**Assessment Report Feedback – Honors Institute**

**Assessment Committee Contact**: Vicki Baker

*\*Note*: The assessment report/feedback was reviewed/provided by Vicki Baker, and Bille Wickre

First, thank you so much pulling this assessment report together.  Reading it helped me better understand the curriculum structure and progression. Overall, you have a great foundation for future assessment efforts, and hopefully the feedback provided is useful to you as you move forward.  Feel free to contact me (or Bille) with questions or if you need assistance as you move forward.

*Step 1:  Mission*

Based on the additional information provided in the report, the mission appears to be aligned well with the program components and is a good representation of the program overall

*Step 2:  Outcomes*

Your outcomes are consistent with your program mission (and the college’s mission). We also appreciate the outcomes at both a local and national level which are helpful for comparative purposes.

*Step 3: Program components*

Our biggest questions related to program components are the commonality across components.  For example, you mention “coursework in 4 ‘Great Issues’” courses and we ask you to think about what kind(s) of assessment initiatives you can undertake to make sure that the learning students get across these courses in consistent regardless of the 4 courses they choose to take.

**A first answer: Great Issues courses are a complex combination of history, tradition and fortuity.  One must understand the complexity of the curriculum before assessing “commonalities” which should be emphasized.**

**In terms of history, Great Issues courses were born out of the Basic Ideas Program at Albion. That program, the Basic Ideas Program, ran from the early 1960s until the early 1970s, and was initially funded by an external grant. Its faculty collaboratively taught Albion students classic texts ranging from the ancient Greeks to Jane Austen.**

**In the mid 1970s, Dan Steffenson, Geoff Cocks, Ralph Davis and others began working on the creation of an Honors Program to be similar to Basic Ideas, in the sense that courses would cover broad areas of disciplinary knowledge and would use texts and resources thought to be classics in the subject matter taught.  Courses were to be reading and writing focused, to not allow exams or quizzes, and to be discussion-based (which means that students discussion is a part of their grade and discussion is expected to be carried along by the students with nominal faculty “control”).  In this sense courses were expected to function like a graduate seminar. Beginning with Science and Humanities faculty, and expanding to include all four divisions of the College the phrase “Great Issues” is taken today to refer to foundational ideas from the discipline of the faculty member teaching the course.**

**In recent years these foci have been instantiated in courses where the faculty member’s area of scholarship or interest frame the issues raised. This would distinguish, for instance, the classical history and philosophy of science course taught for years by Dan Steffenson from Doug White’s course on global warming, or Chris Van de Ven’s class on uses of GIS to interpret data. Our courses also include the author’s course on incommensurability, incomparability and value theory as well as Ronney Mourad’s course on the proper political use of religious arguments when making policy or law in a pluralistic democracy. An upshot: “Great Issues” become those issues raised in the context of the professor’s interests and (wildly pluralistic) disciplinary knowledge.**

**The commonalities sought are increasing student awareness of issues, methods, arguments, topics and literature under the individual tutelage of every faculty member who teaches in honors.  I guess I would appreciate a non-reductionist and non-trivial measure of commonality beyond this in these courses. One possibility, suggested by Dean, is that we find a way to assess whether our students have increased their awareness of issues, methods, arguments, topics and literature in their individual courses.**

*Step 4: Methods/Data*

While we applaud you on the indirect measures you are collecting (surveys, focus groups, etc), you need to also collect direct measures of assessment. In assessing student learning, there are direct and indirect sources of evidence. Direct evidence is clear and convincing information about student learning, such as: tests, examinations, papers, projects, assignments, field experience assessments, and portfolios. These are particularly strong sources of evidence especially when accompanied by articulated standards (such as a rubric). On the other hand, with indirect evidence there is room for other factors to affect the outcomes either positively or negatively. Examples of indirect evidence include: retention, graduation, and placement rates (may be impacted by economic conditions or college policies); surveys of students and alumni (may indicate feelings about college experience); grades (standards and even content may differ across instructors and institutions).

Another question that was raised for us while reviewing your report is what is the connection between years 1-2 and years 3-4 for students.  If we are reading the report correctly, students must take a certain number of courses in years 1 & 2, and complete a thesis in year 4, but what experiences link all years together for students (e.g., what is the common thread that runs through all years)?

I realize this may seem like a huge undertaking, but we’ll get you through this with baby steps and we are happy to work with you on how to approach this in the most effective manner possible.

**Answer 2: This question raises issues which seem easier to answer than the previous one, and once again both history and present function must be understood to answer it.**

**Honors has 330 students enrolled in every major and program across campus. We have designed the curricular requirements to immerse students in exciting discussion based courses in each division of the college. We would ideally like to have students complete their four courses in the first four semesters, to come to love the give-and-take in these broad courses, and to then focus on the departmental, disciplinary and program-related courses needed to construct an appropriate background for an honors thesis. We recruit the majority of Albion’s high achieving students, educate them to engage in lively give-and-take in our discussion based courses, and then encourage them to acquire serious discipline-based knowledge. When they work on a thesis we require them to collaborate with faculty outside of the department of their primary major as a working thesis committee member.**

**The truth is that many of our students do not complete their honors courses by the end of the sophomore year, though the encouragement to do so is important in encouraging them to finish before it is logistically too late.**

**This makes concerns about 1-2-3-4 curricular sequencing empirically irrelevant on my view. We do provide a colloquy class, populated by upper class students, and this course serves as a bridge between coursework and thesis for dozens of our students. We also see honors as a community, and include students of all four classes in field tips, cultural events, parties, social events, and competitions.**

**Dean and I are working on a rubric. This could handle some of the issues raised throughout.**