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THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI
SALLY MCDONNELL BARKSDALE HONORS COLLEGE
EXTERNAL REVIEW REPORT
March 21-23, 2007

Gary Bell, Rosalie Otero, and Robert Spurrier

I. Introduction

We open with two observations that are discussed later in our report. First, the students in the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College (SMBHC) are among the finest we have encountered in our many visits to a wide variety of colleges and universities over the years. Second, if it were not for the SMBHC and the opportunities it provides, these students most definitely would *not* be at The University of Mississippi.

Dr. Gary Bell, Dean of the Honors College at Texas Tech University; Dr. Rosalie Otero, Director of Honors at the University of New Mexico and Past President of the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC); and Dr. Robert Spurrier, Director of The Honors College at Oklahoma State University and a Past President of the NCHC; were invited to serve as outside reviewers for the SMBHC by Honors College Dean Dr. Douglass Sullivan-González.

Our 2007 visit to The University of Mississippi campus came almost exactly five years to the day after our 2002 visit. We are including several segments from our 2002 report to provide context for our assessment of honors education at The University of Mississippi in 2007.

We have divided our report into four sections: (1) this introduction, (2) an executive summary, (3) specific commentary on the structure and organization of the SMBHC, and (4) an analysis of the SMBHC in terms of the National Collegiate Honors Council's Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program and Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors College.

Prior to our visit we received and reviewed materials sent by Dr. Sullivan-González including an exceptional self study Honors College Review; a copy of the 2005-06 Undergraduate Catalog; a copy of *Hyperbole*, the undergraduate literary magazine of The University of Mississippi; various recruitment and application materials; information about the university; guide to scholarships; SMBHC Student Handbook and Faculty Handbook; Research and Thesis Guide; and By-Laws of the SMBHC Honors Senate. During our visit we also received and had the opportunity to review the evaluations of the classes that have been taught since 2002 (several volumes). The materials provided were comprehensive, organized, and an invaluable asset in the review process.

Our schedule for the three-day visit included an entrance and exit meeting with Honors Dean, Douglass Sullivan-González, Associate Dean John Samonds, and Assistant Dean Debra Young. We also met with Chancellor Robert Khayat, Provost Carolyn Staton, and

members of the Honors Council: Aileen Ajootian, Wei-Yin Chen, Deborah Chessin, Joshua Kipp, Thomas Marshall, Charles Ross, Jay Watson, Mark Wilder, and Marvin Wilson. Other meetings included members of the Honors faculty: Michael Allen, Rick Elam, Ann Fisher-Wirth, Wendy Garrison, Susan Pedigo, Douglas Robinson, Natalie Schroeder, Joseph Ward, Esther Sparks, Gerard Buskes, Karen Raber; members of the Honors 101/102 faculty: Melvin Arrington, Robert Brown, Gerard Buskes, John Czarnetsky, George Dor, Ann Fisher-Wirth, Charles Gates, Timothy Nordstrom, Anne Quinney, Sheila Skemp, John Williamson, and John Winkle; members of the Faculty Senate: Robert Albritton, Mark Hamann, Jay Watson, and John Williamson; Deans Linda Chitwood, Samuel Davis, Glenn Hopkins, Brian Reithel, Julia Rholes, and Barbara Wells; department chairs: Aileen Ajootian, Teresa Carithers, Stephen Cutler, Tristan Denley, Donald Dyer, Richard Forgette, Charles Gates, Samir Husni, William Lawhead, Mark Loftin, Patrick Quinn, Charles Ross, Jeffrey Roux, Lt. Col. James Shaver, Mark Van Boening, Nancy Wicker, Elizabeth Ervin, and Joe Ward; heads of administrative units including admissions, housing, financial aid, and Study Abroad; SMBHC Student Senate: Joshua Kipp, Anthony Yuen, Mimi Abadie, Patrice Jones, Ryan Yates, Patrick Dogan, Daniel Hedglin, Rebecca Lo, John Darnell, William Denney, Kaleb Page, Catherine Servati, Vince Chamblee, Erin Callahan, Harrison Ford, Matt Sephenson; and a group of approximately 30 honors students.

We very much appreciate the courtesy and helpfulness demonstrated by everyone we encountered at The University of Mississippi during our campus visit.

In an effort to avoid inadvertent errors on matters of fact, a confidential working draft of this report was provided to Dean Sullivan-González with an invitation to call any factual errors to the attention of the visiting team by e-mail before completion of the final version of the report.

With approximately 800 institutional members the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) is the largest national organization concerned with honors education, but it does not serve as a formal accrediting body for Honors Programs or Honors Colleges. The members of the visiting team are NCHC Recommended Site Visitors, and they bring a range of national honors experience. This document, however, should not be construed to constitute a report from the National College Honors Council as an organization.

II. Executive Summary

A. Honors College Strengths

Examining the materials provided by the dean and the visit to campus proved both interesting and instructive. The SMBHC is in good hands with a well-respected and committed dean. The college also has strong support from Chancellor Robert Khayat, Provost Carolyn Staton, other administrators, and faculty. Further, the dedicated and energetic staff of the college is truly committed to honors education with both energy and imagination. The dean and staff are undertaking many projects, some directly related to

honors and others benefiting the university more broadly, to the extent that they may be stretched thin.

