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S.C.H.O.L.A.R.S. – A Modest Proposal in Trying Times

by Walker Richards, Caitlin Baxa, Juan Ordonez, Allison Schraub

(Honors English 1102, Honors Speech 1120)

With the cost of a college education steadily increasing every year, attaining higher education has become an increasingly more difficult task to accomplish for many students year to better themselves. One alternative to more expensive four-year state and private institutions is attending a two-year community college. Many students consider this a viable option because it allows them to stay close to home while still pursuing a college degree with an opportunity to transfer. Students in the DuPage County area have one of the nation's premier community colleges at their fingertips in College of DuPage. For years, College of DuPage has been ranked among the nation's top two year colleges, offering a challenging and respected curriculum and programs of study for academically noteworthy students. Among the options students may undertake include the renowned Honors Program. According to the College of DuPage website,

The Honors Program gives highly motivated students an opportunity to participate in academically enhanced courses designed to add depth to their college experience. We also offer smaller class sizes, in a seminar format, that encourage students to get to know each other and their professors well. Our program employs a holistic approach in terms of our students' community college experience. To do so, we emphasize four key areas: academics, transfer, extracurricular activities and recognition.

Since its inception in 1984, the Honors Program has provided accelerated students the chance to excel with smaller class sizes and distinguished professors. This is not limited to the College of DuPage, however. Many other schools throughout the nation have equivalent programs; for example, Mira Costa Community College in California remarked on its website,

The Honors Scholars Program community is comprised of scholars who share a passion for learning and the desire to expand their academic and personal horizons. Honors Scholars students enjoy personal contact with faculty, exploring academic subjects in more depth, and engaging in a variety of special intellectual challenges. The Honors Scholars Program makes it possible for students to conduct extended individual research, provides leadership opportunities, and offers the chance to present their work at conferences.

Honors: Touching and Shaping Lives

The purpose of an Honors Program is to have an environment geared toward highly achieving students and to enable them to develop a multitude of skills required for success in the real world. According to the program's history,

To date, nearly one hundred percent of the students opting to complete the Honors Scholars Program have transferred to four-year baccalaureate-granting colleges and universities – many of these highly selective schools like the University of Chicago, Georgetown, Northwestern and Duke – with the vast majority receiving degrees there. One Honors Scholar has even become a Rhodes Scholar.

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of the Honors Scholar Program is the enthusiastic learning environment created by Honors faculty and students alike. College of DuPage's Honors Professor

Chikako Kumamoto, who has conducted extensive research into the life progression of College of DuPage Honors Scholars alumni, compiled a collection of success stories. Some of the most notable are Marcella Jorgelli and Ruslan Kochemirovskiy.

The epitome of how the Honors Scholars program shapes successful students and leaders is Marcella Jorgelli. A traditional but international student originally from Albania, she attended College of DuPage from 2003-2005 in the Honors Scholars Program. She also won a very prestigious national scholarship worth thirty thousand dollars from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation. After successful completion of the Honors Scholars Program and an associate's degree, she transferred to the highly regarded the University of Chicago. Excelling her way there to a degree in chemistry, she has been admitted and is now pursuing graduate work at Harvard.

Another outstanding example of the impact of the Honors Scholars Program is Ruslan Kochemirovskiy, an Honors Scholar at College of DuPage from 2005 to 2007. An immigrant from Moscow, Russia, he transferred to the University of Chicago with a scholarship and will receive a bachelor's degree in mathematics. These are simply a couple of examples of the abundant number of successful leaders the Honors Scholars Program produces here at the College of DuPage.

Honors Scholars: An Admired and Imitated Program

The Honors Scholars Program has a set criterion of academic and service-oriented objectives which have been in effect for twenty years. Boasting over a thousand students taking individual courses in the Honors Program and over four hundred students in the Honors Scholars Program, College of DuPage is envied by a number of other area community colleges such as Harper Community College, Joliet Junior College, and Morraine Valley Community College for the quantity and quality of students it has attracted into its advanced areas of study. According to Andi Liedtke, head administrative assistant of College of DuPage's Honors Program, other community colleges often contact the Honors Program office to gain insight and advice as how to start up their own Honors Program, mimicking ours.

