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## Student Leadership in Western Washington University's Honors Program

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# Student Leadership in Western Washington University's Honors Program

By Emma Wiechert

Advised by Dr. Scott Linneman

## **A History, Of Sorts**

I joined the Student Honors Board (SHB) my first week on campus. But, in case you don't know, every freshman joins about 15 clubs their first week on campus, and then you see what sticks. SHB stuck for me. The entire time I've been working on this project I've been trying to think about why, but I'm still not sure. The executive board at that time was incredibly kind, and some of the greatest people I have ever had the pleasure to meet. My entire time on the board I was simply trying, and often failing, to live up to the incredibly high bar they had set. I've always found myself in leadership roles, and I enjoy being a leader (which is likely another reason I stuck with SHB), so I pretty quickly earned the title of "Edens Hall Liaison" on the board. Plus, one of the girls on the board made us treats for most meetings. All I know is, that is the club I was most loyal to throughout my time at WWU.

Sometime in early 2019 I fell ill with depression. There is no better way to say it, just as you fall ill with a cold, depression came over me like a wave stopping everything I knew to be true. I don't tell you this as a sob story, or to evoke any sympathy, but because I think it is relevant to what I eventually explore in this project. Eventually, I was having a hard time going to class, often skipping, and even getting out of bed. The one thing I continued to do? SHB. There is no perfect explanation to this, but I will tell you this, it felt like a light in an otherwise very cloudy, gray life. For one hour every Thursday I had a bit of hope that I might end up okay in college. In May 2019, we held elections for the next years executive board. I ran for president

(unopposed), and while I tried to play it off as an impulsive decision, it was something I had been thinking about for weeks.

For the next two years I made small changes, just as I assume every president has done and will continue to do, and became even more involved in the honors program through HOPPS (Honors Outreach to Past and Prospective Students), the book club, and serving on various boards. I loved meeting with prospective students and new freshmen and planning events for other students. Covid-19 came and stayed, and I continued to mull over if there was a better way for leadership to be executed in the honors program. I proposed researching and examining this to Dr. Linneman as my senior project, and he kindly agreed to advise me on it. The rest of this paper is more scientific including the process, findings, and a recommendation.

### **A Brief Overview of Leadership in WWU Honors (As of June 2021)**

#### Volunteer Student Leadership

1. Student Honors Board (SHB): A group of students composed of an elected executive board and others who choose to attend meetings. The executive board includes a president, secretary, and event coordinator/publicist. The president leads meetings and events, and handles most communication between other departments and faculty (I served as the president from May 2019-May 2021). The secretary takes notes at each meeting and maintains a database of past notes and other documents regarding events, such as posters. The event coordinator/publicist handles event responsibilities such as pizza orders and creates posters for each event. Each executive board member is expected to attend all meetings and events. The board meets each week for about an hour. There is typically an event or two a month, including events such as Pizza and Profundity or the

annual art gala. For the past few years the executive board has run unopposed and there have been dwindling members in the board as time has progressed.

2. Honors Students of Color (HSOC): a community that supports historically underrepresented minority students by providing a safe and inclusive social and academic environment throughout their journey in the Honors Program. There are leadership positions such as president, and the group typically meets weekly with more structured events every other week. All minority students are welcome to attend HSOC events whenever they may choose, and the leadership positions are elected yearly similar to SHB.
3. Honors Outreach to Past and Prospective Students (HOPPS): A group of students who participate in engagement with possible honors students and some alumni. The students who choose to join fill out an application and attend an introductory meeting. They are then able to attend lunches with visiting students and their families, help with large prospective student events, such as Experience Western Honors, and attend events with alumni. It is up to the individual HOPPS how many, and which, events they wish to participate in.
4. Honors Board(s): At various times certain students are requested by honors faculty to join boards. For example, the board that meets and decides on the seminars for the following year. Or the board that is interviewing people for various posted honors positions. These boards require various amounts of time, but typically only a couple weeks of extended work. Often the members are chosen from SHB and HSOC.
5. Mentorship: honors has been piloting a new mentorship program where upperclassmen are paired with incoming students and/or freshman to assist them in whatever they may

need throughout the year. Students desiring to be mentors fill out an application. The program is being adjusted and evolved as my project has been performed, so it is hard to comment on. There is a strong likelihood it changes into a paid position.

