



## BENEFITS AND BARRIERS OF AN HONORS NURSING PROGRAM: PERCEPTIONS OF 1st YEAR BACHELOR OF SCIENCE NURSING STUDENTS

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### Abstract

The honors undergraduate nursing program was established to meet the needs of outstanding baccalaureate students and to help develop future leaders in the nursing profession. Nine beginning freshman students shared their perceptions about an honors program at a university-affiliated school of nursing in the Northeastern United States. These participants perceived four salient benefits: enhanced learning, exploration of career paths, mentorship, and sense of community. Their perceptions of barriers included: high expectations, ambiguity of long-term benefits, and difficulties in conducting a research-based thesis. The authors concluded that their preliminary description of the findings presented several suggestions for developing a more personalized honors programs in schools of nursing.

*Keywords:* honors undergraduate nursing program, student survey and perceptions of program

### Introduction

The current healthcare system demands well prepared undergraduate nursing students equipped with robust knowledge and skills. Similarly, nursing programs must provide the very knowledgeable students with enriched, stimulating courses. The literature has identified the need for educational programs that can recognize and nurture the needs of the brightest and most creative undergraduate nursing students (Conner & Thielemann, 2013; Gillis, 2002; McGrath, Lyng, & Hourican, 2012; Vessey & DeMarco, 2008). Programs must satisfy the curiosity of students, foster leadership skills, and shape future career trajectories, but also help students to pursue graduate-level studies, develop their identity as scholars, and prepare them to meet the challenges of their future role (Conner & Thielemann, 2013; Gillis, 2002; McGrath et al., 2012; Vessey & DeMarco, 2008). To meet these needs, honors programs have been established in several United States schools of nursing (Stanford & Shattell, 2010; Vessey & DeMarco, 2008). Despite the numerous benefits and opportunities offered by these nursing honors programs, not all students may be interested in them.

Therefore, it is imperative to develop an understanding of the perceptions encountered by beginning freshman students in an undergraduate baccalaureate nursing program. Such understanding can facilitate the development of better-designed honors programs. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to explore freshman undergraduate students' perceptions of the nursing honors program using a survey.

### **Honors Program Characteristics and Objectives**

An honors program, for any discipline, is defined as “a sequence of courses designed specifically to encourage independent and creative learning” (Digby, 2005, p. 9). According to Digby (2005), the essence of an honors program is “personal attention, top faculty, enlightening seminars, illuminating study-travel experiences, research options, and career-building internships—all designed to enhance a classic education and prepare students for a lifetime of achievement.” (p. 7) Honors programs in nursing were established in the beginning of the 1960s, and they currently are featured in the curricula of many U.S. baccalaureate nursing programs (Vessey & DeMarco, 2008).

Since honors programs are considered to promote innovation and novelty among exceptional students (Stanford & Shattell, 2010), the objectives of a nursing honors program include the following: (1) exposing and engaging outstanding students in integrating research findings into evidence based practices (Buckner, 2004); (2) shaping students' critical thinking and problem solving skills by giving them the chance to develop their own research projects (Buckner, 2004); (3) facilitating the path for future graduate education at an early age and assisting students to participate in scholarly activities (Reutter et al., 2010; Vessey & DeMarco, 2008); (4) promoting independent learning through an environment that motivates and challenges students to excel academically, while promoting their self-esteem, sense of accomplishment, personal development, and leadership skills (Gillis, 2002); and (5) enabling students to identify the main issues of the nursing profession and the scientific methods needed to explore them (Gillis, 2002).

### **Development of Honors Program Within the University of Pittsburgh, School of Nursing (SoN)**

In a mission statement at a university school of nursing, the SoN relates its objective for undergraduate education to: “consistently deliver excellence in education.” (The University of Pittsburgh Board of Trustees, 2014) Therefore, the establishment of the SoN honors program was undertaken to: 1) attract, maintain and provide support to the distinguished undergraduate nursing students; 2) promote students' research experience through the completion of a research thesis; 3) and encourage early advances in future careers or graduate-level education through providing networking, presentation, and publication opportunities, all of which set these student scholars apart from other undergraduate nursing students and ensure their success (University of Pittsburgh, School of Nursing, 2015).