For example, Morraine Valley Community College in Palos Hills, Illinois, has an Honors Program which has been in existence since 2002 and currently only has sixty students. These students receive a Distinguished Scholars' Scholarship, which provides full in-district tuition for six semesters at Morraine Valley for student's in the top ten percent of their graduating high school class; very similar to the proposed program scheduled for implementation in the Fall semester of 2009. According to Rita Kribs, coordinator of Morraine Valley's Honors Program, the College wishes their program were modeled around College of DuPage's existing Honors Program in regards to its in-district tuition waiver for *all* Honors Scholars. She believes that Morraine Valley's current program caters to a small select group of students that would be greatly increased if it were more like ours.

A Troubling Situation

In reaction to an unstable economy, combined with a poor fiscal predicament for the school itself, the administration has decided to phase out the existing Honors Scholars Program as it now stands. Due to what we feel was a rash and pedagogically questionable administrative decision, we established the Student Coalition for Helping Obtain Lost Academic Resources for Success (S.C.H.O.L.A.R.S.). As the name suggests, our primary goal is to salvage the heart of the Honors Scholars Program by renovating its current requirements as well as its benefits while simultaneously preserving its rich heritage. We plan to accomplish this through the incorporation of new and more challenging criteria for acceptance and completion of the program. We feel the current program is sufficient as it is, but we recognize the administration's lack of enthusiasm toward the open-ended cost of running the current program and are willing to come to a common middle ground.

One of the most motivating aspects to performing well in the Honors Scholars Program is the tuition waiver. This financial reward encourages students to perform well and gives them something

college students are in constant need of: money. According to Daniel Lloyd, Honors Committee Chair, quoted in the April 17, 2009 publication of the *Courier*, the College of DuPage student newspaper, \$366,000 in tuition waivers have been granted to Honors Scholars by the school this academic year (Garza 2). In a personal interview with Lloyd, he informed the S.C.H.O.L.A.R.S. that changes to the current program are necessary. While administration may view “giving” these honors classes away as a large drain on the college’s budget, it has numerous benefits that outweigh the cost of the program. Those benefits include several criteria for which colleges view their success as an institution, such as an increased persistence, retention, graduation, and transfer rates. Maintaining and increasing percentages in this area will in turn enhance overall enrollment and satisfaction rates among students.

It is the S.C.H.O.L.A.R.S.’ belief that removing the tuition waiver will have demoralizing and irreparable effects on both the student body, as well as the school itself. Cutting the Honors Scholars Program will unquestionably cause student satisfaction to drop, according to a focus group study administered by the S.C.H.O.L.A.R.S. Greg Sutherland, a 4.0 student, commented,

I definitely am upset and dissatisfied with the new proposed changes to be made to the Honors Scholars Program. For me, personally, I wouldn’t be able to join the Honors Program because I wasn’t in the top ten percent from my high school graduating class. Variety and diversity is going to plummet and I feel it will have devastating consequences for many students, not to mention the school.

Greg Sutherland is actively involved in Phi Theta Kappa International, a two-year college honors society. Furthermore, he is Coordinator of Outreach for Student Leadership Council and Philosophy major at College of DuPage.

In this technological age of information, with a number of possible outlets to express oneself, word of mouth is able to travel almost as expeditiously as light. According to a study conducted by the Technical Assistance Research Programs (TARP), an unsatisfied customer will tell ten people on average about the experience, but about thirteen percent will tell twenty people. Conversely, a satisfied customer will only tell only five on average. This will result in an overall decline in enrollment rates. Lower annual enrollment will result in an exponentially greater loss of income than is currently allocated toward the Honors Scholars Program. What is detrimental to the student is also detrimental to the school; therefore, it is crucial to ensure the future success of the program to encourage students to graduate from College of DuPage, thus securing the future of the college for generations to come.