#### Student employees in and connected to honors

1. Teaching Assistants (TAs): A few honors classes have TAs, who are common across all colleges at WWU. TAs are typically honors students who have taken the class previously and are chosen by the professor who teaches the class. Some students are paid while others receive credit.
2. Web Developers: Students employed by honors who work in the honors center on the website, processing applications, and assisting with office work. During covid-19, these student employees were occasionally requested to perform the actions of HOPPS students. These students are also typically members of SHB. Both of these aspects I wanted to explore in my project. How do employed students feel about performing tasks they previously did as a volunteer position? Do student employees who also volunteer in leadership roles ever struggle to separate the two tasks?
3. Fellowship Office Assistants: The Fellowship Office helps students, throughout WWU, find and apply to nationally competitive scholarships and fellowships. Although students from across WWU utilize the Fellowship Office, because of their qualifications honors students represent a large percentage. Due to the Fellowship Advisor being an employee of the honors program, his assistants have typically been honors students. Additionally, his office has been located in the same area as the honors faculty. I have been a Fellowship Office Assistant for around the same time I have been president of SHB, and historically the assistants have also been on SHB.

## **The Research Process**

The goal of my research was to answer a few questions:

1. What are the benefits of not paying certain student leaders and paying others?
2. What are the benefits of volunteering being a key part of student leadership? Are there cons?
3. Would payment increase the number of people running for certain positions? Would there be advantages to this? Or are the best people in the positions the ones who want them without the pay?
4. Does not paying certain positions prevent certain people from taking them?
5. Do students who are employees and volunteers struggle to separate the two?
6. Are most students in multiple leadership positions? Why is this? Should it be streamlined more or kept separate?
7. Are there incentives outside of money that could be provided?
8. Is there anything in general people would change about student leadership in their college?

With these questions in mind and the goal of giving WWU Honors some concrete recommendations at the end, I set out to interview multiple people. Interviewees and conversations included:

1. Students in leadership at WWU honors including SHB, HSOC, HOPPS, employees, and other students who identified themselves as student leaders for various reasons. These conversations were conducted over Zoom.
2. Students and faculty at the Western Regional Honors Conference (WRHC), a conference I was able to attend in April 2021. Students and faculty from across the west come

together to discuss different topics, and I was able to present mine and talk about it with different attendees. The entire conference was over Zoom due to Covid-19.

3. Students in different leadership positions at colleges WWU Honors has contacts or a relationship with. Some of these conversations were over Zoom and others were via email.
4. Finally, when I presented my project in June 2021 I was able to present my project, via Zoom, to friends, family, and key members of the honors program who responded and discussed my findings.

With each interviewee I asked them five questions:

1. What are your responsibilities as a student leader in your program?
2. How did you reach this position of leadership (election, application, faculty appointment, etc.)?
3. Are you compensated/supported in any way (scholarship, stipend, hourly pay, etc.)?
4. What is one thing you like about how student leadership functions in your program?
5. What is one thing you would change about how student leadership functions in your program?

## **Findings and Results**

In response to my first question about roles and responsibilities, I learned that most schools have a similar outline as ours with a group like SHB and a separate one like HOPPS, but there were a few that specifically drew my attention.

At California State University San Bernardino, their honors board divides members into academic, digital, cultural, and recreational and each group plans an event each quarter. For example, the academic board members plan a studying or tutoring focused event while the

recreational group plans an event such as ultimate frisbee. Their president reported the year prior they had members from each college who planned events for that specific college, but they have liked this division more.

At Washington State University, their student honors board does an event every other week, but many of them are “tea with professors” which require less work on their end. Their main event they spend most of the year planning is an honors ball. The president of their program, Juliana LeClair reported that every member of their board (SHB equivalent) was also a member of the program that did outreach to prospective students (HOPPS equivalent), but not the other way around. This trend was pretty consistent across campuses, including our own. This trend has made me wonder if there are benefits or consequences to keeping these groups separate, even if there is severe overlap.

Another key question in this discussion is how much these events impact the typical honors student’s experience, and if they play a role in retention rate. If these impacts are high, it begs the question if these student leaders should be recognized or supported in a greater way?

