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University of Northern Colorado

Greeley, Colorado

COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT OF FIRST-YEAR
EXPERIENCE HONORS COURSES TO PROMOTE HOLISTIC LEARNING

A Thesis/Capstone Proposal

Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment for Graduation with Honors Distinction and

The Degree of Bachelor of Science

Danielle Magasano

MAY 2022

COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT OF FIRST-YEAR
EXPERIENCE HONORS COURSES TO PROMOTE HOLISTIC LEARNING

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ON:

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Abstract

Undergraduate students who engage in first-year experience courses are found to have higher GPA, retention rates, and graduation rates. This study shares the findings of program evaluation applied research within the Honors Program at the University of Northern Colorado and the current first-year experience's impact on program retention and satisfaction rates. The program currently offers two contrasting first-year experience courses that present different curriculum and philosophy. The result is varying first-year experiences for Honors students which can reflect both students' perceptions and experiences within the program. After compiling feedback on both courses through individual interviews, course evaluations, and anonymous surveys, suggestions are proposed to both first-year seminar courses for future semesters, starting in Fall 2023. Data was collected in a cyclical model starting in Fall 2018 and finishing in Spring 2021 semesters. As the Honors Program is moving to a more holistic view, modifying the current first-year experience to mirror that mission will help students be more supported while still getting the connection to the Honors Program that they need. Although this study looks specifically at the Honors Program at the University of Northern Colorado, its model can be adapted to other programs to help increase Honors Program retention rates and satisfaction levels.

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Comprehensive Evaluation and Assessment of First-Year Experience Honors Courses to Promote Holistic Learning

Thirty percent of college students drop out after completing their first year of study, and 40% of all first-generation students fail to complete their degrees (Hanson, & Checked, 2021). Undergraduate students who engage in first-year experience (FYE) courses are found to have higher GPAs, retention rates, and graduation rates (Malik, 2011). The Honors Interdisciplinary Program at the University of Northern Colorado currently offers two contrasting first-year experience courses that offer different curriculum and philosophy. The result is varying first-year experiences for Honors students, which can influence students' perceptions and experiences within the program. After feedback is compiled on both courses through individual interviews, course evaluations, and anonymous survey data, changes will be proposed to both first-year seminar courses for the Fall 2023 and subsequent semesters. As the Honors Program is moving to a more holistic view, modifying the current first-year experience to mirror that mission will help students be more supported while still getting the connection to the Honors Program that they need.

The two first-year seminars currently offered within the program are Honors 101, Introduction to Critical Thinking (HON101) and the Honors-specific section of University 101 (UNIV101), Foundations for Learning and Development. HON101 is an academic-based course, meaning it is an environment that is cultivated around learning, research, and scholarship. The structure of this course is discussion-based with a goal to introduce first-year Honors students to critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Thought-provoking literature is used to start discussions around current social issues and

contrasting perspectives. However, the assignments in this class do not always reflect Honors-level coursework. These types of assignments are purposeful because the class is only worth one credit hour, so the program tries not to overload first-year students. The class size is about 30 students with one instructor and two peer mentors per class section. The class meets twice a week for 50 minutes each. The first day of the week is a class-wide lecture or discussion with the instructor leading the class period. During the second class of the week, the students are split into two recitation groups, each lead by one of the peer mentors; these sessions expand on the ideas introduced by the instructor on the first day. The purpose of these sessions is to go into deeper, more personal discussions with a smaller, more intimate group of peers.

The contrasting course is University 101. UNIV101 is a university-wide course that is open to all students but predominantly serves first-time, first-year students. For Honors students, it is restricted to first-year students. The course is designed to help ease the college transition and set students up for academic and social success. Specifically, the mission of this program is to “promote exemplary teaching and provide meaningful learning experiences and coursework to help build the foundation for undergraduate students’ academic success” (Vaughan, 2022). This course is academic-based as well but has an extra focus on student-support. The course also focuses on giving students access to campus resources and academic tools such as effective goal setting, time management based on personal priorities, and exploring strategies and implications of their decisions. Topics such as diversity and wellness are included, too. Opportunities are presented to students throughout the semester and include social, leadership, research, and other academic opportunities. The assignments are small, yet meaningful, with the exception of

a research paper and oral presentation that gives students the “skills to retrieve and evaluate information from a variety of sources... and articulate and defend ideas and viewpoints” (Hauck, 2018, p. 1). The Honors section has a few additional requirements for assignments to make them more challenging. Students receive support with their assignments from their instructor and Class Leader (peer mentor who have previously taken University 101). UNIV101 is a 3-credit course with 10-30 students in each section. One instructor (doctoral level student) and one Class Leader are assigned each section. Some sections have specific student populations such as Honors students, business students, and first-generation students in specific TRIO programs. Other sections are a mixture of all student populations. The classes either meet three times a week for 50 minutes each or twice a week for 75 minutes each. The instructor, Class Leader and all students attend every class. The University 101 program has conducted research on the impact of its course. At the University of Northern Colorado, students who take UNIV101 have higher fall semester GPAs than those who do not take the course (Pickenpaugh et al., 2021; Vaughan et al., 2020; Ward et al., 2020). Additionally, students who have taken the course have higher graduation rates than students who have not (Vaughan, 2020). These results are measured in the following categories: all students, first-generation students, minority students, undeclared students, and nursing students.

The current Honors first-year experience allows the students to choose between taking 1 credit (Honors 101 only), 2 credits (Honors 101 and Library 151), or 4 credits (Honors 101 and University 101) their first semester. Analyzing and modifying this current FYE structure is important to create a more consistent student experience that

increases student satisfaction and retention within the Honors Program. This study is guided by these questions:

1. What is the influence of the current first-year experience on student satisfaction and retention within the Honors Interdisciplinary Program at the University of Northern Colorado?
2. What changes can be proposed to increase the current student satisfaction within the Honors Interdisciplinary Program?

Answering these questions are important for creating a cohesive, holistic first-year experience for Honors students and retaining them to completion of the program.

Proposing changes will help determine if a new program style, philosophy, and curriculum will enhance student satisfaction and retention within the Honors Interdisciplinary Program. Exploring the current first-year experience for Honors students on campus will help to determine why some students may not be satisfied and potentially not engaging in the program. It is reasonable to predict that students who are dissatisfied with their first-year course may start to disengage from the program; this can lead to first- and second-year student program withdrawals. Once any problems or curriculum gaps within the first-year experience program are identified, changes will be proposed to hopefully increase the retention and satisfaction rates of students within the Honors Program.

Consistent positive research regarding first-year experiences is available already, but this study will narrow those practices to a smaller program level. This study will share the findings of program evaluation applied research within the Honors Interdisciplinary Program at the University of Northern Colorado and the current first-

year experience's impact on program retention and satisfaction rates. Although this study looks specifically at the Honors Interdisciplinary Program at the University of Northern Colorado, its proposed model can be adapted to other programs to help increase Honors Program retention rates and satisfaction levels.

Literature Review

University-Wide First-Year Experiences

Programs across the world have varying FYE for their students, if they have one at all. As colleges started accepting a more diverse range of students, many universities started allocating more resources to FYE programs, which could range from “highly organized learning communities to basic courses introducing students to college life” (Jamelske, 2008, p. 374). Generally, students are positively impacted by having a concrete FYE, whether it is socially, academically, or otherwise (Hendel, 2007). FYE programs are important for all students, not just Honors students. Before understanding how the research surrounding FYEs can be applied to Honors programs (i.e., how it impacts retention, satisfaction, integration, etc.), it is helpful to first understand how average college students are impacted by first-year courses and overall experiences.

University-Wide FYE Impact on Integration

Similar to Honors students, FYE courses have goals to academically and socially integrate first-year students into the university. Malik (2011) found that students who attended more than six classes of their first-year seminar had a higher mean of all factors of integration including study strategies, academic and cognitive skills, critical thinking, usefulness of course readings, connections with faculty and managing time and priorities for academic, connections with peers, understanding of academic services and policies,

sense of belonging and acceptance, increased out-of-class engagement and knowledge of wellness for social engagement than students who attended less than six classes.

Although this data is convincing, this specific study made the FYE course voluntary, inferring that students who attended more than six classes wanted to attend to gain the integration skills. This FYE course had no credits attached, so it was stated that this could take away the students' motivation to go to class often. Research similar to Malik's study should be done to solidify these findings within the FYE discipline. To further illustrate, a study by Hauck et al. (2020) found that students' performance in their FYE seminar course contributed greatly to their "college engagement and academic self-efficacy above and beyond students' entering academic performance and preparedness" (p. 96).

Suggesting that high school GPA and entrance exams are not a significant contributor to academic and social integration at the university level, this study adds context to Honors students' success in an FYE course. Honors students characteristically are high achievers in high school. However, the study examined here suggests that Honors students can still benefit greatly from an FYE course since high school achievement statistics do not necessarily contribute to university-wide integration.

The classroom setting has a big impact on academic and social integration of first-year students. As Tinto (1993) demonstrated, making the classroom more student-engagement oriented combined with creating a cohort-based atmosphere promotes social and academic integration into a larger university. Highlighting students as the driving force of their first collegiate academic experience can have a positive impact on their self-efficacy to complete college well and maintain social relationships. Furthermore, Tinto (1993) discovered that participating in a program comprised of a chronological

sequence of courses with the same cohort made students more socially integrated into their university by establishing these connections early. Within FYE courses such as these, students were able to pin-point the characteristics of their first-year seminar in interviews that established long-lasting relationships between students including the length and frequency of the class and the student-centered nature (Enke, 2011). Survey responses within Hendel's (2007) study reflected that students had a stronger sense of community after engaging in the first-year seminar. Specifically, surveys noted that students had exposure to and, in turn, were more likely to participate in cocurricular activities and special events such as guest lectures and public talks on campus (Hendel, 2007). Engagement such as this typically leads to higher rates of student success in higher education (Astin, 1984). Along those same lines, it was found that students who preferred to work with others in class achieved higher academically than students who preferred to work alone (Freidman & Mandel, 2012). This study demonstrated the interlocking of academic and social integration within the classroom by showing students will achieve higher with a combination of both. Additionally, interviews with students who previously participated in an FYE indicated that the impact of the first-year seminar on their social integration of the institution lasted beyond the first year of study (Lynn, 2008). This study indicated that the social integration part of an FYE can set students up for social success in college by establishing connections and relationships early. UNC's Honors Program is hoping to develop a two-semester FYE to build a stronger cohort community, mimicking Tinto. Hopefully, this will build the cohort-based community as well as increase the social integration success among students.

University-Wide Impact on Student Retention and Satisfaction

University-wide first-year experiences can impact student retention in higher education. In one study, first-generation students who took a first-year seminar had higher retention rates to the second semester of study than students who did not engage in a first-year class (Vaughan et al., 2014). Speculations of reasons to why this occurs are the ease of the college transition and a boost in the self-efficacy of students to successfully complete college-level courses. Additionally, the more students attended the first-year seminar, the more likely they were to retain in higher education (Malik, 2011). A possible concern about this study is that students who attended the majority of classes were already motivated to advance through higher education, leading this statistic to be biased. However, as Astin (1984) demonstrated, students are more likely to succeed in higher education if they are highly involved on campus, i.e., “spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students” (Astin, 1984, p. 518). From interviews with past students in a different study, the first-year seminar allowed the students to make connections to faculty and peers as well as the campus community (Lynn, 2008), making them more successful throughout their college experience.

Surveys after curriculum changes were implemented to the first-year seminar within Victoria University’s Honors program indicated high student satisfaction levels within the university. The FYE was shifted to a block model that allowed students to focus on one concept at a time before advancing to the next. Essentially, this allowed students to take one course over three to four weeks and continue in sequential blocks. Students were more likely retained to the next year of study at Victoria University if they

took this first-year seminar because it promoted, “learning through discussion and group interaction; form[ing] strong and lasting peer connections formed through close contact with one group at a time; [getting] to know and be known by their educators; [receiving] timely and targeted support; and, crucially, they can achieve success early to build confidence and motivation” (McCluskey et al., 2019, p. 6). Although this worked for students at Victoria University, this would be difficult at UNC because this study cannot make large-scale schedule changes. However, a sequential course model will be proposed to promote cohort style progression through the program.

Additionally, a student’s college self-efficacy at the end of their first fall semester contributes greatly to their likelihood of persistence to the following spring semester (Wright et al., 2013). Incoming students’ motivation to complete college is a significant factor for third semester persistence, but the second most contributing factor was if the student had taken the FYE seminar or not (Pittendrigh et al., 2016). The impact of the FYE on student involvement is crucial to retention within higher education and should not be taken lightly.