The quality of advising in the honors college is excellent. The students view the advising they receive in the honors college as exceptional. When we asked the students what was the best part of the honors college, they answered in one voice, “Dr. Debra Young.” The Honors Center is centrally located, and with the addition of the third floor, the SMBHC will enjoy more needed space. The lounge area, however, is relatively small. It should be a place where the entire honors community could gather for special events. That would not be possible now. The visiting team recommends that the lounge be expanded. The lounge could easily be expanded toward the back patio.

B. Areas of Concern

The Honors College has the potential to become a stronger component in continuing the institution’s reputation for teaching and student intellectual development. There are interested and capable faculty as well as qualified and motivated students and a superb staff. It is essential for the central administration to continue its support for the role of the SMBHC within the institution. The visiting team is concerned that the annual budget of the Honors College is largely dependent on the generosity of their benefactor, Mr. James Barksdale. It may be prudent and far-sighted to establish a permanent endowment that will support the SMBHC annually.

Moreover, it seemed to the visiting team that The University of Mississippi’s annual contribution to the College is relatively small. Given the fact that the SMBHC contributes so much to the well being of the institution, it is our recommendation that the university consider contributing, for instance, to course “buy-out” funds so that more Honors classes might be supported and so that departments are not pressed so hard by the demands that Honors places upon them. As we spoke to various constituencies on campus, this seemed to have been a major issue—especially for deans and for department chairs.

With a mandate for continued growth, the SMBHC needs additional staff. A financial specialist would free up John Samonds so that he could concentrate his efforts on other matters. He could, for example, be available to teach an honors course that would give him more legitimacy with the faculty. He is responsible for advising and recruiting as well as for working with department chairs and faculty to develop and schedule honors courses. In addition to many other duties, Debra Young is responsible for recruiting and preparing students for major national and international fellowships such as the Truman, Goldwater, Rhodes, and so on. It may be advisable to establish a separate office for that purpose in order to reach all qualified Ole Miss students (and thus give her more adequate time for her other obligations and perhaps allow her to take on a teaching assignment as well). At some institutions such an office is often located in a central area like the student union building. Hiring a director of the office of national scholarships

and fellowships, and setting up a special office for that purpose, could well strengthen the ability of The University of Mississippi to be more competitive in receiving these prestigious awards.

The thesis requirement is commendable. Research does prepare students for graduate and professional schools. It helps students to think independently, to ask original questions, and to work one-on-one with a faculty mentor. The SMBHC, however, needs more flexibility in this area. Accounting and engineering majors, for example, are required to complete internships or design projects that could be accepted for thesis credit with some modifications.

The SMBHC is thinking about the possibility of raising admissions requirements in order to curtail the growth of the College. The visiting team thinks this would not be advantageous to the University. Because the admissions requirements for students who apply to Ole Miss are relatively low, it is important not to raise the admission for the college. The Honors College may consider a number of other options including a portfolio application, interviews for some select group or all, or certain other requirements such as previously exhibited leadership roles, volunteer activities, and preparatory courses. The dean is concerned that large numbers minimize the feeling of community that the SMBHC has enjoyed these past ten years. It is possible to have honors students feel a part of the Honors College, participate wholly, and be enriched and exceptionally educated even though the dean may not know each student personally. The University of New Mexico, for example, has 1400 students in its program, Texas Tech has approximately 950 participants (at the outset of academic year 2006-07), and Oklahoma State has 916 “active participants” in its honors college.

C. General Observations and Recommendations

The SMBHC has a relatively short history, having been founded in 1997 with a generous gift from James and Sally McDonnell Barksdale. The founding and continued support indicates that the Honors College was desirable and is meeting the need within the university of offering top students special academic experiences and enriched educational opportunities.

Recommendation 1: It is essential for Mr. Barksdale and the central administration of The University of Mississippi to continue to support the role of the Honors College within the institution.

Recommendation 2: The SMBHC and The University of Mississippi need at least four more staff positions in order to continue to meet the needs of the students and the College as well as students outside the College who wish to compete for major prestigious scholarships. A financial specialist is needed by the SMBHC. A full-time honors advisor

would insure that the growing number of students in the College receive timely and appropriate honors advising. An additional staff member could be responsible for recruiting students to develop greater ethnic and geographic diversity in the College. (Also, as noted above, a separate office and director for prestigious national fellowships should be established.)

Recommendation 3: Increase the budget for faculty and departments providing courses for honors students. Some departments including English and History have been most generous in providing classes and faculty to the Honors College, but they may need additional incentives to continue to do this. In addition, other departments and faculty on campus may be persuaded to develop and teach honors courses.

Recommendation 4: The SMBHC should be assigned faculty lines. These new faculty would be responsible for teaching honors courses. This would especially be the case with the core Honors courses and with the innovative interdisciplinary courses that are so basic to any Honors effort. Such a step would take the burden away from some departments. Another possibility would be for the university to add new faculty positions for those departments that work closely with the SMBHC. A third option would be to hire “Honors Fellows,” faculty from other departments assigned to teach exclusively in the SMBHC for two or three years. The Honors College would, of course, be expected to pick up the salaries and benefits of those faculty members for those years. The departments could, thereby, gain the salary of those faculty members for various purposes during the two- or three-year period. This recommendation builds upon an observation made on page 3, above, that the University should more heavily invest in the operation of the SMBHC.

Recommendation 5: Develop guidelines that will make the honors thesis more flexible. At present, the engineering students can write up their senior design projects to satisfy the honors thesis requirement. We suggest that the SMBHC work with Accounting majors, for example, to incorporate their required internship in a similar manner. As more students enroll in the SMBHC, more faculty will be required to work one-on-one with students working on theses. It may facilitate and benefit the process if some projects can be accepted for both the department and the SMBHC.