The SoN honors program was developed in partnership with the Honor College of the university. The honors program at the University of Pittsburgh, SoN was developed based on the recommendations of the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC). These recommendations were established to ensure that honors programs are designed to challenge and meet the expectations of the outstanding students (Digby, 2005). Moreover, these recommendations help ensure that faculty characteristics, allocated resources, and admission criteria of an honors program in nursing promote student retention and encourage completion of the program (Digby, 2005).

In order for a student to enroll in the honors program in the University of Pittsburgh, SoN, he or she must present and maintain a minimum grade point averages (GPA) of 3.5 throughout the program. The students are expected to develop and conduct a research project to graduate with the Bachelor of Science in Nursing–Honors (BSN–H) degree (Puskar, Kitutu, & Dunbar-Jacob, 2014). Although both the number of nursing honors programs have increased and their benefits have been studied, a limited number of students choose nursing honors education (Lim, Nelson Stimpfel, Navarra, Slater, 2016). Thus, the aim of this study was to share perceptions of nine freshman nursing students about the benefits and barriers of the nursing honors program.

## Methods

This is a preliminary exploratory descriptive study using a survey to provide meaningful insights to the questions about an honors program in nursing. In the survey, two open-ended questions were asked: (1) what are the benefits you [the student] expect to gain from participating in the honors program? (2) what are the barriers you [the student] expect to encounter during your participation in the honors program? All data were transcribed by a research assistant, which were then coded and analyzed to identify benefits and barriers. Themes were determined and discussed with three faculty experts who taught honors classes in the school until an agreement of the themes was established. Frequencies of responses to the two questions were calculated.

## Procedures

A convenience sample was selected from a freshman honors seminar class. Students whose GPA was a minimum of 3.5 were eligible to participate in the study. All nine students in the honors seminar class agreed to participate in the study. Students were informed that their responses would be collected and themes identified as part of a quality improvement evaluation and that the findings may be disseminated for publication. The survey study was designated as quality improvement, which was to make changes that will promote better outcomes and performance (Oermann & Hays, 2015). Therefore, university institutional review board (IRB) approval was waived.

The honors seminar class occurred in a 15-week fall term, where students attended a weekly, 1-hour freshman honors seminar class. This honors seminar introduced the students to different SoN faculty members who presented their research to the honors students. Through this

experience, the honors students were exposed to different specialties and began to develop a research question to pursue. The seminar was designed on a Pass/Fail basis.

## **Sample**

Participants of this study were freshman-level baccalaureate nursing students. Nine female students, whose areas of interest included anesthesia, obstetrics, and pediatric nursing, completed the survey. Participation was voluntary. The average age of the students was 18 years old.

## **Findings**

Four benefits and three barriers themes emerged from the perceptions of the beginning freshmen. Students' responses to each question were tabulated, and organized into categories by the research assistant.

### **Benefits of the SoN Honors Program**

The undergraduate freshman nursing honors students identified four main benefits offered to them by the program: (1) enhanced learning experiences; (2) opportunities to explore career paths or graduate education; (3) mentorship with distinguished faculty; and (4) a sense of community among students.

#### **Benefit #1: Enhanced learning experiences**

Participants stated that the SoN honors program allowed for enriched learning about internships and scholarships, exposure to volunteering, and shadowing nursing experts. Students reported that such experiences enhanced the opportunity to explore the multifaceted composition of nursing roles at an early stage:

In one semester of working with my research mentor, I have begun to learn the process of navigating databases, identifying relevance in scholarly articles, establishing study data entry protocols, and understanding the importance of protecting subject confidentiality

The students also believe that the SoN honors program offers them an individualized mentoring experience—smaller class sizes allow for more in-depth discussion and learning opportunities. As one student declared...

A great advantage of being in an honors program is the smaller classes that allow for more one-on-one with professors. Since honors classes, like our seminar, are smaller, professors are able to get to know their students better.

Moreover, students stated that the courses offered by the SoN honors program facilitated interactive research and rigorous clinical experiences. According to the students, such a specialized and engaging learning opportunity augments students' confidence levels and encourages development of necessary skills needed to become competent, inquisitive, and critical thinking nurses. Participants indicated that enrolling in such a program offered a range of research opportunities, which allows aspiring nurses to explore research in unique ways that are not available to all nursing students. Thus, they are able to work in an area of research that compliments their own interests. As a result, students come to appreciate the impact that nurse researchers can have on patient care.