University-Wide FYE Criticism

Not all aspects of first-year experiences are positive, though. Specifically, the main point of criticism is the lack of rigor in the first-year experience course (Hendel, 2007). The lack of rigor could possibly taint a student’s perception of the university, which could lead to a decrease in retention to the second year of study. On the contrary, easy curriculum could boost a student’s self-efficacy to complete higher education curriculum. This could be fine for university-wide FYE courses, but curriculum should be more challenging for Honors students. Programs at universities across the world vary on

program outcomes and implementation strategies, but they often share some common characteristics: small class sizes, discussion-based content, and concepts for college student success (e.g., study skills, academic planning, and time management; Clark & Cundiff, 2011). Depending on the program, these can be familiar concepts for Honors students and could lead to less of an impact. On the other hand, they could be totally new to students who were not previously designated as “gifted” in pre-collegiate education experiences.

Honors Program First-Year Experiences

The following will discuss how current first-year experiences (FYE) inside existing Honors programs compare to university-wide FYE and impact first-year collegiate Honors students. Varying Honors programs offer different first-year experiences for their students. Some Honors programs do not offer anything in regard to a first-year experience for their students. As demonstrated earlier, it is strongly supported that the FYE has a positive impact on students, and by having a first-year experience, that positive impact can enhance a program’s impact on its students at the program-wide level.

Honors FYE Impact on Integration

First-year experiences have positive impacts on students’ integration into university, as explored above. Those impacts can be transferred to the program level to help a specific niche of students. A study conducted at the conclusion of the first-year Honors seminar course at Pace University indicated that this first-year seminar increased students’ need for increased cognition and promoted the integration of ideas and academic challenges. Students indicated that they were confident in their ability to do

college after completing an FYE course (Dinan, 2019). Similarly, a survey conducted by Holliday (2014) concluded that Honors students enjoyed their first-year experience course because it made their transition to college easier by providing them stress relief through academic and social support. These students also noted that the small class size and importance on goal setting helped ease their academic transition while the resources discussed and offered (e.g., campus resources, learning resources) helped ease the social transition. When students are presented with resources such as these to ease their academic transition, they have more time to devote to socially adjusting.

Social adjustment to college is just as important as academic adjustment for any student. Stage (1989) found that academic and social integration had reciprocal effects on each other. A student was more likely to be effectively academically integrated if they were successfully socially integrated. However, if a student was already academically integrated, becoming socially integrated was easier and quicker (Stage, 1989). This study showed how both aspects of college integration are dependent on each other, and first-year students need them both to be truly successful in higher education. To aid the social integration of first-year Honors students, a study by Johnson (2009) showed that including peer mentors in a first-year experience course helped students feel both academically and socially integrated by the end of their semester. The peer mentors were instructed to support students academically and socially, easing their college transition. The student assessment of the peer mentors concluded that 72% of the peer mentors were effective in facilitation of the material, 71% were effective in their ability to assist students academically, 82% had enthusiasm for the subject, 85% were knowledgeable about campus resources, and 75% were effective in their ability to serve as a role model

(Johnson, 2009). All peer mentors were successful in connecting students to resources, clubs, or hosted social activities for Honors students (Johnson, 2009).

Additionally, implementing nationally used Honors Program practices like Upper Division Honors Program (UHP), Honors Interdisciplinary Program (HIP), and City as Text can easily build Honors community and provide opportunities to foster cohort connections (Lacey, 2007). Upper Division Honors programs allow undergraduate students to conduct their own research while working with small peer groups for support. Honors Interdisciplinary programs allow students to take additional classes to dive deeper into a concept unrelated to their major. They are grouped with a cohort, and throughout their college experience, they voluntarily take classes, attend workshops, and go to social events together as a community. City as Text is a national Honors activity that encourages students to explore their off-campus community together; it is meant to foster connections between students early on in their academic career. Although UHP is not a first-year student program, connections made between first-year HIP students commonly transfer to UHP later in the students' academic career. Not all Honors programs implement these national programs, but they can be useful to better community building inside an existing program.

Another community building practice is the use of Honors-specific residential learning communities: dorm halls on campus specifically dedicated to Honors students. Students living in residential Honors learning communities with the addition of first-year experience courses are more socially satisfied and stated they had easier college transitions (Spisak et al., 2019). These learning communities place students with like-minded individuals and immediately establish friendships and connections. Classes

comprised of students from the same residence hall have been shown to produce close student relationships (Spisak et al., 2019). Building community is important to the social integration of first-year students. Introducing them to established communities on campus (like residential learning communities) gives them the opportunity to engage while already being inserted in the group. UNC's Honors Program has an existing residential learning community on campus that contributes to cohort building. FYE courses can establish communities like this by allowing students to engage to their comfort level while actively being involved in the classroom. Creating an FYE to encompass this community building concept could enhance student socialization and hopefully increase student retention and satisfaction within UNC's Honors Interdisciplinary Program.

Honors FYE Impact on Student Retention and Satisfaction

Like the impact of university-wide first-year experiences, Honors FYE courses can impact Honors student retention and satisfaction with the overall program and overarching university. Students who both lived in a residential Honors learning community and engaged in the FYE course finished the first semester with higher GPAs and were more likely to complete the Honors program by graduation than Honors students who engaged in neither (Spisak et al., 2019). The study outlined points to solidified first-year experiences within Honors programs increasing student retention not only within the program itself, but within the respective university.

There are also multiple aspects of the first-year experience that influence student satisfaction with an Honors program and university. Engagement in an FYE is one of the first interactions students have at universities and Honors programs, so its impact on student perception of the institution is crucial for continued engagement. In McCluskey et

al. (2019) study at Victoria University, students took part in learning only one unit or concept at a time. This allowed the students to dive deep into one concept and understand the innerworkings of the subject. This model had a positive effect on student engagement, learning, and academic outcomes at Victoria University. The student-focused classroom and close peer experiences impacted student satisfaction within the course and the university. This model recognized the complexity of students' lives and purposely simplified the curriculum to help them ease transition, which students positively responded to and specifically pointed out in course evaluations. Honors students in another study indicated that connections to faculty, smaller class sizes, and student-centered learning were the most frequent responses to the survey for top reasons of satisfaction among Honors Interdisciplinary Students at University of Nebraska (Kampfe et al., 2016). An apparent trend between these studies is the importance of student and faculty relationships within the FYE. This close-knit environment sets the scene for students to make lasting connections with each other and faculty.

Honors FYE Criticism

Criticism of Honors-specific FYE courses reflect criticism of university-wide FYE courses. In Kampfe and colleague's (2016) study, students were asked to share ideas of activities for the future Honors program cohorts. Responses with the highest frequencies were social gatherings with an emphasis on meeting others, professional development opportunities, volunteering, making changes to the mentoring program, and guest speakers and leadership opportunities. All of these responses included either academic or social support, which could be achieved by modifying the existing FYE at the University of Nebraska. Another study examined a student comment on program

improvement. In an open-ended survey, a student commented on the impact of the first-year seminar by saying:

“A lot of the material discussed was very basic, things that I think college students, especially honors students, should have already known. I do not feel like this class was very beneficial. I think a lot of the material covered were things I already knew and was forced to learn again” (Holliday, 2014, p. 51).

Considering Honors program curriculum is supposed to be elevated in some respects, this criticism is valid. First-year experience courses are students' first point-of-contact for Honors students, and they should reflect the academic and social objectives of the program. If they do not, student perception of the program can be skewed in the direction of not enough academic rigor.

Purpose

In sum, a lot of information about first-year experiences is available, and its impacts are well known. Most studies examined showed positive impacts on academic and social integration, student engagement, retention, and satisfaction. This review was intended to examine the differences between first-year experiences available to Honors students and first-year experiences offered to all students at a university. However, there is less information on Honors-specific first-year experiences. Although first-year seminars for Honors students should be similar in nature to university-wide first-year seminars, they need to be more rigorous to be truly successful in all of these FYE impact categories. More research based on Honors FYE and its impact on the institution's Honors program is needed to expand and solidify existing research. The purpose of the

current the research study will add to the existing body of research by diving into the specificity of these items within two contrasting first-year seminars offered for the University of Northern Colorado's Honors Program. Findings from this study will impact the student experience in the Honors Program to promote a holistic learning experience. The research questions guiding this study were engineered to identify and modify the impact of the first-year experience. These questions are reiterated below.

1. What is the influence of the current first-year experience on student satisfaction and retention within the Honors Interdisciplinary Program at the University of Northern Colorado?
2. What changes can be proposed to increase the current student satisfaction within the Honors Interdisciplinary Program?

Methods

Participants

To collect participants, maximum variation purposeful sampling was used. Maximum variation purposeful sampling was most beneficial to this study as it seeks to find "important shared patterns that cut across cases and derived their significance from having emerged out of heterogeneity" (Palinkas et al., 2015). As students have different experiences from one another, finding common themes that intersect each experience is helpful in developing a more cohesive and impactful first-year experience program. Inclusion criteria included students who took Honors 101 or the Honors section of University 101 in the Fall 2018, 2019, or 2020 semesters. Seventeen individual interviews were conducted with 3 students from 2018, 7 students from 2019, and 7 students from 2020. The breakdown of students is below:

Table 1*Number of Students by Semester*

Semester	Honors 101 Students	University 101 Students
Fall 2018	2	1
Fall 2019	5	2
Fall 2020	4	3
Total	11	6

Table 1. Number of Students by Semester

I sent out an email to students on the roster for these courses with an accompanying SignUp Genius link so interested students can volunteer for a time slot that worked best with their schedule. After a student volunteered for my study through this link, I emailed the student using their personal contact information given at the time of sign-up explaining my research project with the attached consent forms. For a script of my written communication with students, please see Appendix A and B. There was no gender or experience requirement for participant selection. Out of the 17 total student participants, there were 4 males and 13 females. All students were still enrolled within the University of Northern Colorado and had reached a maximum of three years of study. The participants did not come from a vulnerable population and were all above the age of 18.

Data Collection Procedures

The first step of data collection was collection of secondary data from the Honors withdraw survey - a survey actively used to track the reasons students withdrew from the program - created by the Honors Program. This is a university data set. Data was collected specifically about students who had withdrawn from the Honors Program during their first year at UNC, providing quantitative data for reasons students chose to

drop the Honors Program. After collection of this secondary data, it was used to report the top reasons students were not satisfied with the program and accompanying courses. This data set was used to show reasons students withdrew from the program during their first year, and how their first-year experience courses impacted that decision. This allowed connections between qualitative and quantitative data and informed common themes across cases. Student responses were anonymous, and there were no identifiers in this data set.

The second step of data collection was individual interviews of consenting participants. Before participating in the research process, students received a letter of informed consent electronically. Because of the novel coronavirus, interviews were conducted through Zoom. Interviews occurred at the end of the Spring 2020 semester for students who took the course(s) in Fall 2018 or 2019. Interviews were conducted in Spring 2021 for students who took the course(s) in the Fall 2020 semester. The students who volunteered to be interviewed about their experience in either University 101 or Honors 101 were interviewed by the primary researcher only. There were no other observers present. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes and was screen-recorded to be transcribed into text. For a list of interview questions, please view Appendix D. These questions were semi-structured, and follow-up and/or clarification questions were included on a case-by-case interview basis. The letter debriefed the participants and informed them of the procedure as well as any risks or benefits involved (see Appendix C).

During the Fall 2020 semester, time was spent observing both courses. Observations included notes about class participation, engagement of the instructor and

peer mentors, and characteristics of the classroom atmosphere, including classroom set up. Notes were not taken on specific students. Instead, the focus of observations was on the class atmosphere, participation, and the classroom setting. For Honors 101 observations, lecture was observed: this type of class occurred once a week. University 101 observations consisted of one observation per week per section because the class format was consistent. These courses were observed once in the Fall 2020 semester. To view the observation sheet, please see Appendix E. Informed consent forms were distributed to all students in each class. The letter was very similar to the interview letter in that it debriefed the participants and informed them of the procedure as well as any risks or benefits involved (see Appendix G).

At the end of the Fall 2020 semester, an online survey to measure the effectiveness of the courses and their satisfaction with the Honors Program was distributed to all students enrolled in Honors 101 and the Honors section of University 101. The students also received a letter of consent for the survey (see Appendix F), displayed as the first page on the survey. Students received a recruitment email asking them to complete the survey. The students rated each statement on a scale including “strongly agree,” “agree,” “neutral,” “disagree,” and “strongly disagree.” All responses were anonymous besides indicating the course. Section number was excluded. The survey is outlined in Appendix F. Students were contacted via email to take the survey. This communication is outlined in Appendix H.

Data Analysis Procedures

After collection of secondary data, thematic analysis was used on individual interview responses to analyze and identify the top reasons students were not satisfied

with the program and accompanying courses. End-of-semester survey and Honors withdraw survey quantitative responses were compiled into data tables and transferred into visual bar chart representations. Without an opportunity for written responses, these surveys serve to support themes found through the thematic analysis of individual interview data.