It might well be desirable, at this point in the development of the SMBHC at The University of Mississippi, to consider an alternative to a thesis for graduation with Honors. Perhaps something akin to the “readings” master’s degree as opposed to the thesis M.A. might be entertained. This would certainly contribute to a higher graduation rate.

Recommendation 6: Develop special admissions criteria to ensure steady but manageable growth, encourage diversity, and sustain the SMBHC.

Recommendation 7: The Honors College needs to work on the integration of all parts of the curriculum and all departments into Honors offerings—to the extent that this is possible.

Recommendation 8: The Honors College should make an effort to have professors and departments develop both interdisciplinary courses and innovative curricular offerings.

Recommendation 9: We suggest that perhaps more recruiting and servicing attention might be paid to transfer students, geographically diverse students, and to non-traditional students. None of these groups seemed to have been overly represented in our visit.

In a similar vein, the student population with whom we interacted did not seem to be especially representative of the state's population as a whole. Greater attention to diversity might be undertaken in the recruitment and retention considerations. A revision of the application form and procedure may be called for.

Recommendation 10: There should be a standardized, published set of criteria for who the Honors teachers in any given semester shall be and what the expectations for Honors classes are.

Recommendation 11: It would seem timely to split the national and international scholarship operation from the SMBHC and put it into an entirely separate office.

Recommendation 12: The production of a senior thesis for Honors graduation may warrant a re-visitation. The junior research effort seems quite redundant, at least as we understand it.

III. The Structure and Operation of the Honors College

A. Facilities

The Honors College building is certainly spacious compared to the facilities often found on other campuses, and frankly provoked some envy in at least one visitor. With four floors (including the basement) devoted to the College there is sufficient space for a library and a large computer lab, a state-of-the-art interactive computer classroom, other

classrooms, and office space as well as a fine commons room and kitchen. The new SMBHC seal, student art work, and appropriate memorabilia from graduating classes certainly contribute to the ambience, the appeal, and the welcoming nature of the building.

It is a matter of some value to see that both the Philosophy Department and the Classics Department have been re-located elsewhere on campus, and thus the top or third floor is now available to the college. The plans that were shown to us, with the addition of a more spacious library, storage areas, offices, and a large study/gathering area, are commendable and, again, a tremendous addition to the well-being of the college. With the dramatic growth in the number of Honors College students at The University of Mississippi, however, space that even a year ago would have seemed more than adequate now appears destined to become crowded in short order. The desire to expand the SMBHC building by building an addition on the rear of the current structure is a reasonable one in light of the anticipated continued growth in numbers. The plans for an additional classroom, a much larger lounge, and an expanded kitchen are certainly worth pursuing.

We were pleased that the office of the dean now is far more accessible to students than in 2002, having been moved to the first floor along with the office of the Administrative Coordinator. We believe this makes a much more positive statement that students are to be welcomed into the SMBHC and that the dean makes every effort to be accessible. There still is a division of administrative offices on different floors, but it may be that the structure of the building is such that this is unavoidable.

B. Curriculum

Since the last visitation it is clear there has been some curriculum revision. The sophomore level Honors requirement has been dropped. The freshman honors courses, 101 and 102 offerings, which serve as a core for the Honors College curriculum, carry either English or humanities/social sciences credit. This is a nice accommodation to the large numbers of students who arrive with college English credit already completed. Moreover, the expressions of appreciation for the courses, from both faculty and students alike, not to mention administrators, were sufficiently fulsome so that topically and educationally we can only commend the effort. Specifically, in meeting with the professors who teach Honors 101 and 102, the visitors were struck by the extraordinary commitment to, and the interest that these professors had in, the premises of the course and the pleasure they expressed in working with the Honors students. Equally striking was the commitment of the various departments across campus to allow their professors to be used in this manner—in light of tremendous enrollment pressures that the university is experiencing. There was minor caviling from some departments about the pressure that it puts on them to undertake such extraordinary cooperation—with History and English apparently bearing the brunt of the commitment—but in general this degree of

cooperation by external departments and colleges with an Honors effort is truly unusual and indicative of the viability and vitality of the Honors effort.

In fact, in general, we found an enviable spirit of cooperation with and regard for Honors across campus. Whether it was college deans, or department chairs, or administrative staff, the SMBHC Dean gets a great deal of credit for building an atmosphere of cooperation, and he is at the same time the beneficiary of a most “Honors-hospitable” atmosphere.

In evaluating the course offerings over the last several semesters, it is clear that efforts have been made to increase offerings in the sciences and the social sciences. This broadening of the curriculum is worth noting. However, although 65 courses were offered in Spring of 2007, for instance, it should be noted that 16 were the Honors introductory course, and a sizeable percentage were at the freshman and sophomore level. Forty-nine courses is not unrespectable, but in order to keep the Honors experience at The University of Mississippi from becoming a strictly lower division phenomenon (with the exception of thesis expectations), we would encourage the devising and offering of more upper-division Honors courses that can have general education application but also draw the student more deeply into disciplinary offerings.

Moreover, it would seem that interdisciplinary courses are in short supply. One of the prime purposes of an Honors effort on a campus is to encourage curricular experimentation and course innovation. As the SMBHC matures, and as staff become more numerous to oversee this Honors function, perhaps more attention can be paid to soliciting upper-division courses and stimulating curricular innovation.