Likewise, students stated that through participation in an honors program at the University of Pittsburgh, SoN, their leadership skills were embraced and nurtured because students are encouraged to participate and present research outcomes at national and international conferences. In addition, the students reported that the honors nursing classes ensured that they graduate with the necessary skills to be critical thinkers. As a result, students view the honors program as an excellent resource of support and encouragement for top-performing students.

### **Benefit #2: Opportunities to explore career paths or graduate education**

Five students stated that the honors program provided them with an enriching undergraduate experience. Working on an individualized basis helps students match their own research ideas with their future career goals at a very early point in their studies, which encourages them to consider pursuing an advanced degree in nursing. One student aptly recognized this aspect in the following manner:

Being in the honors program allows students to explore their interests in certain specialties earlier than students who are not in an honors program. Whether it is finding a mentor who specializes in your area of interest, getting involved in research, or taking an honors class about the specialty you are interested in, there are many opportunities for honors students to get involved and get a head start on their future career path.

The students enrolled in the SoN honors program believed that the experience of participating in research developed their awareness of professional options, such as specific tracks in research and education. These options are in contrast to exploring only a particular clinical specialty area in which to work.

### **Benefit #3: Mentorship with distinguished faculty**

The honors students reported the development of a special bond with their faculty research mentors as a key characteristic of the honors program. This bond, they believed, might facilitate future collaboration and constitute the basis for a lifelong relationship. This close relationship also encouraged the students' academic growth and career success, thereby fostering their confidence in clinical, educational and research practice. Consequently, through working

with faculty members and researchers, nursing students who enrolled in the honors program experienced a world of higher education, research, journal publication, and conference participation.

In addition, nursing students enrolled in the honors program valued the mentorship relationship, stating that the faculty's passion, involvement, and time investment in the mentorship was highly valued. Similarly, these students also reported that they developed connections with prominent nursing scientists and researchers via presentations by the latter throughout the program. This highly individualized program, according to one of the participants, provided "the opportunity to work with a faculty mentor and perform research in order to write a thesis paper."

Students treasured the integrity of the mentorship provided throughout the program. One participant reported that "the relationships established among students and their professor/mentor advisors are unfathomably useful in guiding each student's career path." Therefore, these highly valued connections enticed many students to participate and remain within the honors program.

#### **Benefit #4: A sense of community among students**

According to the honors students at the SoN, a major advantage of the honors program is the sense of community that is created among BSN-H students. Being a part of the BSN-H makes it much easier and more effective to obtain internships and scholarships that may include research, especially when working among a group of students striving to achieve similar goals with the help of a mentor. BSN-H students are also able to work together to discover their passions and develop new experiences that they will carry with them later in their studies and working life. One student reported it this way:

The chance to meet and talk with other honors students who have similar goals and aspirations while participating in honors seminar [was provided]. We were able to share ideas and support each other in achieving our goals.

With the rigorous intensity of nursing curricula across the nation, the formation of such tightly knit groups of students serves as a favored commodity within the university.

#### **Barriers of the SoN Honors Program**

In addition to the four benefits described, the undergraduate nursing honors students identified three main barriers encountered as a part of the honors program: (1) high expectations, including competitive GPA, intensified workloads, and increased time commitments; (2) ambiguous long-term benefits; and (3) difficulties of conducting a research thesis.

### **Barrier #1: High expectations [GPA, workload, and time commitment]**

The honors students at the SoN stated that acclimating to the first year of nursing school is a challenge in itself, let alone being a part of an honors program. The students perceived the extra workload imposed by an honors nursing program, such as conducting an independent research project as stressful, especially when they are expected to maintain a competitive GPA of 3.5 to remain in the program and apply to graduate schools. BSN-H students also find it difficult to manage their time effectively and maintain a balance between the work needed for the required nursing classes and those needed for non-nursing classes. Since honors students at the University of Pittsburgh SoN are expected to plan in advance for the years to come, they perceived such expectations as challenging, rigorous, and intimidating. The BSN-H honors students also reported that being involved in an honors program may come with more work, increased time commitments, and higher expectations than being on the regular track, which could be overwhelming. One student remarked that “the need to keep my GPA above a 3.5 can be a little stressful and can make difficult courses more daunting.” Such pressures for academic excellence coincide with similar stressors for determining a specific career path as early as the freshman year; that is...