In response to my second question, how student leaders reach their positions, for boards that plan events similar to SHB, students are elected by fellow students in the group. For groups like HOPPS, most students have to fill out an application but as Arwen, a prospective student outreach volunteer and mentor at the University of Montana pointed out, almost every student who fills out the application is accepted. This also rings true across other campuses, including WWU.

In situations like SHB, most students report running unopposed. This is also the case at WWU. To me, it is worth questioning why this is, and if it needs to be addressed. Are the right



students in the positions, or are there people who may be better but didn't run? Or are the ones who are willing to run therefore the best suited people to do it?

One thing student leaders really liked about student leadership in their honors program is that students are the ones electing them to their positions, not the faculty. As one student expressed it, they want the people they are working for to elect them.

In response to my third question about compensation, many students report that the idea has never crossed their mind, specifically in terms of monetary compensation. Dylan Cherullo, another student at the University of Montana, said that every student who volunteers with their outreach program is guaranteed a letter of recommendation from their Dean Timothy Nichols. He also reported that he received a scholarship from his school and thus feels a stronger need to give back. He also explained this scholarship means he does not have to worry about finances like some of his peers, which frees up his free time to volunteer. He reported that being paid wouldn't change much for him. He came to the University of Montana because of their mentor program, and that is primarily why he wanted to join it as a student.

Students across the country reported that their honors program pays for all of their events, and often those events include free food, a huge incentive and compensation for college students. Students at our own school report that because they are unpaid for the work they do in SHB, it often has to fall to the bottom of their priority list leading to missed meetings and rushed projects. Or, at least a disappointment in themselves for who they performed, even if the flaws go unnoticed by others.

Most students report having an on-campus job in addition to their volunteer work in SHB. Some students find it hard to balance working and SHB and therefore believe that if they were paid for their work in SHB they could then do that exclusively, because it is what they truly

enjoy doing. Others believe if they were paid for SHB they would continue to do both regardless. These students are mostly those who enjoy their job and volunteering with SHB.

One voice that is missing from this conversation is those that never join leadership in their honors program at all, and I continue to wonder if that is because they have a greater need for money and thus do not have time to volunteer as others do. These voices are likely low-income students, first-generation students, and students of color who are all historically underrepresented in honors colleges and leadership.

The biggest take away from this question did not end up being a clear answer on if students should/want to be paid, but instead a unanimous desire for support. Every student leader I interviewed, when I asked if they would change one thing, they reported that it would be that their faculty reached out and engaged with them more.

It seems to me that because honors students, and particularly in my project honors student leaders, are so self-sufficient and driven, faculty are very hands off. But just because they may not need the support, doesn't mean the students wouldn't appreciate a regular quick check in. Angelina Cayabyab, a participant in the WRHC, believed that a check-in would improve her mental health due to knowing she has that support and appreciation, and thus she believed she would be a better leader.

### **Recommendations (for lack of a better word)**

So, in the spirit of full honesty and disclosure, I had a recommendation before I did any interviews. But throughout my interviews I grew more hesitant that this change was the exact answer or would be as productive as I had hoped. However, I still want to present my first proposal and then move on to the consequences and remaining questions of the proposal, and then to a less clear, but perhaps better starting point of recommendation and the benefits overall

of the two plans. Throughout my hesitancy I have been constantly reminding myself of something I learned in Dr. Katie Brian's honors seminar on carceral matters: just because we make an adjustment or change does not mean we cannot continue to make adjustments and changes as we learn more about ourselves and our needs.

So, my original proposal was that there would be 2-5 paid WWU Honors Students, with at least one being from HSOC. Everyone who was a semi-regular attendee of SHB or HSOC would be eligible to apply and both students and faculty would have a voice in the election/hiring. These employee's responsibilities would include leading events and meetings for SHB, HSOC, and book club, attending faculty senate meetings, attending one HOPPS lunch a week and helping with the big prospective students' days, front desk responsibilities, and filling the current web developer roles. This would not include TAs or Ras. Depending on events of the week, students would work around 10-15 hours a week (at WWU student employees cannot work more than 19 hours a week).

Moving on to the consequences of this plan, it could decrease engagement of those who were not being paid. For example, if you weren't being paid and knew others were would you continue to come to SHB? Would you continue to volunteer for HOPPS lunches and EWH? There would, of course, still be the incentive of free food. This may especially be true for students who applied but weren't chosen for the position. However, for those students hoping to achieve the position in a later year, they may volunteer more to increase their chances.

