The Honors Task Force (HTF) met weekly during Spring Quarter and biweekly during Winter Quarter 2012. Members include: Ken Brown (Philosophy), Jessica Carson (Administrative Analyst, Programs and Planning), Adrienne Greve (City & Regional Planning), Jim Mueller (Math), Erika Rogers, (former director of the Honors Program), Tom Trice (History), Lou Tornatzky (Industrial Technology), Sema Alpekin (Industrial and Manufacturing Engineering and Director of the Honors Program), Cheri Baumgarten (Administrative Analyst, Honors Program), and Kate Murphy (History), task force chair. Honors students and seniors Brita Bookser (Psychology), Alexandra Highsmith (Business), & Michele Jenkins (Math) also participated in the HTF’s discussions.

**Background**

The Honors Program was created by Academic Senate Resolution AS-434-95 in March 1995 and implemented in the Fall of 1999. Currently, 519 students, representing every college on campus, are enrolled in the program. Sixty-four faculty members have taught in the program during the last seven years.

The HTF was created in Fall 2011 to review the current state of the Honors Program and to recommend future directions. Specifically, the HTF’s charge was to examine the possibility of revising the existing program so that all students have similar opportunities to those in the Honors Program.

After researching Cal Poly’s current program, honors programs at peer institutions and within the CSU system, and the relevant literature, the HTF concluded that the program was already open to all qualified students, who may apply for admission to the program at any point in their Cal Poly careers. Furthermore, the HTF unanimously agreed that a smaller, more focused program best serves the interests of the students and the university as a whole. Based on its research and discussions, the HTF offers the following recommendations and observations about the program.

**Vision**

The HTF’s vision for the Honors Program is best encapsulated in the program’s new mission statement, which developed out of the task force’s discussions:

The Cal Poly Honors Program provides an academically enriched learning experience for the university’s most outstanding and highly motivated students. It brings together students, faculty, and friends of the university to seek challenges, participate in experiential and interdisciplinary learning, grow as individuals, and expand the boundaries of their academic potential.

Throughout its curricular and extracurricular programming, the Honors Program fosters active intellectual engagement and a mutual exchange of ideas, in which students and faculty are partners in discovery. Honors courses, research opportunities, housing, service learning projects, and other activities provide the university’s most outstanding and highly motivated students with an enriched learning experience in the company of similarly motivated peers.
Value
It is the opinion of the HTF that the Honors Program represents an integral part of Cal Poly, not just for students and faculty involved with the program, but for the university as a whole.

From Fall 2007 to Spring 2009, the Honors Undergraduate Research Program furnished a lively and highly successful example of how to employ the Teacher-Scholar model while simultaneously promoting interdisciplinary and experiential education. It provided opportunities for students to work with faculty on research projects, to present their findings at local and national venues, and to publish their results in an Honors research journal in 2008 and 2009. Furthermore, the program promoted interdisciplinary, cross-college research by matching faculty projects with student interest, so that students from Liberal Arts and Science and Math worked with an Engineering professor on the “Polytech Waterbag” project, while an Engineering student collaborated with a Liberal Arts professor to research human trafficking. The program allowed students to receive course credit for their research and enabled faculty members otherwise not involved in the program to receive funding to work with honors students. The HTF recommends that when funds become available, this program be reinstated and made a permanent focal point of the Honors Program.

While by no means the only entity on campus doing so, the Honors Program already embodies many of the university’s strategic imperatives. The program promotes whole-system thinking through its interdisciplinary nature. The Honors Undergraduate Research Program illustrated the potent possibilities of a well-funded, ambitious commitment to the Teacher-Scholar model. The Honors Program has also fostered a culture of community engagement and leadership, evidenced in the service-learning components of the program, the work of the Honors Student Board community service committee, and the multitude of Honors students who serve in leadership positions in organizations throughout campus.

