs Attract Academically Strong, Motivated Students Who Seek the Challenges of a Rigorous Program of Study and Are Striving to Maximize Their Potential. The benefits of honors involvement are great. Along with the recognition students receive, honors work offers a sense of community; specialized advising for scholarships, fellowships, and internships; priority course registration; extracurricular events and activities; potential international experiences; private library study carrels; and creative enrichment activities and research. Class sizes are smaller and students work one-on-one with faculty in their majors, all at no extra cost. Undergraduate honors programs are one of three research enrichment models explored by Vessey and DeMarco (2000), who specifically reviewed the literature and websites of nursing honors programs and found that all "are developed to foster creativity and intellectual curiosity in high-achieving students" (p. 359).

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, where we are employed, is home of the Lloyd International Honors College (LHC). For incoming freshmen, a high school grade point average (GPA) of 3.8 is required for admission to the LHC; for current students, a GPA of 3.3 is required. Acceptance enables students to register for honors courses that emphasize advanced and independent course work toward a deeper understanding of course material. Achieving this goal means more research, more writing, and more hands-on practical work than standard course work.

Disciplinary honors work (in the student's discipline or major), completed during the junior and senior years, requires a minimum of nine credit hours of course work in the major, as well as a three-credit-hour senior honors project. In the junior year, honors students often complete a course enrichment activity, including presentation of the activity to faculty and classmates. As seniors, they engage in independent study or an undergraduate research assistantship.

Each school or college in the university has a faculty liaison to the LHC, who is the school's contact for all student inquiries about combining honors work with the chosen major. The faculty liaison also assists and advises students at all levels, from those seeking information about honors to seniors almost ready to graduate. Honors liaisons are familiar with the specific requirements of the program; they are also aware of fellow faculty members' interests and know which faculty are willing and able to work with undergraduate students.

Finding an Area of Interest: Approximately half of all premajors who apply in the spring to the clinical nursing program are selected to start the program in the fall. After they learn of their acceptance during spring break, students are invited to an "honors informational invitation," where current honors students share their work (presentation practice), and details of the honors college are presented.

Some students know their area(s) of interest, but most need assistance in narrowing down a specific area. Brainstorming sessions, facilitated by a faculty member, are extremely helpful for exploring topics or areas of interest that can be developed into a junior-year enrichment activity or senior honors project.

Initially, students are encouraged to skim through their text chapter titles or index to see if they find a topic of interest. The decision about the topic is their own; they must own it and love it. The more passionate a student is about the topic, the less the creative enrichment project feels like work and the more it seems like a study break. We have found that guiding students in a personal exploration of what excites and motivates them generates energy for both faculty and students.

The Honors Contract: Junior-level enrichment activity coursework is completed through an honors contract. Students contract with faculty to incorporate an enrichment activity into two of their four five-semester-hour courses to gain honors credit. Upon completion of the enrichment activities, students earn 10 semester hours of honors credit in their major. (The four courses are medical-surgical, mental health, pediatric, and maternity nursing. Each has a classroom and clinical component.)

Honors contracts are developed by the student and instructor for a particular course, and the student, instructor, and liaison all sign the contract. The enrichment activity involves in-depth exploration of a course-related topic, culminating in a research paper, oral report, PowerPoint presentation, fieldwork, or leadership/service project. The project is intended to give the student a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

While enrolled in medical-surgical nursing, one student contracted to examine the effects of common anesthetic agents on the elderly, including frequent complications and nursing interventions to manage these complications. Another student completed a 15-minute presentation outlining the causes, prevention, treatment, management, and complications of deep vein thrombosis. One mental health enrichment activity was titled, "Common Psychotherapeutic Agents and Their Side Effects." In another mental health nursing project, the student produced a picture and poem interpreting mental illness concepts and an essay about how clinical experience enhanced learning.

Pediatric presentations shared with faculty and classmates have included a poster presentation about effective nursing communication with children and adolescents, and a brochure and class presentation about the nurse's role in caring for an autistic child and the child's family. One student did a literature review of papers exploring a possible connection between Gulf-War service and

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birth defects in the offspring of servicecmen. We often find a maternity-medical or mater-
ity-surgical-surgery, inasmuch in one student’s PowerPoint presentation about the effects of
gestational diabetes on the patient and fetus during and after pregnancy. Maternity-men-
tal health overlaps are also common.

Senior Honors Projects Students may select an independent study project worth three credit hours or apply for an undergraduate research assistantship (URA) and earn a $1000 stipend, but no credit hours. Both require a written proposal from the student. Faculty members apply for URAs through the Office of Undergraduate Research. The URA, while facilitated by faculty, is prima-
arily the student’s effort.

Juniors are given time to formally pres-
ent their enrichment activities to faculty and classmates. Senior-level students are also expected to share their work through formal presentations to outside groups or forums and to submit papers for publica-
tion. Presentations are excellent preparation for sharing work locally, regionally, and even nationally. Examples of recent projects are listed in the Table.

Outcomes Students who participate in disciplinary honors show tremendous pro-
essional and personal growth and enrichment. They are introduced to the world of
research, presentations, publications, and graduate studies, and their skills in team-
work and communication are enhanced. Faculty encourage students along the way
and communicate with each other to enhance student experiences, research
efforts, and mentorship. They consistently nominate students for both research awards and student excellence awards.

The energy, enthusiasm, and excitement honors students bring to nursing are conta-
gious. They are highly motivated and appre-
ciate faculty time and involvement. The
enthusiasm flows both ways; faculty are will-
ing to share their passion for research with
these students. When honors students pres-
ent their work, they not only help educate
their classmates, but also motivate many of
them to inquire about the possibility of pur-
suing honors themselves.

The students who have completed disci-
plinary or full university honors exhibit self-
confidence and pride in their accomplish-
ments. One student told us, “Thank you for
your help, guidance, and patience in helping me with my honors project. I am really glad that I pursued the disciplinary honors requirement and I thank you for your sup-
port. You give very good advice. Thank you
for choosing to help me fulfill my dreams.”

Another student stated, “Although I was hesitant about participating at first, my hon-
ors adviser helped me make the right deci-
sion about getting involved with disciplinary honors. I’m extremely glad she helped me because looking back, it has been a very
rewarding experience. My honors projects allowed me to explore areas of personal inter-
est in nursing that were not covered by the standard curriculum. My adviser helped me focus my excitement for certain topics….Her enthusiasm and support helped me stay moti-
vated and complete the projects.”

One student said that when presented with the possibility of graduating with honors, she
was both excited and concerned. “My com-
tees came from a time perspective. I was working full-time, and had a family at home to care for. My honors adviser was instrumental in helping me push forward to accomplish this. Not only was she extremely informative, she was also very organized and provided me with the materials I needed. I appreciate her dedication in helping me accomplish this goal. I am so glad that I took her advice and did the extra work…. When I graduate this spring I can be extra proud that I will be recognized for my hard work.”

Finally, one student asked, “How do you even begin to thank someone who became a mentor and helped change your life?”

Combining our time and talents has been effective in integrating research into our undergraduate nursing program. The over-
lapping triad of faculty researcher, faculty honors liaison, and honors student works
well for maximum research and learning effectiveness. Our collaboration has brought
satisfaction and growth in our disciplinary honors program, and increased both the
quantity and quality of undergraduate nursing research.

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