At the same time, it is clear that several academic programs wish it were possible to expand their participation in the Honors curriculum. We note that this was especially called to the visitors’ attention by the School of Business Administration and the School of Pharmacy. One suspects that contact with other programs and departments may have produced similar concerns. Thus we would encourage a closer look at how the students in under-represented disciplines might be more fully accommodated and how classes in under-represented departments might be added.

To reiterate what we wrote in 2002,

Two other requirements that students must meet in order to graduate with honors are the junior research project and senior thesis. Although the intent of these requirements to encourage students to develop their own scholarly interests or become involved with the research pursuits of the university faculty is laudable, the students are perhaps being asked to become graduate students before their time. The undergraduate curriculum should allow for exploration, development, enhancement, and broadening. A whole year devoted to studying a narrow field may be counterproductive for those students who do a Junior Research Project. The title itself, “Junior Research Project,” is a misnomer because students

may fulfill the requirement in various ways including a study abroad semester. It may be beneficial to the Honors College if junior year courses or colloquia were developed to enhance community. Many of the students indicated that once they had completed their sophomore year, they “never” saw each other again until graduation, except in passing.

Although employing new terminology, the “Honors Exploratory Research Project” appears to continue a graduate school preparatory model rather than being open to a suitable variety of experiences.

Finally, because the Honors College curriculum is still rather structured, it does not easily allow for transfer students or for students with excellent grade point averages already at The University of Mississippi who, for various reasons, did not apply to the Honors College as incoming freshmen. A Junior Entry option has been developed, however, that can accommodate transfer and continuing students in terms of junior-senior honors curricular options.

C. Students

As noted elsewhere in this report, the SMBHC students with whom we met were truly exceptional. Equally apparent from student comments is the fact that they would not have attended The University of Mississippi if it were not for the SMHBC. Observationally, however, and based on faculty comments as well, there does seem to be a certain homogeneity in the students within the Honors College. The students do not seem, for instance, to reflect the make-up of Mississippi in general. While this is a difficulty in virtually any Honors program/college that we visit, it is a deficiency that needs vigorous attention. Such attention can take many forms. For instance, a more thorough portfolio approach for application to the Honors College might be considered. While the application asks for expected information (test scores, letters of recommendation, etc.), there might be other metrics, such as questions about “first generation college attending status” or some insight into socio-economic status that could be gleaned by zip codes. Essays could ask questions about challenges that the students faced in either attending high school or that they have experienced in anticipating college.

It is also unclear to the visitors to what extent those making admissions decisions consider a variety of factors and what those factors might be in admitting the freshman class.

Another possible avenue for dealing with this lack of diversity might well be a “grow your own” program. Combined with service objectives of the SMBHC, current students might be encouraged to work with K-12 students who are in under-represented groups or who reside in under-served areas (the Delta region, for instance). They could serve as mentors, tutors, and role models as the College, over the long haul, begins to address concerns about a fully diverse student body.

Another aspect of diversity is geographic diversity. One of the Honors Senate members commented about how his in-class encounters with a student from Pennsylvania forced him to think outside his normal frame of reference. To the extent that it is possible to do so, it would be beneficial to use scholarship dollars to attract top honors students from outside Mississippi as well as to keep outstanding Mississippi high school graduates in the state for their university education.

D. Out-of-Class Activities

There has been a spirit of innovation interjected into the Honors efforts at The University of Mississippi. In the process, it is clear that a spirit of community has been built among the students and that these students have developed strong allegiances to the SMBHC and to the university.

The Freshman Ventures program, for instance, is both maximally innovative and highly appealing. While we could not help but wonder about liability issues, apparently so far there have been no seriously negative incidents. The topics covered are motivating. That no more students take advantage of this opportunity than do at present, and that some projects end in failure because not all in the group can be persuaded to commit to the effort, is regrettable—but as one young man maturely stated, “I learned as much from the failure of my group as I would have from the trip itself.”

The idea of a “Make Me Jealous” adventure (formally entitled the Extraordinary Student Award) is equally creative and compelling. One can only wish that more than two students could be accommodated.

We have every expectation that the Dean of the SMBHC will continue to innovate unusual experiences for these students.

E. Residential Colleges

While the visitors understand and appreciate the objectives of the impending, newly devised residential college idea at the university, we retain a commitment to the importance of Honors students perhaps being clustered together in one of the colleges. The justification that they need to leaven the student body as a whole bears consideration, but perhaps more persuasively, many of these students, being often less socially adept as a result of high school experiences, should be allowed to group together in an effort to let them discover that it is acceptable to be academically motivated—to be smart. Finding kindred spirits socially is very important for these students.

Subsequently, the Honors students could perhaps serve as mentors and resident assistant in the residential colleges, thus providing the desirable leaven after they have established

their own social identities and self confidence. Also, honors students are leaven in non-honors classes and in non-honors organizations on campus.

F. Faculty Handbook and Mentoring

The SMBHC has developed a Faculty Handbook to complement the effective Student Handbook. It contains valuable information about the nature of honors courses, SMBHC academic and other requirements, course policies, faculty development workshops, and selection of faculty as well as information about the thesis. Contrary to our 2002 visit, the visiting team heard comments indicating that while there were differences among sections of the same course the students' sentiment is that they learned a great deal regardless of the professor or the approach to the material employed in any particular section. The Faculty Handbook has been strengthened by inclusion of some discourse on the nature of honors classes, as opposed to regular classes, and about the general philosophy of honors education.