While endorsing the value of the current Honors Program, the HTF also finds that the institution has not taken full advantage of the strengths and potential value of this program. The HTF offers the following examples of areas where this could be achieved:

- The Honors Program serves as an incubator for innovative pedagogy, by allowing faculty the opportunity to experiment with new approaches, subjects, and pedagogies that, when proven successful, serve as prototypes within the broader curriculum. The opportunity to use the Honors framework as an incubator for additional course innovation, including those that fall outside the bounds of disciplinary constraints, could be advertised to faculty in general. Such opportunities could help to attract and retain faculty and to assist junior faculty in enhancing their Promotion and Tenure portfolios.
- The success of the Honors Undergraduate Research Program could be employed by the University Grants Development Office as both a model for successful grant proposal writing for undergraduate research as well as a vehicle for additional grant proposal development.
- A robust Honors Program would further enhance Cal Poly’s proven ability to attract top students. Given the number of out-of-state students in the Honors Program, the HTF believes this could help to increase out-of-state and, generally, more diverse applicants.
- Nationwide, it has been shown that strong Honors Programs can attract major donor funding to campuses. Here in California, several Cal State institutions have been the recipients of major

1 The subsequent academic year, 2009-2010, marked the beginning of major budget cuts to the program.
gifts tied to their Honors programs; approximately one quarter of honors programs within the CSU have dedicated endowments. The Honors Program is a potential magnet for external funding that has not been utilized to date.  

The HTF maintains that if the Honors Program is encouraged to thrive, it will also help the institution to thrive. But these goals cannot be realized by the bottom-up efforts of a partially-funded Honors Director. The initiative must come from an institutional commitment, by which Cal Poly not only recognizes, acknowledges, and embraces the strengths of its programs, but, in addition, leverages those strengths for the greater good of the entire campus.

Next Steps
The HTF is very aware that many of its recommendations depend upon the availability of funding. Therefore, the HTF believes that it is crucial that the program secure sustainable funding for the future and become less reliant upon state funds. As a result, the Honors Program has begun a conversation with University Advancement to secure endowing gifts for the program as part of the capital campaign. Such funding would be used to:

- reestablish the Honors Undergraduate Research Program
- establish an Honors Senior Showcase to share the results of student work
- purchase faculty release time (especially to facilitate team-taught interdisciplinary classes and to develop new courses)
- fund student scholarships
- support administrative staff and program leadership

The interdisciplinarity embodied in the Honors Undergraduate Research Program remains a defining feature of the Honors Program as a whole. Presently, the program accomplishes this through HNRS 100 (the required introductory course that is currently taught around the theme of sustainability, diversity, and ethics) and through Honors G.E. courses. In the future, the HTF recommends that the program add a capstone course to the Honors curriculum. An Honors capstone class would provide Honors students with a culminating interdisciplinary experience that builds on the foundation laid by HNRS 100 and Honors G.E. courses. Although the capstone course could take various forms, the HTF envisions these seminar classes as interdisciplinary, inquiry-based, and likely project-driven seminars that encourage students to solve real-world problems by drawing upon the breadth of knowledge acquired through G.E. and the depth of expertise developed within their respective majors.


In the short-term, the HTF recommends that the program raises its GPA requirement for students to graduate in the program to a 3.5 minimum and correspondingly raise its requirements for underclassmen to remain in the program. The HTF also concluded that the program needs to raise its entrance requirements for freshmen applicants in order to reduce the program to a more manageable size (to approximately 100 students per class).

In its research, the HTF discovered that three-quarters of Honors Programs in the CSU offer priority registration to their students. The HTF believes that such a privilege would strengthen the program and, especially, increase completion rates by enabling students to more easily navigate the curricular requirements of both their majors and the program. The HTF believes that the program meets the requirements outlined by the University Registration and Scheduling Committee’s policy on granting priority registration status and therefore recommends that the program petition the committee to request priority registration for its students.

The HTF recommends that the Honors Program establish an advisory board, comprised of faculty from each college, to assist the director in the implementation of the HTF’s recommendations and to provide a more permanent mechanism for advising the director on matters of policy, curriculum, and development.

In recent weeks the HTF has had preliminary discussions with the UNIV task force (UTF) on the subject of encouraging interdisciplinary education on campus and, in particular, the UTF’s proposal for a Center for Integrative Education that might provide a future home for the Honors Program. The HTF shares UTF’s commitment to encouraging interdisciplinary education at Cal Poly, and recommends that the Honors Program be utilized as both a model and a vehicle for achieving this goal.

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4 The National Collegiate Honors Council identifies such an advisory board as a characteristic of a fully developed honors program. “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program,” http://nchchonors.org/faculty-directors/basic-characteristics-of-a-fully-developed-honors-program/