Additionally, for some groups, especially HOPPS, the volunteer aspect is particularly important. When a prospective student is eating with a student who truly wants to be there, it means a bit more to that prospective student. Additionally, the current student is at liberty to be more honest if they are not being paid. A student may feel more comfortable telling the

prospective student what they do not love about the program, and they can be more frank when asked about something like party life. For example, when talking to some of the leaders at University of Montana, they said often mentors become good friends with their mentees, something that may be more unlikely if money is factored in. Without getting into the weeds too much, logistical aspects such as if these employees are mandatory reporters would also need to be considered.

Finally, leaders are different and have different abilities and strengths. Therefore, it would require a very specific student who could and would enjoy doing all of these roles well. For example, students who lead events may not want to do office work; students who do HOPPS may not want to work with current honors students; students who are web developers may not want to engage/do outreach at all. And there is value in having different people involved in discussions and different aspects of honors. There is danger in narrowing down leadership to such a tight definition. Additionally, paid students would possibly give up other things that make them more well-rounded and diverse students such as other clubs or jobs.

There are also some key questions that would make this plan more compelling that remain unanswered. Specifically, would paid positions expand interest in honors leadership, particularly to those who are historically underrepresented? If interest was expanded, elections would likely be more competitive. This returns to the question if competition would bring out the best students for the roles or if the best students for the roles are those who are willing to do the work without pay or competition.

Moving to my post-interviews proposal, I believe the primary goal should be increasing communication and a general feeling of support between all WWU Honors students and faculty, but especially student leaders. This could look like a group of diverse, rotating students meeting

with honors staff and faculty every other week or monthly to discuss various items (events, current needs, etc.) and/or faculty having “office hours” specifically in the honors center. The point of having faculty in the honors center would be that students would likely feel more comfortable just stopping to chat, instead of having to go to an entirely different location where it is just them with the professor. Having other students around along with the honors center being a “neutral location” where no party feels more comfortable could lead to more authentic conversations.

The key benefits of both of these plans are the increased communication and updates between students and honors faculty and staff, as well as the improved transparency and flexibility. If there were clear student leaders who students knew had regular communication with faculty, other students may feel more comfortable talking to the employed students about issues/questions in the honors program versus talking to faculty. These messages could then be relayed. Finally, increased communication and, if chosen, payment, would keep students and faculty more accountable to each other. Currently, as I mentioned earlier, many of the students in these roles are working other jobs and those must come first leading to missed meetings and tasks getting done late as they fall to the bottom of the to-do list. Increased communication and/or payment would increase accountability for all.

I want to emphasize that while Dr. Linneman advised me on this project, I was at full liberty to make whatever recommendation I saw fit. I was originally sure I should absolutely be paid for the work I do with honors, but I am no longer convinced. Regardless, I have realized some important things in this endeavor.

First, leadership looks different in everyone, and that is wonderful and something that should be celebrated. Students who do best one on one and not in large groups should not be discounted as leaders.

Second, honors students hesitate to ask for support, but most would like it. Thus, faculty may need to reach out first to offer support instead of assuming their leaders will ask for it when it's needed. Moreover, faculty should continually push that connection, such as asking about how an event went afterwards or asking about the students preferred club or sports team. If the communication is established and students are shown that faculty continue to show up they will trust them as a support system more.

Third, more communication is almost always better.

And finally, we should embrace that we may make a change and then learn, evaluate, and adjust later on. This is how progress is made.

*Author's note: I'd like to say this essay has been a labor of love, but I'm not entirely sure that is true. College has been the hardest thing I've ever done, partly because of some external circumstances, but also simply because of what it is. There were several times I thought about leaving WWU or college altogether, and I am still not sure I'm proud of myself for what I've done here at the end of the day. But, here I am crawling to the finish line that is getting my diploma. Throughout my tumultuous time here, there have been two consistencies at WWU: the honors program, and with it the Student Honors Board, and my best friend Ariana Gant. And while I assure you I could write a paper on my love for her, it is ingrained in my very soul to try and improve things. The paper you are about to read is an attempt at exploring possible improvements to the Student Honors Board, and also an exploration of leadership and myself that came out of it. If nothing else, this project and paper are a labor of humbleness, gratefulness, and accepting change and failure. Which these days, looks a lot like love to me.*

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