The addition of a Faculty Handbook is significant, but we recommend more careful mentoring of the faculty into Honors models and teaching approaches (as conceived nationally) along with putting more emphasis on social interaction among faculty and students in informal settings. This could be achieved with semi-regular Honors faculty meetings, especially among the teachers of the introductory course. This was a strategy recommended to us by those faculty members with whom we had dinner.

Finally, some faculty complained about the process of choosing faculty to offer Honors courses. Our only suggestions are that full transparency in the process of choice be employed and that departments be encouraged to rotate assignments among excellent faculty who are well suited for honors classes in the hope that, with wider participation, even greater "buy-in" by faculty be achieved.

G. Student Handbook

The Student Handbook of 2006, considerably revised since our last visit, is welcoming and student-friendly. It provides an extensive and well-organized fund of information to its students including communication information, requirements, academic regulations, information about the Honors Center, student organizations, and benefits of the SMBHC.

It gives students an excellent overview of expectations of, and what they can expect from, the SMBHC. We especially commend the student pictures and descriptions contained in the rear of the booklet.

H. Recruiting Materials

The recruiting brochures for the SMBHC are well done and include information about outstanding students, the curriculum, benefits, eligibility, and scholarships. Given the mission of the SMBHC to serve students from Mississippi and the surrounding region, a bit of fine tuning for future editions might well be to include profiles of students from outside the state as well as Mississippi residents.

I. Web Page

With the increasing use of the Internet by prospective students, an attractive and easily used web page is important in recruiting. The web page of the Honors College is well designed and continues to appear to be updated on a reasonable basis.

J. Budget Concerns

First of all, and most compellingly, we are completely appreciative of the role that Chancellor Khayat has played in encouraging support from outside sources for the SMBHC at The University of Mississippi. We also appreciate that he understands the enormous benefits that the SMBHC is providing to the university and to the state. We heard enough comments that Honors mostly provided the justification for these excellent local students to remain in-state to commend the chancellor in the directions that he has taken with regard to Honors.

The total budget of the SMBHC is extremely generous, as noted elsewhere in this report. Surprisingly, however, budget strains are noted by department chairs and, as mentioned above, there are still not as many departmental honors sections as we would anticipate at a university of the size of The University of Mississippi.

Given the fact that funding is renewable, but not guaranteed, and despite the past generosity of the donor, Mr. James Barksdale, the visitors worry about the stability and the longevity of the funding for the Honors College. We would encourage every effort being bent toward persuading a very gracious donor to endow a basic fund for assured future functioning of the SMBHC.

In like vein, the investment of the university in this most crucial of programs is minor. We would encourage a rather more serious university investment of resources in the SMBHC in order to insure stability, to evince university commitment, and perhaps most importantly to cover some relatively large gaps in what the SMBHC is able to do. For instance, it is strongly recommended that faculty lines for Honors class coverage be generated, that cooperating departments be more fully compensated for their rather remarkable effort in providing Honors classes (especially the introductory classes, Honors 101 and 102), that funds be made available for additional staff, and that building

expansion be made possible. These seem to be prerequisites for the type of growth that the SMBHC is facing if it wishes to continue its record of excellence.

K. Strains and Uncertainty in Academic Departments

Departments providing faculty to staff sections of the required honors courses report that they are stretched thin, especially in the English Department, and are not able to plan far enough in advance to meet other departmental responsibilities. That the deans also complained rather stridently about the demands that Honors was placing upon their operations is a pretty good indication that the business of providing courses needs to be carefully re-evaluated.

Other universities have a variety of mechanisms to deal with this situation. Some (including Texas Tech and the University of New Mexico) have tenure-track faculty whose “home department” is Honors. At Oklahoma State University, departments with faculty teaching in the team-taught interdisciplinary honors courses receive “full funding” buyout of the faculty with the understanding that this is an ongoing budgetary commitment from The Honors College. In addition, long-term arrangements with some departments for “overflow” honors sections of departmental courses have allowed those departments to hire visiting faculty on three-year appointments instead of having to rely on local adjuncts (who are difficult to find in some disciplines).

L. Honors Faculty and Departmental Responsibilities

In addition to the budget and staffing problems noted by department chairs was the concern some chairs expressed that some of their best faculty were recruited to teach honors classes. The result was that some of their department offerings might be shortchanged. To avoid either overburdening departments or not having enough excellent faculty for honors courses, the SMBHC dean and department chairs should work in close cooperation to staff required honors courses in a way that takes into account both departmental and SMBHC concerns. Early and ongoing communication is essential. The Honors Dean should meet with department chairs at least once a year, perhaps at a lunch meeting.

M. Faculty Stipends for Supervising Honors Theses

The cash stipend to faculty for supervising successfully-completed honors theses, amounting to \$400.00, is both large enough to offer a token of appreciation for their work, but small enough not to engender equity questions on campus.

N. Honors College Staffing

It is worth noting that most professional staff in the Honors College have advanced degrees in the humanities (History and English). The dean is a faculty member in the History Department. If personnel vacancies were to occur in the future, or if additional professional positions were to be added, careful consideration should be given to a wider distribution of academic disciplines that more fully reflect the nature of the student body of the SMBHC.

O. Honors College Councils

It is our observation that the Honors College Council, wisely populated with both faculty and a student member, is playing a larger role in the determination of the policies of the SMBHC. This needs to continue.