The recordings of individual interviews were translated into text. These verbal feedback statements were used to generate common themes throughout the Honors students' first-year experience and their experience in the specific courses. Using Descriptive Coding (Saldana, 2014), a word or short phrase was used to summarize the main topic of the interview excerpt. Patterns among the excerpt codes were used to detect common, overarching themes. This data was used to help inform proposed changes to be implemented to the first-year experience courses. The surveys collected at the end of the Fall 2020 semester also informed these decisions. Because the surveys outline the effectiveness and satisfaction levels on a student-by-student basis, this was a helpful tool to gauge the effectiveness of the courses across all Honors first-year students. The surveys were analyzed and transformed into visual charts and graphs. Classroom observations were used to provide context for how each class differed in a classroom setting.

As participants in this study were anonymous, all necessary steps were taken to prevent others from identifying the participants. All gathered information and data is stored on the primary researcher's personal computer. All recorded data from interviews were transcribed by the primary researcher only. These tapes were not shared with anyone beyond the research team. Participants were assigned a number in all research

notes, transcripts, and finished reports of this study in the format FAU19-01 or FAH19-01. This number symbolized the fall semester they took the course (18, 19, or 20), the course they took (U for University 101 and H for Honors 101), and the student number (1-10). All paper data, including signed consent forms, field notes, and completed surveys, is kept in a locked file cabinet in the primary researcher's office. There is a slight possibility that someone may be able to identify the participant based on identifiers used in their records. Participants were informed of this risk and of the precautions that would be taken to avoid identification. All data, digital and paper, will be destroyed after a period of three years.

Results

Honors Program Withdraw Survey Data

When withdrawing from the Honors Program, students are sent a survey to ask their reasoning for leaving the program. This is not a survey that was created for the purpose of this study. Rather, this is a survey that was created and is utilized by the Honors Program. The primary researcher was granted access to this survey and its data to fit the scope of this study. Because this study focuses on the first-year experiences of Honors students, only data from students withdrawing during their first year of study was considered. When asked about the reasoning for leaving the program, the survey has the following options:

- Honors classes do not fit well into my degree plan
- I feel I do not need the Honors Program to succeed
- Honors classes were not interesting or satisfying to me
- Honors was not what I expected it to be

- Honors does not fit well with my other extracurricular activities
- Taking extra Honors classes is too expensive
- I need to graduate and have not completed the Honors requirements
- I decided to transfer to another university
- Personal health
- Early graduation
- Other

The responses from the 2019-2020 school year are below. The top 5 responses from the survey are included.

Figure 1

Top Reason for Leaving Honors

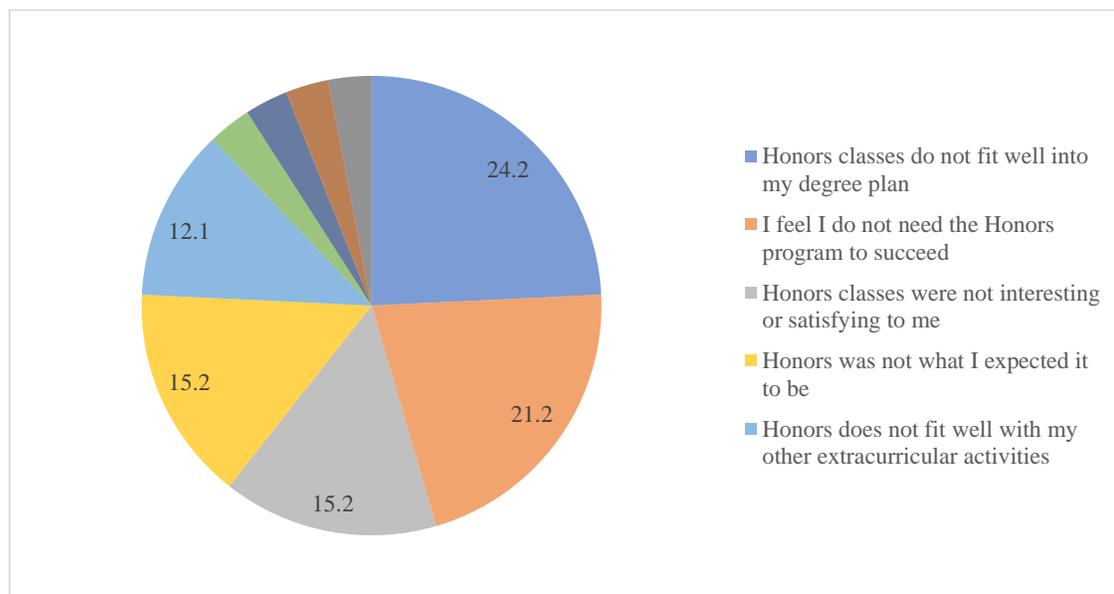


Figure 1. *Top Reason for Leaving Honors*

The chart above shows that the top reason students left the Honors Program was because the classes required to complete the program do not fit well into their personalized degree plan. Uninteresting Honors courses was listed as the third cause of

freshman students leaving the program. At the time of departure, the only classes students would have taken are Honors 101 and/or University 101. Even though this is not the top reason, it is in the top three reasons making it a significant cause of freshman withdrawals.

Individual Interview Data

Data collection was completed in Spring 2020 (for Fall 2018 and 2019 semesters) and Spring 2021 (for Fall 2020 semester) for the HON101 and UNIV101 courses.

Individual interviews analyzed through Descriptive Coding thematic analysis (Saldana, 2014) provided three main themes: University Experience, Academic Integration, and Classroom Environment. These themes and their corresponding subthemes are supported by the quantitative data collected by surveys. Themes and subthemes were determined by grouping similar descriptive codes into subthemes and identifying a pattern that constituted an overarching, connecting theme. Each student had a different experience within the same course(s), and the common, overarching themes helped inform a holistic program proposal. Quotes from both courses are included with each theme and subtheme to showcase the differences in each course as it relates to the respective theme or subtheme. An auditor was utilized when finding and defining themes. Thematic codes and subthemes are presented in the following table (main themes are bolded):

Table 2

University Experience Code Book

Code	Definition	HON101 Example	UNIV 101 Example
University experience	A mixture of all student experiences within the university,	“It was helpful to just have the professor and be able to reach out to	“[After UNIV101], I have people that I can ask, and I know where to go. I feel more

	including faculty and staff relationships, on-campus events, cohort building, and supplemental instruction, in relation to being enrolled in either Honors 101 and/or University 101	her outside of class. Trusting her was what was the most helpful part.”	comfortable going to places to ask for help.”
Social integration	The students’ perceived ability of being socially healthy and welcomed at the university and within the Honors Program	“I really liked the social aspect of HON101 but if I could change the curriculum, I would change all of it.”	“I don't know what I would have done without it my first semester, because I probably wouldn't have any friends other than my roommate.”
Cohort dynamics	Aspects of each cohort that are attributed to enrollment in Honors 101 and/or University 101. Also includes the impact of the Honors Residential Learning Community	“I feel like a lot of what helped me get more comfortable in [Honors 101] was because I knew people from University 101 that were in it.”	“[It] is really nice to make those connections, especially since pretty much everybody there was new coming to college.”
Faculty and staff relationships	The Honors Program’s ability to effectively communicate events, program requirements, and other important details to its active students	“I really have a strong connection with the Honors Program because of [the graduate assistant] and being with [the director] and being in the student club. I kind	“My [peer mentor] was there for me a lot, and the teachers were a backbone to everything that I was able to do through the Honors Program.”

		of created those relationships with a lot of people in the Honors office and made my connections strong enough to make my want to be a part of the Honors Program a lot stronger.”	
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Table 2. University Experience Code Book

Table 3

Academic Integration Code Book

Code	Definition	HON101 Example	UNIV101 Example
Academic Integration	The students' perceived ability of how well they are performing and being supported at the university and within the Honors Program in relation to being enrolled in Honors 101 and/or University 101.	“You learn some cool little bits of information the first couple of [classes], but then they really just drove the point home and didn't really expand upon anything else. Just kind of staying in that same ballpark.”	“The academic opportunity that I got out of that was like learning more [about] how to write for college and not just these random, specific essays.”
In-class student involvement	Students' accounts of how the class interacted with each other and the curriculum.	“There was a select few of us, like a smaller group, who would contribute more actively with participation in class, and the rest of the class was more observant and didn't	“It was very welcoming, and it was early in the morning. So, everybody I think was a little bit tired, but...there was a lot of energy in the room.”

		participate that much even though the professor encouraged it.”	
Academic rigor	Curriculum-based challenge within Honors 101 and/or University 101	“It felt a lot like a class we would have to take for [the IB] program in high school.”	“It wasn't so easy where I just didn't really have to do anything. Like I would take notes and kind of prep for class, but then other than that, I wouldn't have to cram or study crazy hours. So, it was like a nice middle ground.”
Academic freedom	The student's ability to choose their academic path, subjects, and topics within the classroom	“I really liked being able to have an active voice in my education.”	“It kind of intrigued me a little bit more because I liked doing that research because it was something I was actually passionate about.”

Table 3. Academic Integration Code Book

Table 4

Classroom Environment and Program Satisfaction Code Book

Classroom environment code book			
Code	Definition	HON101 Example	UNIV101 Example
Classroom environment	The atmosphere of each classroom that impacts a student's perception of the Honors Program, their cohort, faculty and staff, and the course curriculum. This includes a classroom space	“When we broke up into the small groups with our TA's, it was sometimes kind of awkward.”	“I think sitting in a circle had a lot to do with...learning each other's names.”

	where students feel welcomed, valued, and affirmed within their lived experiences on a daily basis.		
Program satisfaction code book			
Program satisfaction	The level to which students feel satisfied with the value the Honors Program and/or the first-year experience course(s) is adding to their education.	“I think there are some things that could be altered or changed, but I feel like communication is a big problem.”	“I think it's a good outlet for people who want to push themselves a little bit more academically, but it still creates a lot of those social aspects.”

Table 4. Classroom Environment and Program Satisfaction Code Book

Quotes from students exemplify the differences in each theme or subtheme for the courses. Most themes and subthemes have student responses that show differing experiences within the category although there was agreement among some student experiences. The strongest differences were evident in the Academic Integration theme. The theme results derived from the individual interviews display these fundamental differences that influence program satisfaction.

Observation Data

Observations were conducted to obtain data on the classroom dynamics of each course. Both courses were observed once within the Fall 2020 semester. Observations occurred during the 8th week of the semester for both courses. Similar timings are an important consideration in the findings of this study because students are experiencing similar external conditions such as mid-term exams. Timings were intentionally scheduled for the middle of the semester as to ensure observation of adequate peer interaction and well-established classroom environment and expectations. Notes were not

made on specific students. Instead, the classroom was observed broadly and evaluated in three categories: class participation, instructor involvedness/ enthusiasm, and involvedness of peer mentors. Each category was given a score on a range from 1-10 with 10 being the best score. A synopsis of the results can be found below. Blank and fully annotated observation sheets can be found in Appendix E, I, and J, respectively.

Table 5

Synopsis of University 101 Observation Sheet

Category	1-10 Scale Ranking	Comments
Class participation	10	The class sits in a circle all facing each other. This encourages participation and community within the classroom. Students answered questions quickly and excitedly. They asked clarifying questions, when needed.
Instructor involvedness/enthusiasm	10	The instructor had music playing before class started, creating a lively atmosphere. They talked in the middle of the circle, pacing and turning around so all the students could hear them. They had a discussion-based class instead of a lecture.
Peer mentor involvedness	10	The peer mentor conversed with students before class started about their weekend and interests. They had input during the class discussion. When the students broke up to work on independent work, the peer mentor circled the room and answered any questions students had about their work.
Total	30/30	N/A

Table 5. Synopsis of University 101 Observation Sheet

Table 6*Synopsis of Honors 101 Observation Sheet*

Category	1-10 Scale Ranking	Comments
Class participation	9	All students answer questions as a class when the instructor asks an open-ended question. Majority of students are taking notes. Students are participating in written activities. They go around the room sharing voluntarily. Not everyone participated in every activity. The same few students answering questions.
Instructor involvedness/enthusiasm	10	Start with SMART (specifics about the lesson, reflecting, media critical thinking). The instructor speaks directly to students and involves them in lesson instead of lecturing. They go over weekly topics and homework first. The instructor knows everyone's names and addresses them by first names. Instructor came prepared with printed notes and thought-out questions. Reflection activity at the end of class: write down 5 things you learned/questioned/heard.
Peer mentor involvedness	3	Peer mentors were asked by the instructor to make a list of student responses during discussion. Peer mentors were not actively involved in discussions or activities.
Total	22/30	N/A

Table 6. Synopsis of Honors 101 Observation Sheet

Observations conducted displayed some of the differences in classroom environment for these courses. The greatest difference in evaluation was the involvedness

of peer mentors; the peer mentor was highly involved in UNIV101, yet the peer mentors in HON101 were barely involved.

