

Honors Program Retention/Graduation Study:

**Tracking Retention and Progress Toward Graduation of Honors Students at
North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University**

**Study and Report
by**

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Faced with growing competition for good students and an awareness that our best students should be always properly challenged in their classes, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University developed a University Honors Program that began to function with the start of the Fall 1999 semester. The Program is designed specifically to provide our most talented and motivated undergraduates with enriched, student-centered academic and cultural experiences that stimulate them to reach their full potential and prepare them for positions of leadership and responsible citizenship. It does this through a combination of special classes open only to Honors students, opportunities to do advanced work under a professor's guidance in regular classes, access to cultural events in the area, leadership development programs, travel to Honors conferences and elsewhere, special housing designed to foster a sense of community, public service activities, and efforts to improve the general intellectual climate on campus.

The Honors Program places special emphasis on first year experience. A freshman's first campus contact with Honors begins with a two day Honors Orientation Program. During this orientation, groundwork is laid for a yearlong process designed to assist students in the transition from high school to college and provide them with the skills needed to succeed as active learners.

Honors Orientation has multiple components, each a part of the comprehensive effort to help students develop academically and professionally. These components include:

a] Honors students meet their Honors mentors, advanced Honors students who have already contacted their mentees over the summer prior to enrollment. During the year, mentors meet

regularly with their mentees, help them become acquainted with campus services, participate in social activities together, and help them become committed members of the Honors community of learners and the larger Aggie family.

b] Freshman students are introduced to the faculty members from the various Departments who serve as Honors advisors and the faculty members teaching Honors courses in the Fall semester. Arranging for student contact with these selected faculty prior to the start of classes helps students view their advisors and instructors less as intimidating authority figures and more as professionals who will assist them in their personal development.

c] Freshman students are given their first taste of college-level inquiry-based learning through the discussion of the book that all are assigned to read over the summer. Incoming freshman students invariably have mastered the skills of passive learning in high school, but often have little understanding of the skills needed for active, inquiry-based learning. These are precisely the skills the Honors Program is designed to develop.

d] Finally, freshman Honors students engage in a half-day public service project along with their mentors and others of the Honors faculty. The Honors program fosters the concept that good students have an obligation not just to themselves, but also to others. Throughout the year, Honors freshman students are required to complete 10 hours of additional public service, often working as groups with their mentors.

Having completed the Honors Orientation Program, freshman Honors students have become aware of the demands that will be placed upon them as Honors students, have made friends with some of their peers, met many of the faculty who will work with them during the rest of their college career, and taken part in a public service activity that they invariably find both enjoyable and meaningful. The Orientation, therefore, lays the foundation for Honors to build upon during

the remainder of the student's time in the Program. It is also important in the bonding process that links freshman Honors students to the Program and to the University.

Freshman Honors students are further brought into the culture and community of Honors by their low-enrollment Honors classes that emphasize skill development over the transmission of information. Likewise, participation in the varied social, cultural, travel, and leadership development opportunities sponsored by Honors further weds them to both the Program and the University. Finally, the constant e-mail communication between them and the leadership of the Program keeps them informed of upcoming events and facilitates continuous feedback between the Director and the students. Though designed to spur the academic and personal development of Honors students, these activities also contribute to the Program's high retention rate by providing them with a range of services that are not programmatically available to non-Honors students.

The Honors Program has evolved since it began in the summer of 1999. Moreover, even though not all incoming Honors freshman students remain eligible for the Program throughout their academic career, all are exposed to the plethora of services that are provided to those in their first year at the University.

It is gratifying to learn that a study of Honors freshman retention by the Office of Planning, Assessment and Research confirms that students in the Honors Program have exceedingly high first and second year retention rates. Table I shows the level of retention for first-time freshman students in the university and in the Honors Program. First and second year retention rates are typically over twenty percentage points higher for Honors students. Even though not all Honors freshman students remain in the Program, the overwhelming majority do remain at the University as illustrated by the data below.

Table I

Retention of First-time Freshman Students

Year	Honors	Honors Freshman		Total University	
		First Year	Second Year	First Year	Second Year
		Retention Rate			
1999	41	92.70%	87.80%	72.30%	61.60%
2000	53	96.20%		76.60%	

With the assistance of the Office of Planning, Assessment and Research, the retention and progress toward graduation rates of Honors freshman students will be tracked on an ongoing basis through their graduation. Future studies will compare the retention rate of Honors freshman students to other equally talented students at the University who are not in the Honors Program. This latter study will help us better understand more about the extent to which participation in the Honors Program results in improved retention. If future tracking reports continue to confirm that participation in Honors leads to higher student retention rates, it is possible that some of the strategies used by Honors could be utilized for the general student body, possibly contributing to a higher student retention rate at the University as a whole.