The SMBHC Student Senate is a superior idea, and we were struck by the energized and highly motivated young people that we met in that grouping.

P. Role and Expectations of Honors College Dean

To quote from our 2002 report,

Within the national honors community, it is well known that serving as Honors Director soon becomes almost an all-consuming task if one is to be successful with the developing and nurturing of an Honors College or Honors Program and the honors students to be served in the College or Program. It should be understood by all concerned that the position of Honors Director is a full-time commitment that typically requires an 8:00-5:00 office presence (unless the Director is in class or attending administrative meetings) in addition to some evening and weekend commitments. The Honors College is not likely prosper with an “absentee director” who devotes great amounts of time away from his or her office to other academic pursuits, no matter how important. An Honors Director should not expect, nor should there be an expectation of him or her, to be able to pursue an aggressive research or service agenda during the time he or she fills the position of Director.

Although Provost Staton is a strong advocate of term limits, and there are some powerful arguments to be made for change, which is sometimes necessary to bring in fresh ideas and new energy; there are as many strong arguments to be made for longevity. The visiting team can attest to the fact that Honors College Deans and Honors Directors at other more established institutions who remain in their positions for a number of years

have a greater rate of success and national visibility than those whose commitment to Honors is only for a short period. Longevity is important for continuity and community. A Director/Dean must establish close working relationships with students, other faculty, administrators, the community, alumni, and other state, regional and national honors organizations in order to thrive. In addition, he/she must continue to develop curricula, policies, traditions, and many other facets of honors education that take time.

This sentiment, first voiced in our document from our 2002 visit, bears repeating. As Dean Douglas Sullivan-González continues to create and build an exceptionally effective Honors experience for his students, we trust that he will have the temporal latitude to continue these pursuits.

Q. Staff Position Descriptions in SMBHC

Contrary to what we discovered on our last visit, there are now very effective, and to our way of thinking, accurate job descriptions for the various staff and administrative positions in the SMBHC.

R. Professional School Admission

Honors College graduates at Texas Tech University are granted admission to the Medical School without having to take the normally-required standardized test. Honors College graduates at Oklahoma State University receive preferences in terms of admission to the Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine and Veterinary Medicine. As the SMBHC matures, we continue to recommend that similar arrangements be pursued with the professional schools at The University of Mississippi. This is a situation that could be only enhanced by the position of a highly supportive chancellor having ultimate responsibility for both the general academic campus and the medical school in Jackson, Mississippi.

IV. The Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College in the Context of the National Collegiate Honors Council's Basic Characteristics of a Fully-developed Honors Program

A brief analysis of the SMBHC in terms of National Collegiate Honors Council guidelines is provided below. Although it is the largest national organization concerned with honors education, with approximately 800 institutional members, the National Collegiate Honors Council does not serve as a formal accrediting body for Honors Programs or Honors Colleges.

BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF A FULLY-DEVELOPED HONORS PROGRAM

No one model of an honors program can be superimposed on all types of institutions. However, there are characteristics which are common to successful, fully-developed honors programs. Listed below are those characteristics, although not all characteristics are necessary for an honors program to be considered a successful and/or fully-developed honors program.

**** A fully-developed honors program should be carefully set up to accommodate the special needs and abilities of the undergraduate students it is designed to serve. This entails identifying the targeted student population by some clearly articulated set of criteria (e.g., GPA, SAT score, a written essay). A program with open admission needs to spell out expectations for retention in the program and for satisfactory completion of program requirements.***

As was the case in 2002, the SMBHC clearly meets this NCHC characteristic. There is a carefully-devised admissions process for entering freshmen that takes into account standardized test scores, high school academic performance, applicant essays, and recommendations.

There continues to be the option for some students who do not meet the specified minimum criteria to be considered for admission based on apparent potential for success in the Honors College, and—unlike 2002—this option is communicated clearly to prospective students.

A Junior-Entry Program has been designed for transfer students and for continuing students who did not participate in the SMBHC earlier in their academic careers. This new option certainly deserves commendation.

**** The program should have a clear mandate from the institutional administration ideally in the form of a mission statement clearly stating the objectives and responsibilities of the program and defining its place in both the administrative and academic structure of the institution. This mandate or mission statement should be such as to assure the permanence and stability of the program by guaranteeing an adequate budget and by avoiding any tendency to force the program to depend on temporary or spasmodic dedication of particular faculty members or administrators. In other words, the program should be fully institutionalized so as to build thereby a genuine tradition of excellence.***

In 2002 we commented: “There is no clear mandate from the institutional administration in written form, nor are there clear policies and procedures in the Honors College that have received approval from the central administration.” Although the documents provided by the Honors College indicate clearly-thought-out approaches to a variety of

matters within its jurisdiction, there still does not appear to be a comprehensive policies and procedures document that has received the approval of the central administration.

In 2002 we also wrote, “The Honors College budget is a most generous one, thanks to the generosity of the donors for whom the McDonnell-Barksdale Honors College is named.” Thanks to the continued generosity of Mr. Barksdale, the SMBHC remains one of the best funded in the nation. As noted elsewhere in this report, however, if Mr. Barksdale were to decide not to continue to support the Honors College, its state-provided budget would be quite inadequate for a major university.

**** The honors director should report to the chief academic officer of the institution.***

The SMBHC Dean reports to the Provost, so The University of Mississippi meets this criterion.