End-of-Semester Survey Data

An end-of-semester survey was distributed to students in both Honors 101 and University 101 at the end of the Fall 2020 semester. With the exception of one question, this quantitative survey included responses to statements on a 5-point Likert scale of “strongly disagree,” to “strongly agree.” Students responded to 13 statements and 1 question in the survey. Out of the 16 students enrolled in the Honors-section of University 101, 15 responded to the survey leaving a 93.8% response rate. Out of the 45 students enrolled in HON101, 18 students responded leaving a 40% response rate. Although the response rates are not comparable, the number of student responses for each course was similar. The results from the survey are below:

Figure 2

I am Satisfied with this Course as an Honors Introductory Course

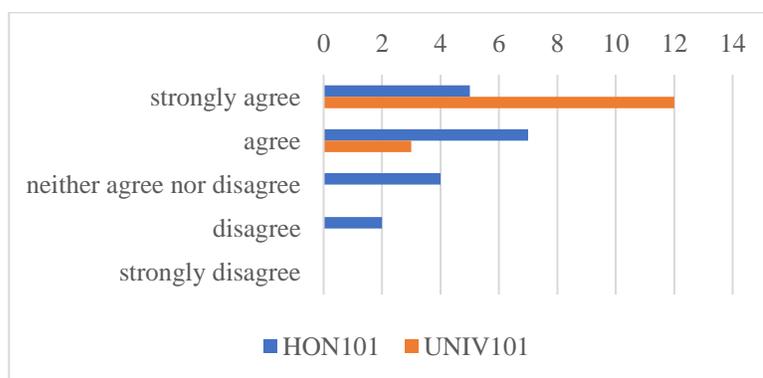


Figure 2. *I am Satisfied with this Course as an Honors Introductory Course*

Figure 3

I was Presented with Honors-level Activities, Discussions, and Assignments

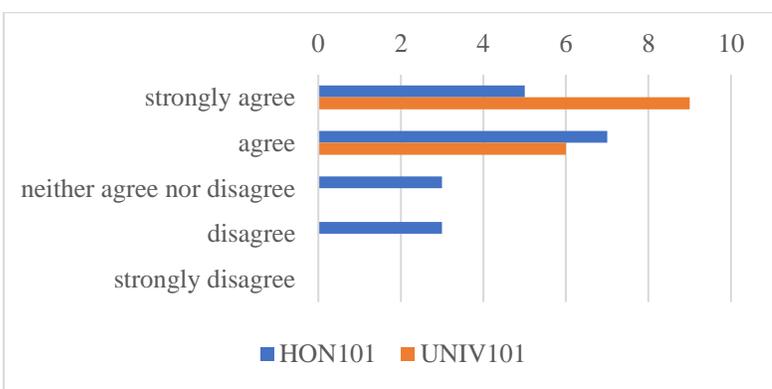


Figure 3. *I was Presented with Honors-level Activities, Discussions, and Assignments*

Figure 4

I feel Strongly Connected to the Honors Program after Taking this Course

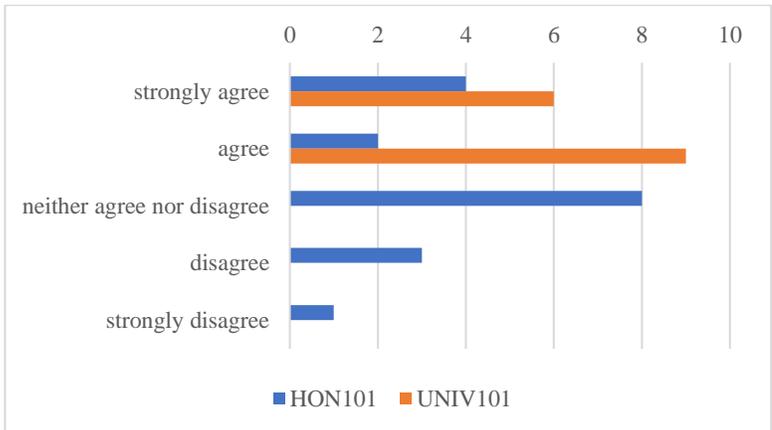


Figure 4. *I feel Strongly Connected to the Honors Program after Taking this Course*

Figure 5

I feel Connected to my University at Large after Taking this Course

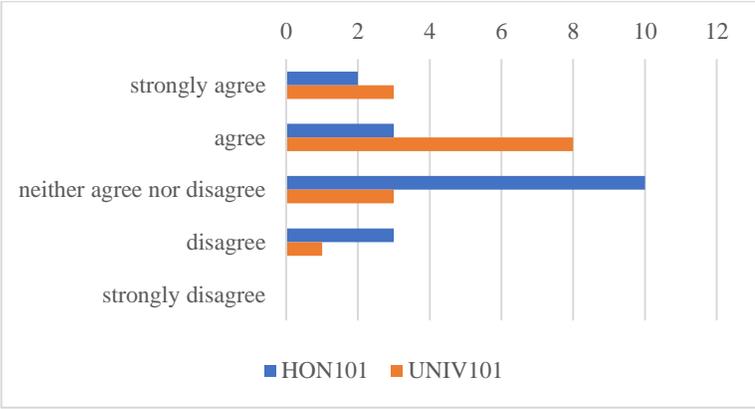


Figure 5. *I feel Connected to my University at Large after Taking this Course*

Figure 6

I am Likely to Retain in the Honors Program after this Academic Year (2020-2021)

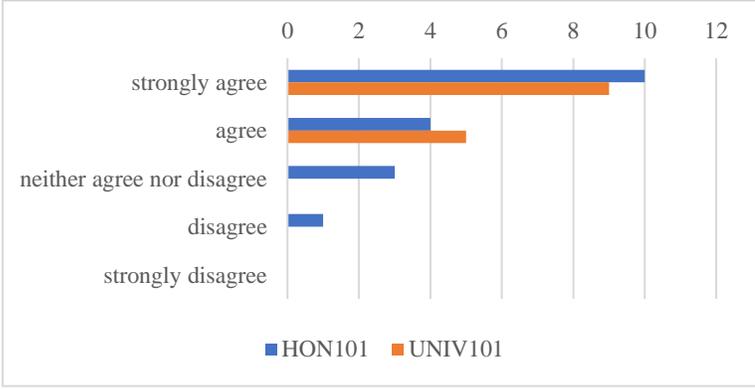


Figure 6. *I am Likely to Retain in the Honors Program after this Academic Year (2020-2021)*

Figure 7

I am Satisfied with the Benefit this Course added to my Higher Education Experience

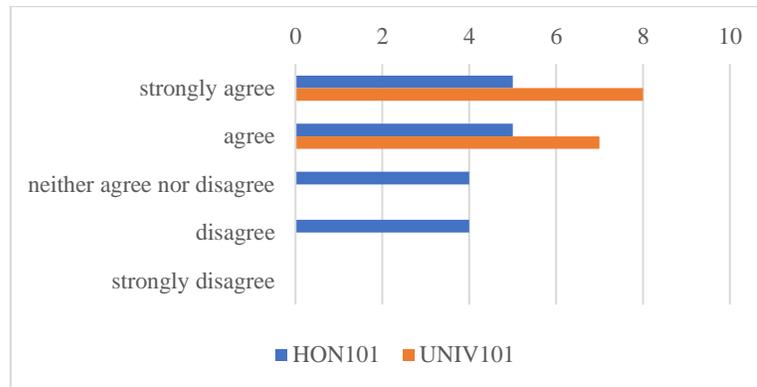


Figure 7. *I am Satisfied with the Benefit this Course added to my Higher Education Experience*

Figure 8

I was Presented with Academic Opportunities Outside of this Course

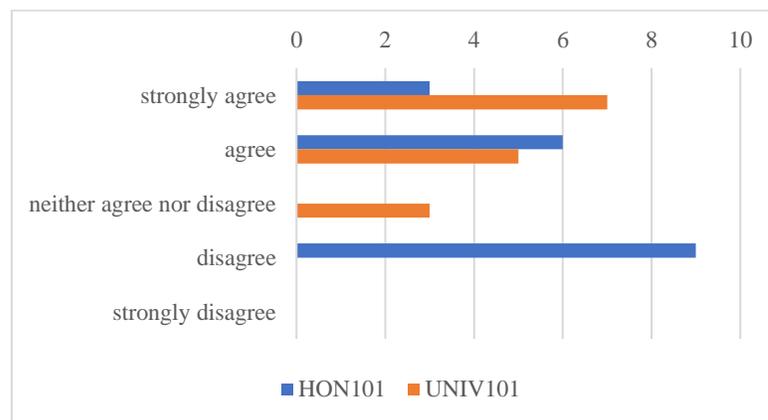


Figure 8. *I was Presented with Academic Opportunities Outside of this Course*

Figure 9

I was Presented with Social Opportunities Inside and Outside of Class Time

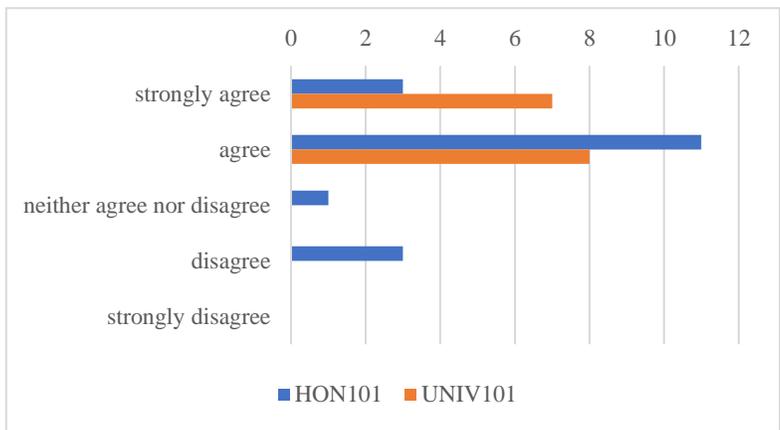


Figure 9. *I was Presented with Social Opportunities Inside and Outside of Class Time*

Figure 10

I feel Connected to my Honors Community after Taking this Course

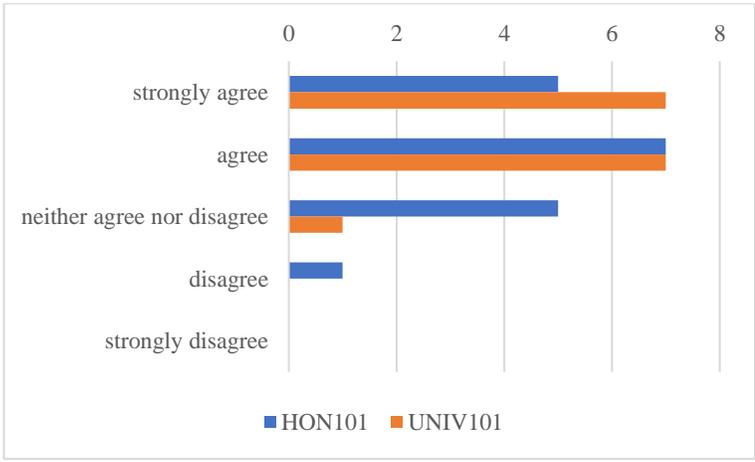


Figure 10. *I feel Connected to my Honors Community after Taking this Course*

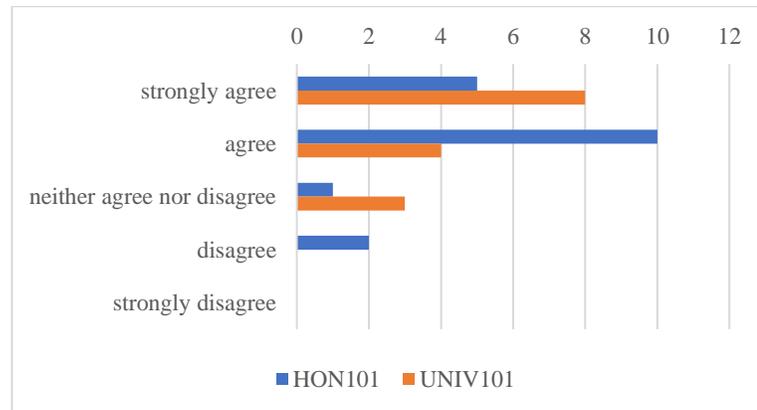
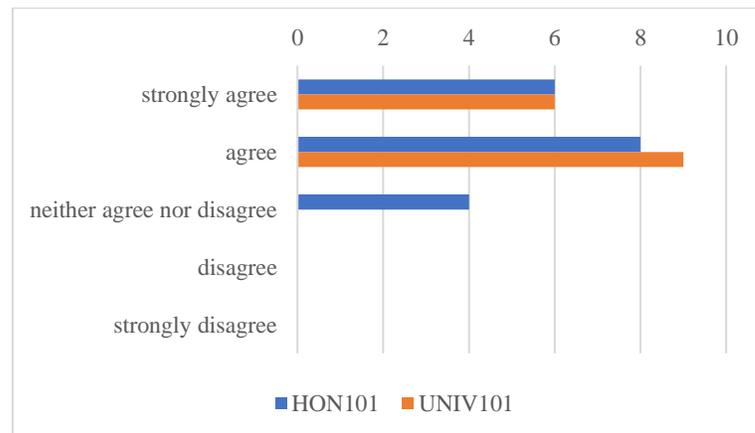
Figure 11*I made Friends in this Course**Figure 11. I made Friends in this Course***Figure 12***I felt Safe to Share my Thoughts in this Course**Figure 12. I felt Safe to Share my Thoughts in this Course*