There seems to be an expectation that I should know what I want to do in the future in terms of the graduate degrees I want to obtain and the field I would like to work in, and looking that far ahead after only one year of nursing school can be difficult.

### **Barrier #2: Ambiguous long-term benefits**

Students were concerned with the indeterminate long-term benefits of the honors program. Although honors programs have been in nursing schools since the 1970s, students expressed apprehension, which question the validity of potential benefits. For some students, participating in an honors program may result in perceived anxiety regarding the equivocal long-term benefits. One student reported feelings of dismay regarding the professional benefits of the program in this way:

While early shadowing and volunteer experiences are obvious short-term benefits, it is often hard for us [freshmen, nursing students] to see the beneficial impact of performing our own research, or even aiding a faculty member’s research, if we choose to go a more traditional, clinical route.

Hence, although several students acknowledged that the long-term benefits will obviously enhance their marketability, some students mentioned that not all nursing roles require an extensive research background in nursing.

### **Barrier #3: Difficulties of conducting a research thesis**

One of the main challenges of the honors program that students expressed was conducting an individual research thesis. For undergraduate students, the responsibility of

conducting a research project can be a quite challenging experience, especially because their research course was during their freshmen year. Students indicated that being a freshman undergraduate student is in itself challenging because they experience a range of psychological stressors related to relocation, adaptation to a new environment and to a different educational system. Therefore, in addition to facing the latter stressors, honors students perceived the idea of beginning research and completing a thesis by graduation as intimidating. One student expressed her beliefs as follows:

Conducting an individual research project, in which the student has the primary responsibility for the entire protocol, can be quite overwhelming to an undergraduate student, especially [to] a freshman because college at the undergraduate level has a greater psychosocial aspect than [at the graduate level]

In summary, the difficulties associated with conducting a thesis in the honors program include several challenges, particularly the process of adjustment to a new educational and social environment combined with the rigor of a traditional nursing program, and the perception of not having a sufficient understanding of research.

### **Discussion**

According to a recent published article, more than half of the top 40 nursing schools reported they offer a nursing honors program (Lim et al., 2016). This study explored freshman undergraduate nursing students' perceptions of the benefits and barriers encountered by an honors program. The students described four benefits and three barriers. The anticipated benefits offered by the honors program included: (1) enhanced learning experiences; (2) opportunities to explore career paths or graduate education; (3) mentorship with distinguished faculty; and (4) a sense of community among students.

According to the participants, the honors program is expected to enhance their learning experience through providing internship and scholarship opportunities, in addition to increased exposure to volunteering and shadowing experience. For example, the SoN honors program offers students updates on internships and scholarships that may match their research interest on a regular basis through website features and newsletters. In addition, the SoN exposes their students to volunteering and shadowing experiences through their honors courses including, the honors seminar course.

Furthermore, the honors courses are designed to facilitate academic and clinical development via methodologies that are not always adequately emphasized in a regular nursing curriculum. This statement is consistent with the finding by Stanford and Shattell (2010) that nursing students who graduate from an honors program typically demonstrate confidence and satisfaction in what they have accomplished. Reutter et al. (2010) described the role of an honors nursing program in promoting the continuous learning process as one that fosters "an attitude of inquiry," (p. 566) which encourages the nursing students "to never stop challenging the status quo." (p. 566) The appreciation acquired throughout this program for the ingenious impact

nursing scientists have on healthcare remains consistent with previous studies. Reutter et al. (2010) reported that honors students exhibit an increased respect for the role of nurses in research and the value of nursing research. These students also value their involvement in the dissemination of research by attending conferences (Reutter et al., 2010). In addition, nursing honors students learn to critically appraise research papers and utilize evidence-base practices (Klemm, 2012).