In 2002 we expressed concern about lack of regular communication between the Provost and the Honors Director. According to both the Provost and the Honors College Dean, communication now is open and frequent in both directions.

We also expressed serious concern in 2002 about the four-year term of the Honors Director, with possible renewal of the term no more than once. We were pleased during the 2007 visit to have heard nothing about such a self-defeating term limit policy.

**** There should be an honors curriculum featuring special courses, seminars, colloquia, and independent study established in harmony with the mission statement and in response to the needs of the program.***

The breadth of honors courses available to honors students at The University of Mississippi has improved significantly since 2002, and with the elimination of the sophomore-level required courses students have greater flexibility in fulfilling Honors College curricular requirements. This increased flexibility addresses one of the concerns we expressed in 2002.

Likewise, the elimination of the requirement of students’ attendance at eight evening events has addressed what was a major student concern in 2002.

In 2002 we reported: “[S]ome students indicated that they believed the required honors classes to have a distinct political agenda. When queried about this perception, the Honors Director’s response was that ‘of course’ this was accurate. She expressed the concern that if students were given choices they might, for example, elect to study European literature rather than the multicultural approach found in the required honors curriculum.” The curricular offerings in the 2006-07 academic year appear to be more

balanced, and the discernable “agenda” of 2002 no longer appears to be a driving force behind the selection of topics or works to be read.

A truly exciting addition to the curriculum is the Freshman Ventures option available to teams of new freshmen to travel to locations across the United States to address various questions. Not only are the questions interesting in and of themselves, but the team-building aspects of the Freshman Ventures option also are of significant value.

Similarly, the sophomore community action component adds another dimension to the education of Honors College students at The University of Mississippi.

The funding made available to students for travel is commendable, and we understand that it is fully compatible with Mr. Barksdale’s wishes to provide opportunities for Honors College students to experience life outside the state of Mississippi.

**** The program requirements themselves should include a substantial portion of the participants’ undergraduate work, usually in the vicinity of 20% to 25% of their total course work and certainly no less than 15%.***

With a requirement of twenty-nine honors credit hours, the Honors College complies with this characteristic.

**** The program should be so formulated that it relates effectively both to all the college work for the degree (e.g., by satisfying general education requirements) and to the area of concentration, departmental specialization, pre-professional or professional training.***

With the increased breadth of honors curricular offerings, the Honors College has addressed many of the concerns we expressed in 2002. As noted above, we encourage consideration of ways to incorporate capstone experiences in academic majors in lieu of a more traditional honors thesis. We also believe that it is imperative to develop and offer more upper-division honors courses as well as to develop better integration of the honors curriculum with all of the colleges and programs on campus.

**** The program should be both visible and highly reputed throughout the institution so that it is perceived as providing standards and models of excellence for students and faculty across the campus.***

As was the case in 2002, the Honors College is reported by almost all concerned to be a vibrant and vital part of The University of Mississippi. A small minority of the faculty with whom we met did seem to have an “old days” approach rather than embracing the strides made by the Honors College in the past five years, but even these faculty had

many positive things to offer in their comments. Students (almost all of whom indicate that they would not have come to the University without the presence of the Honors College) were extremely positive about their academic experiences and their treatment by the staff of the SMBHC. Faculty, deans, the provost, and the chancellor likewise had nothing but praise for the students and staff of the Honors College.

The concerns expressed to us in 2002 about “the perceived rigidity of the curriculum or the procedures in the Honors College” by all accounts have been resolved to the satisfaction of all concerned.

A new concern, however, has arisen because of the rapidly increasing number of Honors College students and the need for more faculty to teach honors classes at a time when general university enrollment has grown dramatically. Some department chairs reported that they were experiencing significant staffing pressures as a result of these changes.

To facilitate discussions about concerns of the department chairs (and some of their deans), it would be helpful if the Dean of SMBHC would schedule a meeting once a semester at a convenient time to allow for a face-to-face “open forum” discussion of issues that either he or the department chairs might wish to raise.

**** Faculty participating in the program should be fully identified with the aims of the program. They should be carefully selected on the basis of exceptional teaching skills and the ability to provide intellectual leadership to able students.***

In 2002, two major points of concern were raised by our conversations with faculty who taught honors classes and students in those classes. The first was that at least some of these faculty believe that the definition of “honors” means “more difficult.” The second related to faculty attitudes as perceived by a number of the students who asserted that some faculty teaching in the core honors courses did not deal well with disagreement or departure from the slant of the required reading (although students from other sections indicated that disagreement or dissent was not discouraged in their sections).

We are pleased to report in 2007 that nothing was communicated to us by any of the students with whom we met that would indicate that either of these problems continue to exist in the SMBHC. On the second point, some students indicated that their professors, although sometimes expressing a definite personal viewpoint in class, encouraged disagreement with their positions and in no way penalized students who expressed opposing views.

It is apparent from the extensive course evaluation data available for our examination that students are extremely positive in their responses to their honors course experiences. The only concern, expressed by the dean, is the participation rate in the evaluation process has declined since it became an on-line electronic process.

Faculty who teach in the freshman course sequence (101/102) reported that the faculty workshop for these courses is extremely valuable, that they appreciated the fact that they work together to determine the texts to be used, and they found the course to be extremely rewarding.

To further strengthen faculty identification with the goals and policies of the Honors College, it would be helpful if the Dean were to host a lunch meeting once a semester for those honors faculty (particularly those not in the introductory course sequence) whose schedules would permit attendance.