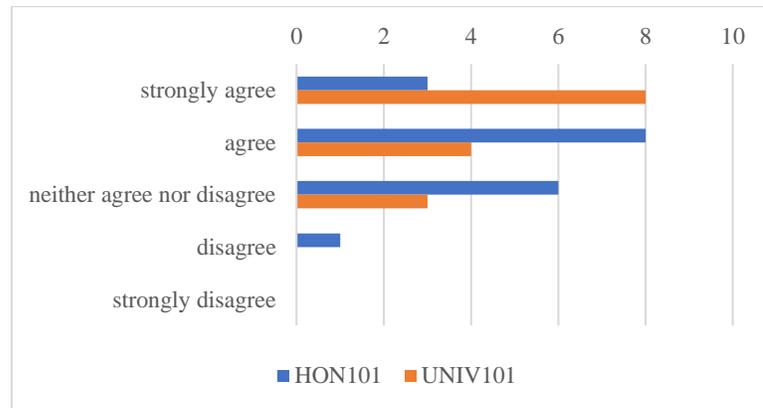
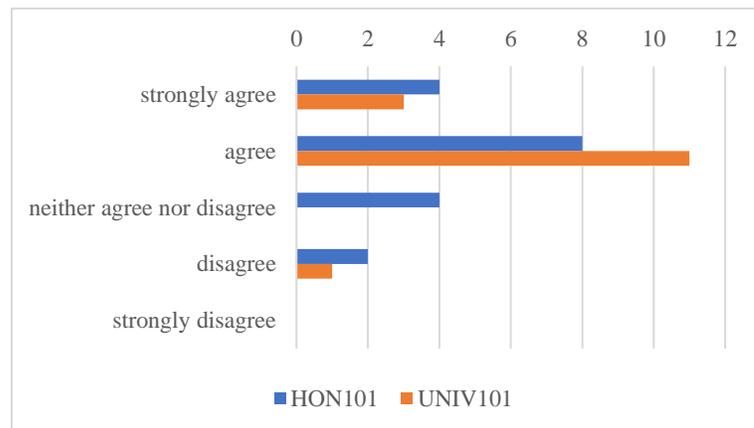
Figure 13*My Peer Mentor(s) was Effective**Figure 13. My Peer Mentor(s) was Effective***Figure 14***I am Satisfied with the Honors Program and its Goals**Figure 14. I am Satisfied with the Honors Program and its Goals*

Figure 15

If You could have Taken only One Introductory Course, Which One Would You Take?

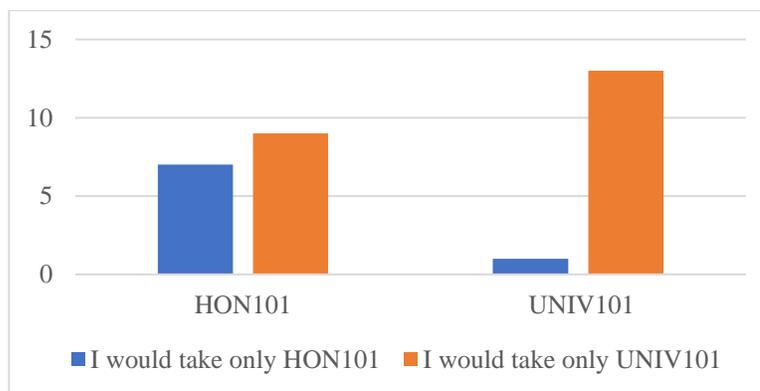


Figure 15. If You could have Taken only One Introductory Course, Which One Would You Take?

Results from the end-of-semester survey showcase that overall, students favored University 101 more than Honors 101. The responses reported here were used to support individual interview themes and subthemes.

Discussion

With the themes, subthemes, and supporting quantitative data presented above, it is clear that both Honors 101 (HON101) and University 101 (UNIV101) produce differing lived experiences within the Honors Program's first year experience. Guiding this study, the research questions are (1) "What is the current Honors Program first year experience and how does that impact students' perceptions of the program?" and (2) "How can the Honors Program first year experience be modified to create a cohesive and holistic experience for Honors freshman?" These questions were explored and answered within the scope of this study. The following section connects and relates students' interview responses, quantitative data, and themes and subthemes. The results and discussions displayed in this study can be used to benefit the future directions of the Honors Program as well as influence curriculum enhancements.

University Experience

As presented in the above codebook, the theme University Experience mixes all student experiences within the university. This theme is supported by the subthemes of Social Integration, Cohort Dynamics, and Faculty and Staff Relationships.

Social Integration

HON101. Within the qualitative and quantitative data responses, it is clear that Honors 101 was beneficial for social connections, both between students and faculty/staff. One student noted, “I really liked the social aspect of HON101 but if I could change the curriculum, I would change all of it,” showcasing that the social component was the most desirable piece of the course for the individual. Other students found the social component to be odd and disjointed. For another student, “The social thing- it was kind of weird. For me personally, I was the only boy in the class. So, they kind of joked about that a little bit, but that was kind of weird. But even if I was [not], it did [not] really work out, getting things set up like that.” The Honors 101 course created variable experiences for students on the social integration spectrum. When presented with the statement “I made friends in this course,” only Honors 101 students selected disagree; however, no students selected strongly disagree (see appendix K for chart). Data shows even though some students enjoyed the social component of Honors 101, some did not. This is a severe contrast to the responses reported from University 101 students.

UNIV101. As noted in the results section, the classroom setup for University 101 is uncommon in a college setting. When commenting on the structure of the University 101 classroom, one student said,

“I liked sitting in the circle because I felt like I was looking at other people in the class. And so, it helped me get to know names and faces better. And I made some friends in that class... I think that was one of my only classes where I knew everyone's name... I don't know what I would have done without it my first semester, because I probably wouldn't have any friends other than my roommate.”

In University 101, instructors and peer mentors tried to provide as many out-of-classroom experiences as possible for students to attend to bolster their social integration into the larger university. A student commented on these extracurricular events by saying, “There were the football games, study nights, all these different things...I think it’s a really good thing that [they] do that because I think that if they didn’t...I think people would become more socially isolated, and we don’t really want that coming into college.” When comparing the social opportunities to their experience in Honors 101, another student commented “There were definitely a lot more social opportunities, like they had to schedule things for us to do outside of class as a class.”

All University 101 students responded saying agree or strongly agree to the statement “I was presented with social opportunities inside and outside of class time” showing that the social opportunity was much greater and impactful in this course (see Figure 9). Social integration and academic integration often go hand-in-hand when assimilating into a new education environment (Holliday, 2014). The impacts of academic integration within the two courses examined here are discussed below.

Cohort Dynamics

HON101. Although the faculty connections in Honors 101 started early, the broader community connection among students did not foster as easily. In most cases, the community connections were facilitated through group projects in Honors 101, and some students noted that building those connections was more difficult. One student said, “every other week we got to like work in groups and create a presentation and they were random groups every time, so we just got to know everyone.” In a similar tone, another student said:

“It was a little bit harder to make the bigger connections in a sense kind of like more of a community kind of feel. But we did a lot of group projects. And so that was really nice to kind of reach out to different people in different groups and... we'd always change groups. We got to make a lot of connections and I'll still talk to people I see down in the hallway and everything.”

One of the benefits of the course was having it be solely Honors first-year students. This helped some students assimilate into the program more. To demonstrate, a student noted, “I think that it helped me to feel more welcomed into the Honors Program just since I was in a class solely with Honors students and getting to know them a little bit better based on the activities in class, and just having a few people to look out for at Honors events.”

Some students, however, commented on how their connections in Honors 101 came easier because they had already built relationships with those students in University 101. To illustrate this, a student enrolled in both courses stated, “it was nice because I shared University 101 with some of the... people in my Honors class. So, it worked out really well to make those groups and start to recognize people.” Another student

commented that “I feel like a lot of what helped me get more comfortable in [Honors 101] was because I knew people from University 101 that were in it.”

The residential learning community (RLC) for Honors first-year students hosts many of the program students, but not all. Students who lived in the RLC commented on it having a greater effect on cohort dynamics than the Honors 101 course itself. For example, a student stated “I was in the Honors dorm, so I was able to connect with those people outside of class. But the class itself did [not] super lend me to be more connected to the Honors Program. The people I connected with, I lived with, and the people who did [not] live in the Honors dorm, I did [not] connect with as much.”

UNIV101. Students in University 101 made stronger connections in the course as evidenced by both interview statements and survey results. A student noted:

“There was a lot of energy in the room in a sense, and [I have] some great memories from that class and getting to work on the projects together. There [was] a lot of collaboration and it was very social, which is really nice to make those connections, especially since pretty much everybody there was new coming to college.”

The same student commented about social opportunities in the course: “within the classroom, especially, there was a lot of great social opportunities that really carried through. It's still holding strong now.” This quote shows that the cohort building efforts in University 101 helped students find a broader community in Honors that existed beyond the class.

The residential learning community also had an impact in University 101, says one student. “I lived with almost everyone...so I lived with all these people! So that made

it more welcoming, and the people I didn't live with, we got along really well... we did a lot of team activities, so it was just super welcoming and engaging and very supportive." Even though the residential learning community exists within both courses, students commented that it flowed better within the University 101 experience. Social integration inside and outside of the classroom like this can heavily impact students' experiences and satisfaction within the Honors Program.

Faculty and Staff Relationships

HON101. Many students noted that they felt a strong connection to the program through their faculty in the course and/or the Honors Program's professional staff. This adds an interpersonal connection with the program to foster a sense of belonging.

However, that connection is not always strong. In one instance, a student stated,

"I didn't have a ton of stress when it came to my college transition. There were a couple instances that the professor was able to help me with, but it wasn't related to the class or the class material. It was helpful to just have the professor and be able to reach out to her outside of class. Trusting her was what was the most helpful part."

In a similar statement, another student said, "I could tell that the professor cared a lot about the students and about the atmosphere and what we were learning, so it made me really excited to come to class every day." Some students pointed out that their connection from the program did not come from the Honors 101 course itself but rather the professional staff within the program. This concept is exemplified by the following student quote:

“I really have a strong connection with the Honors Program because of [the graduate assistant] and [communicating] with [the director] and being in the student club. I kind of created those relationships with a lot of people in the Honors office and made my connections strong enough to make my want to be a part of the Honors Program a lot stronger.”

This illustrates that the faculty in the Honors 101 course did not always have an impact on students' desires to continue with the program. The influence on program satisfaction and continuation can come from elsewhere. One student shared that the support of the professional staff was impactful by saying “having a stronger connection with the director has been really beneficial because...being in the Honors Program, it's kind of hard.” The professional staff works to support students with their efforts to progress through and complete the program in a way that best fits their needs. This can differ from faculty support as faculty support mainly takes place within the classroom. Overall, the faculty and/or staff relationships can be a positive or negative force on the students' perceptions of the Honors Program. This is demonstrated in both courses.

UNIV101. As stated above, students had similar responses in the University 101 course as they did in the Honors 101 course. However, the sentiments were stronger in this course. Students felt overwhelmingly supported by their instructors and peer mentors throughout the semester, starting on the first day. A student described that experience in this quote: “We were able to create those relationships from the first day of class with our teacher, with our [CL], and with other students in the class, and I think that really pushed a lot of us to kind of keep going.” The same student went on to say, “my CL was there for

me a lot and the teachers were a backbone to everything that I was able to do through the Honors Program,” exemplifying support came from both instructor and peer mentor.

When asked about receiving help progressing through the program, a student stated “after this class...if I do have questions about how to go about things, I have people that I can ask and I know where to go. I feel more comfortable going to places to ask for help,” referring to visiting the Honors office for help throughout their UNC career. Even though University 101 is not a class developed by the Honors Program, students still found the help they needed through their faculty and staff relationships. In addition to faculty and staff relationships in the Honors Program, an influential factor of student experience is their own relationships within their cohort dynamics.

Academic Integration

The purpose of both of these first-year experience courses is to introduce students to college life. Part of that includes social integration as well as academic integration. Academic integration is an important aspect of assimilating into higher education, and the support of these courses aids students’ ability to do that successfully. Subthemes of academic integration include In-Class Student Involvement, Academic Rigor, and Academic Freedom within each course.

