

Summary of NCHC Program Review Report: Frederik Meijer Honors College (FMHC)

After a two-day visit in late March 2017, reviewers from the National Collegiate Honors Council submitted a 64-page report describing the FMHC, identifying key “opportunities” for change, and evaluating the existing program using a standard NCHC rubric.

The report as a whole offers much praise: “Overall, we received the clear impression that Honors is highly valued by the university and is seen as a major component of GVSU.” The reviewers go on to identify eight broad “opportunities” (i.e., suggestions), the first of which has to do with the change in FMHC leadership and simply stresses the importance of the suggestions to follow. Two others appear to be fairly boilerplate recommendations by the national organization: the NCHC prefers standalone Honors Colleges, so the reviewers recommend a structural change—something GVSU considered and rejected prior to the reorganization of the early 2000s; and the reviewers recommend an increase in the Honors budget—which of course is something we will strive for whenever possible. The remaining five “opportunities” seem to us particularly worthy of careful consideration this academic year and going forward:

Opportunity #1: Governance

“GVSU needs to come to agreement on an appropriate governance structure that clarifies and solidifies the location and responsibilities of the faculty who are members of the Honors unit.” The reviewers note that while FMHC draws faculty from across campus, it is unusual (but not unique) in having full-time, tenure-track faculty housed in a departmental unit, as well as a unit head. They suggest we clarify the roles of the full-time faculty, the unit head, and the Honors director, and they call strongly for a single curriculum/development committee that represents all colleges and includes students.

Opportunity #2: Curriculum

“We strongly recommend that a strong, well-defined, and sequential curriculum that has numerous Honors offerings outside of general education and located within the major disciplines be created. Further, clear and Honors-specific student learning outcomes should be developed as well.” They call the GE-replacement model “outdated” for three reasons: 1) more and more students are arriving with AP credits that count as GE, 2) GVSU’s mission includes transfer enrollment and partnerships with regional community colleges and thus requires an upper-level component, and 3) an Honors College should offer a comprehensive experience through (and beyond) graduation that includes both a “broadening” vector and a “deepening” vector. The reviewers praise FMHC’s first-year interdisciplinary sequences but call for more departmental courses (Honors courses offered within majors) and a more significant Honors thesis or capstone experience that is tightly tied to the student’s chosen discipline and perhaps also some kind of upper-level interdisciplinary experience, such as an internship. Finally, the reviewers call for the identification of an overarching curricular focus, “an endpoint if you will,” in the form of specific student learning outcomes. “Specifically,” they ask, “what should an Honors experience at GVSU do for its students?”

Opportunity #3: Visibility

“We strongly recommend that steps be taken to raise the ‘brand visibility’ of Honors on the GVSU campus and beyond.” They praise the physical location of FMHC and the state-of-the-art learning/living centers, but they observe that “unless one knows exactly what to look for and where to look for it, it is a bit of a challenge to identify Honors activity on the GVSU campus.”

They suggest more prominent signage, prominent references in all administrative buildings and libraries, and other forms of visibility (banners, t-shirts, etc.), which, they say, “abound elsewhere and signal the pride of place that Honors should have on campus.”

Opportunity #4: Honors Student Governance

“We recommend that the Honors Student Governance group be tasked with planning and executing meaningful Honors service activities that would bridge the gap between the Niemeyer and Holton-Hooker student populations.” The reviewers observe “a great deal of student energy” within Honors and rightly observed that the ANCHOR student group is primarily a Housing community council as opposed to a governance group or a community service organization. They recommend that FMHC take a more active role in building a “programmatic bridge” between the two Honors learning/living centers, and they also recommend that students, under the direction of faculty and/or staff, plan and execute “10 to 15 community service projects each year.”

Opportunity #5: Alumni Development and Extramural Support

“We encourage GVSU to provide whatever support it can for the formation of an Alumni Development or Extramural Support group.” The reviewers praise the interest and energy of the Honors alumni they met with. They recommend that the newly formed Alumni Advisory Council be tasked with 1) identifying one Honors alumnus or alumna who would return to the GVSU campus at the beginning of each academic year to participate in and perhaps be a featured speaker at that year’s start-up activities, and 2) targeting a fundraising mission to support either Honors study-away activities or undergraduate research/creative activities, or both. They note that at many universities such alumni groups provide mentors, recruiters, and service and leadership opportunities for Honors students. They also provide an outside perspective to help shape honors education.