Newly hired College of DuPage President Robert Breuder has proposed that the money saved by revoking the tuition waiver would be reallocated to a scholarship fund for fifty to one-hundred high school students in the top ten percent of their graduating class. In all actuality, the overwhelming majority of honors scholars are not in the top ten percent of their graduating high school class. Furthermore, according to a focus group conducted by the S.C.H.O.L.A.R.S. of area high school students in the top ten percent of their class, forty-eight out of fifty students, or ninety-six percent, are not looking toward the College of DuPage to fulfill their higher education needs, regardless of the full tuition scholarship they would have received by coming here. In fact, if offered essentially the same amount to go to a four-year university, prestigious or not, students would not pick College of DuPage. Glenbard East High School Senior, Jaime Lemens, Lilac Queen winner for 2009, “I received a great deal of enticing scholarship money to attend other colleges. Even if C.O.D. did offer me a full ride scholarship, the amount wouldn’t even compare to what I am going to receive to attend a four year university.”

An Honorable Proposal

As it was, there were few restrictions placed on the tuition waiver which Honors Scholars

formerly received. This results in a variable amount of money being allocated toward the program on an annual basis. Therefore, we have derived a set of requirements, guidelines, stipulations and limitations to incorporate into the existing program in order to cap the costs and make it a set, more finite number. This is our proposed implementation of new policy, beginning with an outline of the general requirements.

PROPOSAL

In order to enter the program, future students would be required to meet the following criteria, depending on the current point in their academic career:

High School Students:

- High School GPA of at least 3.5 **AND**
- Minimum ACT score of 25

Adult Returning Students:

- Minimum of 12 credit hours earned at College of DuPage
- Cumulative GPA of at least 3.5 at College of DuPage

Home Schooled or International Students

- At least 95% achieved on Writing placement test
- At least 95% achieved on Reading placement test
- Achieve highest category on Mathematics placement test or 25 on Mathematics portion of ACT.

ALL Students must comply with following expectations:

- Submit a formal application for acceptance into the Honors Scholar Program
- Attend an Honors Information and Planning Session
- Write a 3-4 page essay regarding individual goals and aspirations within the Honors Program, to be graded by committee comprised of Honors professors
- Maintain a GPA of at least 3.5 while in the program
- Complete a minimum of 24 credit hours of Honors classes, including a learning community seminar (two classes taught around a common theme).
- Complete 25 hours of service projects per academic year independent of any course-required service projects. There will be a Service Committee comprised of students which will plan three events per academic year, assisting students to complete their required service hours. After completion of service hours, a portfolio will be submitted reflecting upon the experience itself, as well as lessons learned from the experience.
- Sign a binding contract agreeing to fulfill all requirements to graduate from the program.
- Complete an Associates Degree at College of DuPage within three calendar years.*

*Note: Pending extenuating circumstances, if a student were unable to complete this requirement, a special review board would decide each case on an individual basis.

Severe action including suspension from the Honors Scholars Program will result if the following transpires:

- If a student's GPA drops below 3.5, one semester is allotted to raise it to program requirements in conjunction with writing an essay that will answer the following questions: What circumstances took place which caused the GPA to drop below 3.5, and what steps will

the student take in order to remedy the situation so that it does not happen again. If a student is suspended from the program twice, then he/she is permanently expelled from the Honors Scholars Program.

- A student who fails to enroll in Honors classes for two consecutive semesters, including summer, will result in suspension of program privileges. To be readmitted in to the program, students must write a two page essay divulging why they would like to be readmitted to the Honors Scholars Program.

As a condition of this reformed plan of implementation, the Honors Scholars Program would be capped at a maximum of 200 students with each student receiving a maximum of a six credit waiver per semester for no more than four semesters. This will put a limit on how much money would be allocated toward the program's total expenditure. Two hundred students x 24 credit hours per year x \$116 per credit hour = a total cost of \$556,800 for the students to complete the program, which is a little over fifty percent than the current one million dollars being spent.