In-Class Student Involvement

HON101. The Honors 101 introductory course is a discussion-based classroom environment. It is a challenge-by-choice activity to participate in class, and that often gives students a reason to not engage. One student demonstrated this by saying, “there was a select few of us, like a smaller group, who would contribute more actively with participation in class, and the rest of the class was more observant and didn’t participate

that much even though the professor encouraged it.” In a similar aspect, another student commented on the recitation sessions with the teaching assistants being quiet as well, they said, “When we broke up into the small groups with our TA’s, it was sometimes kind of awkward. It was like we wouldn’t really talk at all.” These sentiments were echoed in the course observation for Honors 101 (see Table 6). The awkward atmosphere of the Honors 101 classroom translates into the students’ experiences in the course and overarching program.

UNIV101. The University 101 class is much more structured than the Honors 101 class. The day-by-day plan is usually split between lecture, discussion, and activities and is set at the beginning of the semester. Additionally, these plans are the same every semester with slight variations on the daily activities. This means the students do not direct the course and the discussion as much as in Honors 101. However, that has led to a higher participation level. A student stated that in their class, “It was very welcoming, and it was early in the morning. So, everybody I think was a little bit tired, but...there was a lot of energy in the room.” The setup of the classroom encouraged more participation by encouraging students to directly face each other. In addition to student involvement, academic rigor also plays a role in student experiences

Academic Rigor

HON101. With the discussion-based structure of the Honors 101 curriculum, some students found it to be academically mild. Although they enjoyed being able to lead discussions, students often found the curriculum to be lacking in challenge. A student commented on this feeling by stating, “It felt a lot like a class we would have to take for [the IB] program in high school, and it wasn’t really anything new, and it kind of felt like

a waste of time. And it made me kind of not like the Honors Program as much.” Another student echoed this sentiment by saying,

“You learn some cool little bits of information the first couple of [classes], but then they really just drove the point home and didn't really expand upon anything else. Just kind of staying in that same ballpark... I think that kind of made me question a little bit if I wanted to continue the Honors Program, like if I was going to get anything out of it, because I felt like I just wasn't learning anything in there.”

Some students did not mind the free-flowing nature of the class and commented on the low rigor as being a break from the challenge of their other courses. A student said, “I thought it was going to be a lot tougher than it ended up being; it was much more casual and experimental than I thought. I expected...everyone to be really strict and there to be a lot of hard deadlines. Then, I realized it was more just about...just enjoying learning.” To accompany this personal quote, when presented with the survey statement, “I was presented with Honors-level activities, discussions, and assignments,” only Honors 101 students were neutral or disagreed, pointing to the experience that students were less academically challenged in this course (see Figure 3).

UNIV101. For a lot of students, the curriculum rigor was not much more difficult than Honors 101, but it did provide more useful skills. To illustrate, one student noted, “I think we learned a lot of very helpful things for school...I feel like I can apply the stuff from University 101 more in my life.” Another student commented,

“I learned a lot of things that were more specifically geared toward college in that sense. Again, the reference work, doing the paper was amazing, and the time

management and the memorization techniques that all could apply more throughout college. And I loved Honors 101, but I think that University 101 was more helpful for my college career in general.”

Commenting on the research project and its benefits, one student said,

“It was really nice to have that first-hand professional experience as a first-year student coming into college because most of us had never done that. Most of us had given a presentation over PowerPoint in our language class where it only had to be five minutes. But being able to have that chance to do that and kind of create our own pitch as to why our research mattered to us and kind of explaining it in such a short amount of time was actually nice because it helped me with my professional speaking skills.”

Although most students enjoyed the University 101 curriculum and the benefits it offered to their college experience, some students were not satisfied with how the program had not been modified to fit the needs of Honors students. For example, a student said their instructor was not prepared for Honors students:

“The professor didn’t seem like they knew how to deal with a class full of just Honors students, because the curriculum in the UNIV101 class wasn’t really changed or tailored to fit the academic needs of Honors students... which was kind of frustrating because I felt like I was doing the same curriculum and the same assignments as every other student. And I wanted to be challenged more than I was in that class.”

Another student, added to this experience by commenting on the class being an easier college course. They said, “it was like an easier class. But it wasn't so easy where I just

didn't really have to do anything. Like I would take notes and kind of prep for class, but then other than that, I wouldn't have to cram or study crazy hours. So, it was like a nice middle ground.” This data illustrates that the impact of the curriculum in University 101 is variable for Honors students but could overall be stronger. All students interviewed noted their gratitude for the required research project that allowed them to exercise their academic freedom whether they personally thought the course was challenging or not.

Academic Freedom

HON101. Although Honors 101 did not have a research component to the curriculum, students still engaged in academic freedom. Most students participated by engaging with the class discussion. One Honors 101 student said that the “students got a little bit more voice in where we went in terms of discussion and what we were doing, which I really liked. And I really liked being able to have an active voice in my education.” Another student noted that Honors 101 “made me realize how flexible the Honors Program was in the sense that we talked about critical thinking and applied it to media. It wasn't just a course about the Honors Program, even though it was Honors 101, it would apply to a whole bunch of things. So, it made me realize how wide the courses can stretch.” Similarly, another student talked about the mixture of ideas when being able to think freely by stating:

“I really liked how you can explore your own mind, if that makes sense. Like you can bring your thoughts to the table without having it questioned and free of judgement, and you can do it in a way where its free to explore, like it's a big sandbox, where you can just get everyone's ideas and opinions and mix it together. Then you can see what works and what doesn't work, what are the

devil's advocates, you know, how does that play into whatever situation you are approaching.”

The academic freedom in Honors 101 stems from the discussion-based content, and students responded positively to that. In contrast, academic freedom in University 101 was much more rooted in their research project.

UNIV101. In University 101, students engaged in academic freedom in the form of assignments and the required research project. Although required, the students were given the opportunity to choose their own topic. This allowed students to research their passions and interests instead of a pre-determined topic. When talking about the research project, a student said:

“It kind of gave me a little bit of insight to what my final goal is for the Honors Program, like being able to create my own project and things like that. It kind of intrigued me a little bit more because I liked doing that research because it was something I was actually passionate about... we got to choose the topic and it was something that we were passionate about and going to present it, and we're going to work our butts off for that paper, and I think that really pushed me. So that kind of influenced my opinion of the Honors Program because we were able to write about what we wanted. We were not forced to write about something or something in a specific category. We had no boundaries for our project.”

A lot of students echoed this same idea for academic freedom within the curriculum.

Another student added on saying that the support from instructors bolstered their personal educational goals: “I want to do my best at this [project] because I want to continue doing research that I'm passionate about. I definitely got overwhelming support from my

teachers and CL because they knew my research was unique to me and something that I cared about and something that a lot of people don't know about in today's world."

Although academic freedom shows up in both courses, it looks very different, with University 101 creating a stronger tie to freedom of expression within academia. The same can be said about the classroom environment.

Classroom Environment

Both classes differed in classroom environment. For starters, the setup of each class is different. In Honors 101, students sit in traditional classroom rows facing the front of the room. There is one instructor and two teaching assistants (non-first year Honors students). In University 101, students sit in a circle facing each other. There is one instructor and one class leader (non-first year Honors student who took University 101). They meet like this during all class times while Honors 101 classes split between whole class meetings and smaller, TA-led recitation sessions. These differences in classroom environment create a variable experience for Honors first year students.

HON101. In Honors 101, students generally enjoyed the whole class sessions. One student demonstrated this by saying, "It was welcoming... that's a class where we got to share a lot of our ideas, and it was very like comfortable. Like I felt comfortable sharing my ideas, even if they were controversial." To contrast, students often felt uncomfortable in the recitation sessions led by the teaching assistants. For example, another student said,

"It was actually a really fun atmosphere. Our teacher made it fun, and she made it like an open discussion. When we broke up into the small groups with our TA's,

it was sometimes kind of awkward. It was like we wouldn't really talk at all, and it just wasn't as fun as, you know, in person classes with a bigger group."

Another aspect of classroom environment is the class sizes. Honors 101 is a relatively small class, yet it is bigger than University 101 classes. Another Honors 101 student noticed this difference as well, and it impacted their experience. They said, "That class was a little bit bigger than my University 101 class, and so it was a little bit harder to make the bigger connections in a sense kind of like more of a community kind of feel." However, the smaller recitation sessions helped some. Similarly, a student noted, "The recitation group gave me a great opportunity to meet other students and know familiar faces. Like, it was nice to see someone you knew who would be by your side for the next four years." Along with this, most students felt comfortable being vulnerable in class. A lot of students in Honors 101 commented on their ability to share their lived experiences in class. A student noted this in the following quote:

"Being in the Honors class kind of gave me a way to talk about how I was feeling and kind of tie it into what we were talking about in class, and I think that it really impacted me by being able to share my own story through a lecture rather than sharing my own story because somebody wants to know about me, I guess. And just being able to hear other people's stories and how they got to where they are; it was kind of really cool to see that in my classroom because you don't see that a lot in classrooms. So, it created like a unique class experience."

Another student said a similar statement: "It was made very clear at the beginning of the class that no one was going to make anyone else feel lesser than for their opinions or their experiences. I feel like this really helped me to feel more inclined to want to share my

answers and opinions and have discussions with people that I knew weren't going to judge me based on it." Being able to discuss personal experiences like this contributed to the welcoming atmosphere of Honors 101. The environment in Honors 101 had a mostly positive impact on the first-year experience of Honors Program students. The environment had a more cohesive positive impact in University 101.

UNIV101. In University 101, most students felt welcomed and supported by their instructors and class leader. One student commented on this feeling: "the professor was super positive, welcoming, and engaging, and it was really supportive... I had the professor and the [class leader] who were both super kind people, and every single class started with music playing; that definitely made it be more relaxing." Another student echoed that feeling by saying, "Being in UNIV101, for me, was like the atmosphere was actually really cool, it was really fun, we were all super cheery...we really wanted to learn." In addition, some students thought that with the more structured curriculum on University 101 that it felt more like an Honors course. A student said, "I actually liked the atmosphere of this class. It kind of felt more studious and academic." This sentiment can add benefit to University 101 by increasing perceived academic integration among students.

A few students commented on the class setup being different than Honors 101 and how that impacted their experience. For example, one University 101 student said, "I feel like our class was closer than my Honors 101 class; I think like sitting in a circle had a lot to do with that and like learning each other's names." Class size was also a factor for students with someone saying, "it was nice because the class was a little bit smaller. I

mean, it wasn't super small, but it was nice and small enough that I got to know everybody really well.” For more specifics, see Table 5.

Additionally, another aspect of University 101 being welcoming was having the same student population in class. Most first-year Honors students lived in the residential learning community, and that assisted the feel of the classroom environment. A student stated,

“I lived with almost everyone, like almost everyone in the class was in Lujan, so I lived with all these people! So that made it more welcoming, and the people I didn't live with, we got along really well, like we did a lot of team activities, so it was just super welcoming and engaging and very supportive. I'm very thankful I took [University 101] my first semester in college.”

The classroom environment in both courses combined with the other factors discussed in this paper impacted Honors students' experiences within the Honors Program in different ways, overall affecting program satisfaction.

Program Satisfaction

All interview participants were asked about their satisfaction level with the Honors Program as a whole as well as survey participants were asked about their satisfaction with their course as a first-year experience. Overall, interview participants were satisfied with the Honors Program as a whole. A student said this about the program:

“I felt more like I belonged because I feel like when you apply to something online, you feel very disconnected from it because you're not going somewhere

for it every single week. And I think having somewhere to go where there are just Honors students, I think that was very nice...I belong here.”

Another student said, “[It is] through the Honors Program, again, that I’ve made most of my connections, which has been so helpful. So, I’m so glad that it’s there and it really made me realize that the Honors Program is not just as much a club, but it’s a whole part of [my] academic experience.” A different student commented on the program by saying, “I think it’s a good outlet for people who want to push themselves a little bit more academically, but it still creates a lot of those social aspects. And I don’t feel a ton of pressure from the Honors community to perform well all of the time and be perfect.” These quotes highlight the positives of the program.

However, there is some criticism of the program. One student said, “I’m pretty satisfied. I talked to some of my friends, and they said that it’s disorganized. So, I feel like we could improve that aspect. I also think that communication needs to be better. I hear people say they don’t even know what the program is about.” Another student commented on the communication by saying, “I think there are some things that could be altered or changed, but I feel like communication is a big problem.” Highlighted here, the biggest criticism comes from lack of communication from the program itself.