Moreover, the students stated that the honors program provided them with opportunities to explore multidisciplinary career paths and begin to examine graduate education options early in their nursing careers. Stanford and Shattell (2010) point out that the more interested nursing students are about their research topic, the more they report a positive experience about research and the less overwhelming the project seems. In addition, students, through honors program, are introduced to a scholarly society that will serve as an impetus for a successful prospective career or pursuance of graduate level education (Stanford & Shattell, 2010). The benefits of mentorship with distinguished faculty, an opportunity offered to students by the honors program, demonstrates results consistent with previous studies. According to Stanford and Shattell (2010), working with faculty members and researchers constructs the foundation for work in other realms of nursing science, not limited to education, research, publication, and presentation. Consequently, outstanding students report that a one-on-one mentorship experience aids personal development and focuses their ideas towards a research and clinical area of interest, which results in both academic and career achievements. Throughout the entire honors nursing program, faculty members can also provide support and encouragement to facilitate students' learning experiences (Stanford & Shattell, 2010).

The efforts of the honors nursing students are often acknowledged through mentor-chosen nominations for excellence in research and for academic achievement awards (Stanford & Shattell, 2010). Reutter et al. (2010) argue that research programs for honors students are meant to socialize students into a scholarly community through "mentorship, role modeling, and active participation." (p. 563)

Finally, students declared that the SoN honors program helped develop a sense of community among students. According to Reutter et al. (2010), students value the support that comes from being a part of an honors community. This support, while instrumental in helping students develop their research interest, also fosters an environment for deliberation, discussion, and encouragement, allowing students to voice concerns and conquer any encountered challenge. Honors nursing students also stated that they treasure the chance of working with other highly motivated, passionate, enthused and outstanding students (Reutter et al., 2010).

On the other hand, students described three barriers of an honor's program: (1) high expectations, depicted by GPA, intensified workloads, and increased time commitments; (2) ambiguous long-term benefits; and (3) difficulties of conducting a research thesis. While elevated standards are necessary criteria for honors programs, they constitute the main stressors for students. Both Reutter et al. (2010) and Gillis (2002) asserted that nursing undergraduate curricula in most U.S. schools of nursing is condensed, intense, and inflexible; students are

usually enrolled in highly structured, tight schedules, and they are expected to finish approximately 1,300 clinical hours in addition to the 124 credit hours. Likewise, Vessey and DeMarco (2008) indicated that the workload that comes with being an honors student might actually have a negative impact on students' GPA, despite the benefits that the honors programs offer. This concern resonates with nursing students within this university's program, especially when considering that their individualized research involves the creation of a thesis and presentation.

Although distinguished nursing scientists recognize the importance of undergraduate research and can further underline the necessity of honors programs and the value of such benefits, it is often difficult for freshmen students, grappling with unfamiliar environments, to fully appreciate opportunities, whose benefits are not immediately realized. Thus, since little data are provided to students regarding the successes or failures of the graduates of the BSN-H program, students become more hesitant to enter into an indisputably more laborious program. However, after additional exposure to both clinical and research faculty, students increase their awareness and understanding of the demands imposed by the evolving healthcare system, which places the utmost emphasis on evidence based practice, regardless of specialty, location, or professional track. As more students matriculate into the School of Nursing and familiarize themselves with the requirements of the academic, clinical, and professional world of nursing, it is anticipated that students will become less hesitant to embrace the numerous assets of such programs.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, honors programs in nursing can be rewarding for students to meet their learning objectives, recognize their outstanding performance, and distinguish them among other nursing students. Honors programs offer perceived and anticipated benefits (i.e. enhanced learning experience, opportunities to explore career paths or graduate education, mentorship with distinguished faculty, and a sense of community among students) but also barriers (i.e. high expectations, ambiguous long-term benefits, and difficulties of conducting a research thesis). In order to guarantee the expected outcomes, honors programs in nursing should be carefully designed to address the barriers in order to help students succeed. Several solutions may include targeted marketing strategies to inform honor students that they are the best and can meet the high expectations of completing a thesis with faculty mentoring and support. Another solution relates to clearly articulating that the benefits are not ambiguous but achievable.

The results of this study present a preliminary pilot exploration of the benefits and barriers of nursing honors programs. Suggestions for further research include addressing barriers to enhance nursing honors programs, repeating the study with a larger sample, and also with seniors and recently graduated honors student nurses. Similarly, a future study comparing graduates from the traditional BSN with the honors BSN students may offer helpful insights.

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