In the proposed plan by the committee reviewing the Honors Program, and specifically the Honors Scholars Program, it was suggested that a group of fifty to one-hundred students who graduated at the top ten percent of their class would be offered full-tuition scholarships by coming to the College of DuPage for two years. If seventy-five students were admitted under these provisions, it would cost the same amount of money (75 x 64 credit hours x \$116 per credit hour = \$556,800) as the S.C.H.O.L.A.R.S proposed program changes. With the S.C.H.O.L.A.R.S program, more students would be served than the very exclusive anticipated (not guaranteed) seventy-five students. By providing more students with the opportunity to be part of this renowned program, the more opportunity will be given to these students and more students will be admitted into the program while maintaining its selective process and costing the same amount.

Proposed budget for Honors Scholars:

- \$600,000 total budget
- \$556,800 for 24 credit hours for 200 students at \$116 per credit hour*
*program tuition waivers adjust to increases in tuition
- \$6,000 for Annual Alumni Dinner and Silent Auction (in conjunction with Foundation Board) (This would cover a full meal, drinks, and certificates/gifts for donations and resources for a maximum of 100 attendees). The Alumni Dinner and Silent Auction would serve those Honors Scholars who cannot afford to pay for the rest of their regular degree requirements. This would essentially end up in a competitive Scholarship Fund. The students must show financial need in order to receive this Scholarship.
- \$5,000 for Celebration of Academic Excellence. (Decrease of two thousand dollars from prior years' celebrations.)
(Includes faculty nominated Scholars, medallions, pins, food/beverages, certificates of completion and resources)
- \$10,000 Honors Retreat – An award for fifty Honors Scholars on a first come, first serve basis. (Figures based on prior Honors Retreats over the past ten years.)
(Includes weekend stay, activities, food/beverages, tuition waiver for one credit hour class, transportation and resources)
- \$5,000 Service Projects (Three - through a committee of students that will help Honors Scholars complete service commitments)
(Includes initiative for each service project, resources, and transportation)
- \$ 17,200 Reserve to be placed into an Honors Scholars Merit Based Scholarship Fund to reward three graduating Honors Scholars each year with a five thousand dollar transfer

scholarship. The remaining \$2200 will be kept in a separate account to compensate for potential tuition increases.

Coupled with our proposed budget, below is our proposed timeline for actual implementation of this program.

TIMELINE OF IMPLEMENTATION

- Summer 2009:** Send letters to current Honors Scholars, interested students, and potential students. Compose new promotional items such as the webpage, brochures, and frequently asked questions regarding the reforms made to the Honors Scholars Program. The Essay Review Committee will be assembled with three Honors faculty members who will meet four times a year, at the beginning and end of each semester, starting in Fall 2009. This committee will be compensated justly for their efforts and recognized at the Celebration of Academic Excellence. A campus-wide meeting will be conducted for all advisors, counselors, Honors faculty and classified staff regarding the changes being implemented into the program.
- Fall 2009:** Start accepting applications for the Honors Scholars Program under the new provisions. Initial meeting for Essay Review Committee to be held at onset of semester.
- Spring 2010:** Start admitting students into the new and improved Honors Scholars Program. Host First Annual Alumni Dinner / Silent Auction to be held at College of DuPage. Begin phasing-out old program and integrate new program requirements.
- Spring 2011:** First Celebration of Academic Excellence after full implementation of new Honors Scholars Program.

In summation, it is the belief of the S.C.H.O.L.A.R.S. that simply eradicating the Honors Scholars Program as it exists is not the best solution. Rather, we have proposed a plan of implementation that we feel, when enacted, will improve the overall quality of life for students and faculty alike at the College of DuPage. In turn, students will be able to thrive both academically and socially, thus preparing them for a lifetime of success.

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