When talking about the satisfaction within a specific course as an Honors introductory course, the satisfaction varied. Although no students said strongly disagree, only Honors 101 students were neutral or disagreed. All University 101 students said agree or strongly agree (see Figure 2). Students were then asked to respond to the statement, “I am likely to retain in the Honors Program after this academic year (2020-2021).” This statement had a similar outcome to the previous with no students saying

strongly disagree, but only Honors 101 students saying neutral or disagree (see Figure 6). Students were asked to respond to another statement about the satisfaction of their course outcome. In this statement, they were asked to respond to “I am satisfied with the benefit this course added to my higher education experience.” The responses show another similar outcome (see Figure 7). Additionally, responses of first-year students within the withdraw data highlighted the top reasons they withdrew from the program. Within the top five reasons are “Honors classes were not interesting or satisfying to me,” and “Honors was not what I expected it to be,” (see Figure 1). Since most first-year students’ exposure to the program is just Honors 101 and/or University 101 at the time of withdrawal, it can be inferred that students’ experiences in these courses correspond to their top withdrawal reasons. Overall, students were more satisfied with University 101 as an Honors first-year experience course than Honors 101. Below, recommendations are discussed for improving the first-year experience of Honors students to promote a cohesive, holistic student experience.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The current Honors first-year experience allows the students to choose between taking 1 credit (Honors 101 only), 2 credits (Honors 101 and Library 151), or 4 credits (Honors 101 and University 101) their first semester. The data examined in this study concludes that Honors freshman were more satisfied with University 101 as an introductory Honors Program course. Because of this, it is recommended that the first-year experience be shifted from a synchronous optional model to a sequential non-optional model. The recommended path would be that all incoming Honors students take University 101 in their initial fall semester followed by Honors 101 in the following

spring semester. With this, all students would be taking the same number of credits at the same time. Additionally, students will gain the benefit of higher rates of academic integration, social integration, academic freedom, and community building during their first semester in college. Moving the first-year experience from one semester to two consecutive semesters will impact the current cohort dynamics by having a closer connection for a longer period of time. It is hopeful that this will increase the social integration and cohort connection and identification within the Honors Program.

With the criticisms of University 101 lacking in curriculum rigor, there could be improvements to the current curriculum to add Honors-level activities, discussions, or assignments to satisfy the incoming students' desire for challenging academia.

Additionally, more Honors Program information in class is suggested to help bridge the gap between the program and the students during the first semester. Hopefully, this will close the communication gaps as well as allow students to get comfortable with the Honors culture and requirements. Allowing Honors information in class will provide comfortability with the Honors culture which prepares students for Honors 101 in their second semester – a discussion-based Honors course. By this time, students should be comfortable with the Honors ideology of discussion and curiosity over academic challenge.

With these recommendations, the Honors Program first-year experience will be better at supporting incoming students during their transition to college as well as their transition into a non-traditional Honors program, one based in philosophy, curiosity, and discovery rather than academic rankings.

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Appendix A

Participant Recruitment Email

Hello,

I am writing to ask if you are interested in participating in a research project for my honors thesis. The focus of the research is analyzing and modifying the first-year experience of Honors students (specifically in Honors 101 and University 101). Since you recently took either Honors 101 or the Honors section of University 101, you are the ideal candidate.

There will be a 30-minute one-on-one interview about your experience in your first-year experience course. This is ideal for my research because I am looking to gain the perspective that you have on your first-year seminar course and its impact on your Honors program experience.

Many of the interview questions are personal because the purpose of the research is to gain an understanding of you as an Honors student as well as determine how your time in Honors 101 or University 101 influenced your Honors experience. In order to participate, you will be asked to sign a consent form, which will inform you of all risks and benefits involved with your participation.

If you are interested in participating in the study, please sign up through the following link for a time slot that works best with your schedule. I am limiting the number of participants to 5 per course per semester. I will contact you personally if you choose to sign up.

If you would prefer not to participate, please let me know that as well. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Dani Magasano

Maga6217@bears.unco.edu

Appendix B

Follow Up with Participant

Hello [student name],

Thank you for signing up to participate in my research study! You have selected the [time slot] time slot on [date].

Our interview will be conducted on a one-on-one basis in room [campus room]. It is expected to last about 30 minutes. Please arrive on time so we can avoid schedule conflicts.

If you have any questions about your participation or my study, please contact me. Otherwise, I will see you on [date]!

Once again, thank you.

Dani Magasano

Maga6217@bears.unco.edu

Appendix C

Consent Form for Human Participants In Research - Interviews

University Of Northern Colorado



Project Title: COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT OF FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE HONORS COURSES TO PROMOTE HOLISTIC LEARNING

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The purpose of this study is to analyze and modify the current first-year experience of Honors students and the University of Northern Colorado, specifically students who completed Honors 101 or University 101 between the Fall 2018 and Fall 2021 semesters. Based on the experiences and information obtained through a series of interviews and surveys, themes will be developed to describe students' experiences in these courses along with their satisfaction levels with the Honors program while still making certain that your identity is confidential. The information gathered in the study will be used for the purpose of fulfilling honors thesis requirements and may eventually be published.

You will be asked to take part in an individual interview. Interviews will be somewhat structured but should be considered more of an open-ended conversation simply meant to obtain experiences about your first-year courses and their impact. The questions asked in the interviews are of a nature that may be considered personal; for example, you may be asked questions such as: "how did the first-year course you took impact your opinion of the Honors program? Did the course provide you with academic opportunities, and did you take advantage of them? Do you wish you took the other course? If so, explain why." Interviews will take place in a private space and may last up to 30 minutes. Interviews will be audio recorded, but they will later be transcribed for research purposes. There is a small possibility that someone might be able to identify the participants in reports of this research. If this were to occur, it could cause the participants some discomfort. In an effort to keep information about your identity confidential, you will be assigned an

identification number. Throughout the entirety of the research, you will be identified by this number.

You will not receive compensation for participating. The questions being asked in this study can be considered harmless and noninvasive. The risks of participating in this study are no greater than those normally encountered during regular classroom participation.

Questions: If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact Danielle Magasano at maga6217@bears.unco.edu. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact Nicole Morse, Research Compliance Manager, University of Northern Colorado at nicole.morse@unco.edu or 970-351-1910.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation, you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference.

_____ I consent to audio recording (initial).

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

Appendix D

Individual Interview Questions

1. Describe the atmosphere of your class and how that impacted your experience in this course.
2. How did the first-year experience course you took impact your opinion of the Honors program?
3. Did the course provide you with academic opportunities? If so, did you take advantage of them? Describe them, if applicable
4. Did the course provide you with social opportunities? If so, did you take advantage of them? Describe them, if applicable
5. Do you wish you took the other course? If so, explain why.
6. Do you feel you have a strong connection with the Honors program after completing this course? Why or why not?
7. How did this course specifically inform your decision to continue with the Honors program?
8. Did this course help alleviate the stress of your college transition? Why or why not?
9. Do you feel well informed about the Honors program and how to progress through it after completing this course?
10. How satisfied are you with the outcome of your course?
11. How satisfied are you with the Honors program as a whole?

Appendix E

Observation Sheet

Course observing: Honors 101 – Lecture Honors 101 – Recitation University
101

Semester Observing: Fall _____

Class participation:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Notes:

Instructor Involvedness/Enthusiasm:

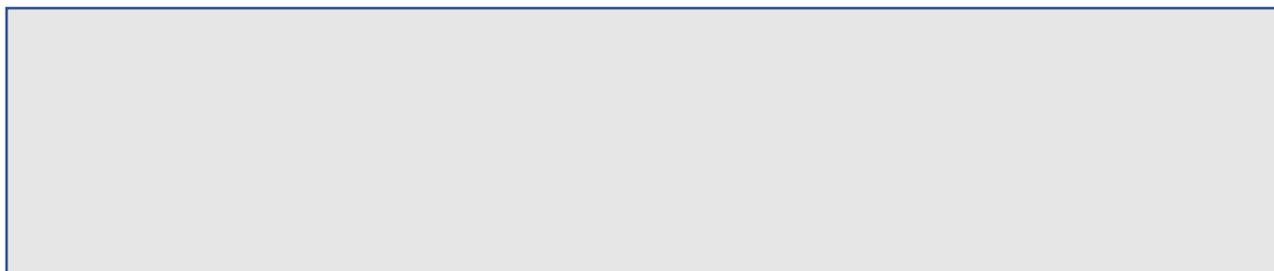
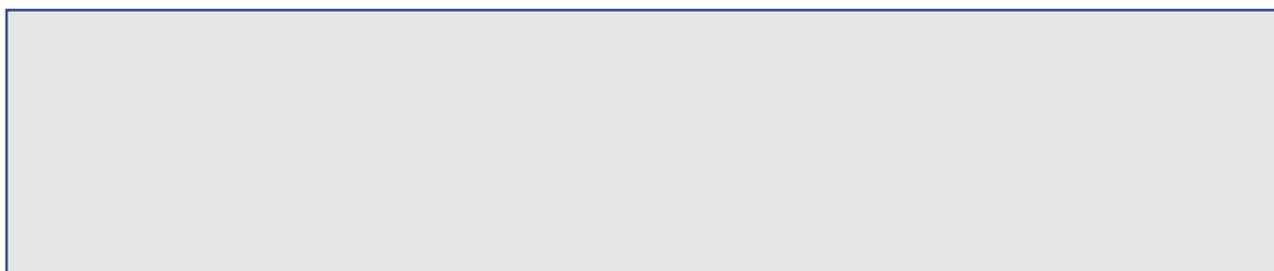
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Notes:

Involvedness of Peer Mentors:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Notes:

Classroom Atmosphere Characteristics:A large, empty rectangular box with a thin blue border, intended for writing notes related to Classroom Atmosphere Characteristics.A second large, empty rectangular box with a thin blue border, identical to the one above, for additional notes.

Additional Notes:

Appendix F

End-Of-Semester Survey: Completed Via Qualtrics

Project Title: COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT OF FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE HONORS COURSES TO PROMOTE HOLISTIC LEARNING

Researcher: Dani Magasano

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Advisors: Dr. Angela Vaughan and Alexis Hauck

University 101

University of Northern Colorado

(970) 351-1175

Angela.vaughan@unco.edu

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The purpose of this study is to analyze and modify the current first-year experience of Honors students and the University of Northern Colorado, specifically students who completed Honors 101 or University 101 between the Fall 2018 and Fall 2021 semesters. Based on the experiences and information obtained through a series of interviews and surveys, themes will be developed to describe students' experiences in these courses along with their satisfaction levels with the Honors program while still making certain that your identity is confidential. The information gathered in the study will be used for the purpose of fulfilling honors thesis requirements and may eventually be published.

You will be asked to take part in an in-class survey. The survey includes questions simply meant to obtain experiences about your first-year courses and their impact. The statements in the survey are of a nature that may be considered personal; for example, you may be asked your level of agreeance on statements such as: "I was provided academic opportunities. I am satisfied with the benefit this course added to my higher education experience." Surveys will take place in class and may last up to 15 minutes. There is no possibility that someone might be able to identify the participants in reports of this research since all responses will be anonymous

You will not receive compensation for participating. The questions being asked in this study can be considered harmless and noninvasive. The risks of participating in this study are no greater than those normally encountered during regular classroom participation.

Questions: If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact Danielle Magasano at maga6217@bears.unco.edu. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact Nicole Morse, Research Compliance Manager, University of Northern Colorado at nicole.morse@unco.edu or 970-351-1910.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation, you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision

7. I was presented with academic opportunities outside of this course

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

8. I was presented with social opportunities

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

9. I feel connected to my Honors community after this course

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

10. I made friends in this course

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

11. I felt safe to share my thoughts in this course

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

12. My peer mentor was effective

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

13. I wish I took the other first-year course offered

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

14. I am satisfied with the Honors program and its goals

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

15. I am aware of the Honors requirements

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

16. I feel comfortable progressing through the program with minimal assistance

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

Thank you for your participation in my study. If you would like more information about my study and how your responses will be used, please contact me at maga6217@bears.unco.edu.

Appendix G

Consent Form for Human Participants In Research - Observations

University Of Northern Colorado



Project Title: Analyzing and Modifying the First-Year Experience of Honors Students at the University of Northern Colorado

Researcher: Dani Magasano

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The purpose of this study is to analyze and modify the current first-year experience of Honors students and the University of Northern Colorado, specifically students who completed Honors 101 or University 101 between the Fall 2018 and Fall 2021 semesters. Based on the experiences and information obtained through a series of interviews and surveys, themes will be developed to describe students' experiences in these courses along with their satisfaction levels with the Honors program while still making certain that your identity is confidential. The information gathered in the study will be used for the purpose of fulfilling honors thesis requirements and may eventually be published.

You will be asked to take part in an in-class observation. Observations will be conducted on classroom environment, instructor involvedness, and peer mentor involvedness. Notes will not be taken on specific students but rather the classroom as a whole. There is a small possibility that someone might be able to identify the participants in reports of this research. If this were to occur, it could cause the participants some discomfort. In an effort to keep information about your identity confidential, you observed class will be assigned an identification number. Throughout the entirety of the research, your class will be identified by this number.

You will not receive compensation for participating. The observations in this study can be considered harmless and noninvasive. The risks of participating in this study are no greater than those normally encountered during regular classroom participation.

Questions: If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact Danielle Magasano at maga6217@bears.unco.edu. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact Nicole Morse, Research Compliance Manager, University of Northern Colorado at nicole.morse@unco.edu or 970-351-1910.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation, you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference.

_____ I consent to audio recording (initial).

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

Appendix H

Recruitment Script – Survey

Hello,

I am writing to ask if you are interested in participating in a research project for my honors thesis. The focus of the research is analyzing and modifying the first-year experience of Honors students (specifically in Honors 101 and University 101). Since you are currently taking either Honors 101 or the Honors section of University 101, you are the ideal candidate.

There will be a 15-minute in-class survey about your experience in your first-year experience course. This is ideal for my research because I am looking to gain the perspective that you have on your first-year experience course and its impact on your Honors Program experience.

I will be coming into your class during the second-to-last week of the semester to conduct the survey.

Many of the survey statements are personal because the purpose of the research is to gain an understanding of you as an Honors student as well as determine how your time in Honors 101 or University 101 influenced your Honors experience. In order to participate, you will be asked to sign a consent form, which will inform you of all risks and benefits involved with your participation.

If you wish to not participate in this survey, please email me back to let me know. You will not be identified as all responses are anonymous. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Dani Magasano

Maga6217@bears.unco.edu

Appendix I**UNIV101 Completed Observation Sheet****OBSERVATION SHEET**

Course observing: Honors 101 – Lecture Honors 101 – Recitation **University**

101

Semester Observing: Fall _2020__

Class participation:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 **10**

Notes:

The class sits in a circle all facing each other. This encourages participation and community within the classroom. Students answered questions quickly and excitedly. They asked clarifying questions, when needed.

Instructor Involvedness/Enthusiasm:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 **10**

Notes:

The instructor had music playing before class started, creating a lively atmosphere. They talked in the middle of the circle, pacing and turning around so all the students could hear them. They had a discussion-based class instead of a lecture.

Involvement of Peer Mentors:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Notes:

The peer mentor conversed with students before class started about their weekend and interests. They had input during the class discussion. When the students broke up to work on independent work, the peer mentor circled the room and answered any questions students had about their work.

Classroom Atmosphere Characteristics:

Very lively
Students seemed excited
Circle seating encouraged participation and community among the students

Additional Notes:

Appendix J

HON101 Completed Observation Sheet

OBSERVATION SHEET

Course observing: **Honors 101 – Lecture** University 101

Semester Observing: Fall 2020

Class participation:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 **9** 10

Notes:

- Answers questions as a class; instructor asks an open-ended question.
- Majority of students taking notes.
- Participating in written activities; go around the room sharing voluntarily, and class gives feedback
- Not everyone participated in every activity; same few students answering

Instructor Involvedness/Enthusiasm:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 **10**

Notes:

- Start with SMART (specifics about the lesson, reflecting, media critical thinking).
- Speaks directly to students; involves them in lesson instead of lecturing.
- Goes over weekly topics and homework first.
- Knows everyone's names and addresses them by first names
- Had printed notes and thought out questions
- At the end of class, write down 5 things you learned/questioned/heard/etc.

Involvement of Peer Mentors:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Notes:

- In recitation, they ask an attendance question.
- Asked to make a list of student responses during discussion.

Classroom Atmosphere Characteristics:

- Sit in rows, not much talking before class. Instructor tries to start small talk before class.
- Classmates talk to each other instead of straight to instructor.
- Very discussion-based lecture on listening skills; equal input from instructor and students
- Canvas shell displayed on projector: walks through helpful modules and

Additional Notes:

- Bring in personal anecdotes and research findings into class.
- Shows video on current political issues showing both sides of the bias through media.

Appendix K

IRB Approval

Title: Analyzing and Modifying the First-Year Experience of Honors Students at the University of Northern Colorado

A. Purpose

Although there is a lot of research about the effectiveness of the first-year experience on retention and graduation rates of undergraduate students, the knowledge has yet to be applied at a smaller, program-based level at the University of Northern Colorado (UNC). Specifically, I am using the knowledge already known to modify the current first-year experience of students in the Honors Program, specifically the Honors Interdisciplinary Program. First-year students currently have the choice to take either Honors 101, an introduction to critical thinking, or the Honors-specific section of University 101. The two first-year experience models are contrasting and create varying first-year experiences for Honors students. I am going to analyze retention rates of the Honors Program and the university at large through the students in both courses. After compiling some qualitative data through individual interviews, and quantitative data through course evaluations and Honors withdraw surveys, I will propose changes to both courses and the first-year experience at large for Fall 2020. After implementing these changes, I will measure the effectiveness again and make changes (if needed) for Fall 2021.

I am modifying the first-year experience within the Honors Program to increase the program's retention, Honors graduation rates, and program satisfaction levels. As the Honors Program is moving to a more holistic view, modifying the current first-year experience will help students be more supported while still getting the connection to the Honors Program and the campus community that they need. Adding more holistic aspects

to the first-year curriculum will hopefully increase students' satisfaction with their university and the Honors program. This study is categorized as exempt. It will not interrupt or modify the normal lives of participants, and it will be conducted in a traditional educational setting.

B. Methods

1. Participants

I plan to conduct individual interviews with 20 students: 10 students who took Honors 101 in either Fall 2018 or Fall 2019 and 10 students who took the Honors section of University 101 in either Fall 2018 or Fall 2019. I will be sending out an email to students on the roster for these courses with an accompanying SignUp Genius link so interested students can volunteer for a time slot that works best with their schedule. I will limit these time slots to include 5 students from each semester, so I have an even number of students from each semester. After a student volunteers for my study through this link, I will email the student using their personal contact information given at the time of sign-up explaining my research project with the attached consent forms. For a script of my proposed written communication with students, please see Appendix A and B. There is no gender or experience requirement for participant selection. The participants do not come from a vulnerable population and will all be above the age of 18.

2. Data Collection Procedures

The first step/round of data collection will be collection of secondary data. This data will include course evaluations from both courses from the past two years, Fall 2018 and Fall 2019. Additionally, student evaluations of peer mentors for both courses for Fall 2018 and Fall 2019 will be collected and analyzed. Both of these types of evaluations will

be provided by the respective program directors, not course instructors. They will be digital pdf documents stored on my personal computer. All student responses are anonymous; the only identifier listed on the evaluations is course instructor or peer mentor. Instructors and peer mentors will be identified by the course and year they taught. For example, the instructor who taught University 101 in Fall of 2018 will be listed as I-UNIV2018 and a peer mentor would be listed with a number if the course section had more than one (PM1-UNIV2018). This will be an indirect identifier. I received permission from the holders of the data, program directors, to release this data to me.

Also, I will be analyzing the data from the Honors withdraw survey, a survey actively used by the Honors Program to track the reasons students withdraw. I have not created this survey. I will be looking specifically at students who have withdrawn during their first year at UNC. This survey provides quantitative data for reasons students drop the Honors Program. After collection of this secondary data, I will use it to report the top reasons students were not satisfied with the program and accompanying courses. The director of the Honors Program gave me permission to access this data. The survey is through Qualtrics, so I was able to download the responses as an Excel file. This file is stored on my personal computer. Student responses are anonymous, and there are no identifiers in this data set.

The second step in my data collection process will be the individual interviews. Because of the novel coronavirus, I will be conducting my interviews through Zoom, an online video-chat platform that all UNC students have access to. Interviews will occur at the end of the spring 2020 semester. The students who volunteer to be interviewed about

their experience in the course they took will be interviewed by me only. There will not be other observers present. I will schedule a Zoom meeting between each interviewee and myself at a time that is convenient for both of us. Each interview is expected to last about 30 minutes, and I will screen-record the interview and transcribe it into text. For a list of possible interview questions, please view Appendix D. These questions are semi-structured, and follow-up and/or clarification questions might be included on a case-by-case interview basis. Before participating in the research process, students will receive a letter of informed consent electronically. I will keep completed forms on my personal computer in a designated consent form folder. This letter will debrief the participants and inform them of the procedure as well as any risks or benefits involved (see Appendix C).

During the Fall 2020 semester, I will spend time observing both courses. My observations will include observations about class participation, involvedness of the instructor and peer mentors, and characteristics of the classroom atmosphere, including classroom set up. I will not be taking notes on specific students. Instead, I will be focusing on the class atmosphere and participation as a whole and the classroom setting. For Honors 101 observations, I will observe both lecture and recitation: each type of class occurs once a week. University 101 observations will consist of one observation per week per section because the class format is consistent. I will observe the courses each twice: once during the 3rd week of the semester and once during the 15th week. I will observe both courses again in Fall 2021 with the same criteria. To view my observation sheet, please see Appendix E. I will distribute an informed consent letter to all students in each class. The letter will be very similar to the interview letter in that it will debrief the participants and inform them of the procedure as well as any risks or benefits involved

(see Appendix G). I will keep the paper copies in a locked file cabinet in my advisor's office.

At the end of the Fall semester, I will distribute a paper survey to measure the effectiveness of the courses and their satisfaction with the Honors Program. The students will also receive a letter of consent for the survey (see Appendix H). It will be similar to the other letters of consent. I will keep the paper copies in a locked file cabinet in my advisor's office. They will also receive a recruitment email stating what day I will be in class to conduct the surveys. They will have the chance to say they do not wish to participate at that time. I will save all emails denying participation as PDF documents on my personal computer. The students will rate each statement on a scale including "strongly agree," "agree," "neutral," "disagree," and "strongly disagree." I will personally distribute and collect the surveys. All responses will be anonymous besides indicating the course. Even section number will be excluded. My survey is outlined in Appendix F.

After this, I will repeat this process. Spring 2021 will consist of individual interviews of the same format and collection of course evaluations from the previous fall. Spring 2022 will be the same except for courses occurring in Fall 2021. I will also observe both courses again in Fall 2021 with the same observation sheet. This will be the extent of my data collection. My final project and findings presentation will be at the end of Spring 2022.

3. Data Analysis Procedures

After collection of secondary data, I will analyze it to report the top reasons students were not satisfied with the program and accompanying courses. Course

evaluations will be used as qualitative data because of written feedback. The Honors withdraw survey will be considered quantitative only since students are selecting options from a list. The quantitative data will be processed into charts while the written feedback will be left as text.

The audio recordings of individual interviews will be translated into text by me and my thesis advisor. These verbal feedback statements will be used to generate common themes throughout the Honors students' first-year experience and their experience in the specific courses. I will use this data to help inform my decisions about changes to be implemented to the first-year experience courses (i.e., make it more focused on Honors, give it more structure, provide more honors-like activities and opportunities, etc.) for Fall 2021. The surveys collected at the end of the fall semesters will also inform my decisions about changes to be implemented the following fall. Since the surveys outline the effectiveness and satisfaction levels on a student-by-student basis, this will be a helpful tool to gauge the effectiveness of the courses across all Honors first-year students. The surveys will be analyzed and transformed into visual charts and graphs.

Classroom observations throughout the semester will be used to observe how the courses progress throughout the semester. This will be helpful in case I need to rearrange topics/activities for the following semester. Also, being involved in the class will be helpful because it will provide me with a foundation of how the course is executed on a day-to-day basis.

4. Data Handling Procedures

I will take all necessary steps to prevent others from knowing who the participants are in this study. First, I will store all information gathered on my personal computer in a password protected file. Only my thesis advisor and I will have access to this file. Second, only my thesis advisor and I will hear the audio-recorded data. These tapes will not be shared with anyone beyond the research team without the explicit consent of the participants. All digital data, including audio, text transcription, and excel spreadsheets with charts, will be saved and stored by myself in a password protected file on my computer.

I will assign all participants a number in all research notes, transcripts, and finished reports of this study in the format FAU19-01 or FAH19-01. This number will symbolize the fall semester they took the course (19 or 20), the course they took (U for University 101 and H for Honors 101), and the student number (1-10). I will keep the list identifying participants separate from the data collected. All paper data, including signed consent forms, field notes, and completed surveys, will be kept in a locked file cabinet in my thesis advisor's office. There is a slight possibility that someone may be able to identify the participant based on identifiers used in their records. Participants will be informed of this risk and of the precautions that will be taken to avoid identification. All data, digital and paper, will be destroyed after a period of three years.

C. Risks, Discomforts, and Benefits

Participants are at little to no physical or psychological harm during this study. The questions being asked in this study can be considered harmless and noninvasive. The risks of participating in this study are no greater than those normally encountered during regular classroom participation. Participants will not be challenged on their opinions and

experiences; discussion will not occur in interviews. Only question and answer are appropriate for this study. There is a small possibility that someone might be able to identify the participants in reports of this research. If this were to occur, it could cause the participants some discomfort. I will minimize these risks by assigning a code (described above) to each participant in the subject. I will keep this list separate from the data collected. This proposed study will not directly benefit participants. The benefit of participating in this study will be the knowledge that their specific experiences and opinions contributed to positive change on their college campus.

D. Costs and Compensations

Participants will not receive compensation for being involved in this study, nor will they incur any financial cost for participating. Students are volunteering to be interviewed. A time cost will be incurred for being interviewed. Interviews will last roughly 30 minutes each. Students will also spend time filling out the survey: about 10 minutes.