**** The program should occupy suitable quarters constituting an honors center with such facilities as an honors library, lounge, reading rooms, personal computers and other appropriate decor.***

With the addition of the space on the top floor that has been vacated by the faculty from the Philosophy and Classics Departments, the Honors College space will become more adequate—although we concur with the dean that an addition to the building to provide additional space will be needed in the not-too-distant future given the growth experienced by the SMBHC.

The computer facilities available to students are exceptional.

The space available in the informal lounge area, while it may have been marginally adequate in the past, is far too limited given the number of students in the Honors College.

**** The director or other administrative officer charged with administering the program should work in close collaboration with a committee or council of faculty members representing the colleges and/or departments served by the program.***

In 2002 we reported: “According to its own members, the Honors Council plays no role in the operations of the Honors College and has no idea of what its role might be. Instead of being a body that provides guidance and insight from and into the larger campus community, this body is essentially useless as presently constituted.”

In 2007, Honors Council members indicated that they meet once a semester and believe the Council to have taken on greater importance. They indicated that the Council had taken the initiative to bring about earlier contact between Honors College students and their honors thesis directors (a step to alleviate the not-uncommon fear of the senior honors thesis that is reported at many institutions and sometimes leads to departure from an honors college before completion of all of its requirements).

Council members also expressed concern about the rapid increase in the number of Honors College students and the resulting stress in terms of faculty teaching assignments as more honors sections are needed. There was some discussion of the possibility of making admission to the SMBHC more restrictive to limit numbers of entering freshmen, although there was at the same time recognition that the College is extremely important to the university in terms of recruiting students who meet its current admission criteria.

As presently constituted, the Honors Council had only one student member. Many institutions have multiple student members on their honors committees or councils to facilitate a diversity of student views and also lessen the possible feeling of “intimidation” that may come from being the only student among a group of faculty.

**** The program should have in place a committee of honors students to serve as liaison with the honors faculty committee or council who must keep them fully informed on the program and elicit their cooperation in evaluation and development. This student group should enjoy as much autonomy as possible conducting the business of the committee in representing the needs and concerns of all honors students to the administration, and it should also be included in governance, serving on the advisory/policy committee as well as constituting the group that governs the student association.***

The SMBHC Student Senate now is engaged in policy matters in the College, as exemplified in the development of an academic integrity proposal to develop a balanced procedure for the handling of allegations of academic dishonesty on the part of honors students. In addition, the Student Senate communicates regularly with the dean, associate dean, and assistant dean of the SMBHC on a range of matters. The Student Senate also is responsible for social events and fundraising activities for charitable organizations.

**** There should be provisions for special academic counseling of honors students by uniquely qualified faculty and/or staff personnel.***

Although upper-level students expressed satisfaction with honors advising, this area may be becoming problematic in the SMBHC with the significant increase in the number of students. There simply is no way that the associate dean and assistant dean can be expected to meet the legitimate honors advising expectations of the growing number of honors students while meeting their other responsibilities. Relying on faculty in various departments is not a substitute for having qualified SMBHC staff to provide honors-centered advising. As noted above, we recommend the addition of at least one full-time honors advisor to the staff of the SMBHC.

**** The honors program, in distinguishing itself from the rest of the institution, serves as a kind of laboratory within which faculty can try things they have always wanted to try but for which they could find no suitable outlet. When such efforts are demonstrated to be successful, they may well become institutionalized thereby raising the general level of education within the college or university for all students. In this connection, the honors curriculum should serve as a prototype for things that can work campus-wide in the future.***

The SMBHC has provided faculty with an opportunity to be creative in their teaching in the 101/102 sequence and in other settings as well. The LIBA 101/102 sequence is said to have been modeled at least in part on the Honors 101/102 sequence. Although we do not yet see evidence that other honors curricular initiatives have been emulated elsewhere on campus, it is worth noting that the Croft Institute incorporates at least some elements similar to those of the Honors College.

**** The fully-developed honors program must be open to continuous and critical review and be prepared to change in order to maintain its distinctive position of offering distinguished education to the best students in the institution.***

The SMBHC has undertaken comprehensive steps to evaluate honors courses, and it has produced brief annual reports that outline its successes as well as its plans for the future. The fact that the 2002 external review team was invited to campus in 2007 to assess progress made in the intervening five years is an indication of the seriousness with which the critical review process is taken.

**** A fully-developed program will emphasize the participatory nature of the honors educational process by adopting such measures as offering opportunities for students to participate in regional and national conferences, honors semesters, international programs, community service, and other types of experiential education.***

With the Freshman Ventures option, community action component, and senior travel experience the SMBHC has embraced the concept of participatory, experiential honors education. In addition, selected honors students have had the opportunity to meet in small groups with world-famous speakers who have come to the campus of The University of Mississippi.

** Fully-developed two-year and four-year honors programs will have articulation agreements by which honors graduates from two-year colleges are accepted into four-year honors programs when they meet previously agreed-upon requirements.*

The SMBHC does not have formal articulation agreements with two-year colleges, but it does have a Junior-Entry Option, based on students' having a 3.50 or higher grade point average, that is open to both transfer and continuing students.

**BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF A FULLY DEVELOPED HONORS COLLEGE
(Approved by the NCHC Executive Committee on June 25, 2005)**

An honors educational experience can occur in a wide variety of institutional settings. When institutions establish an honors college or embark upon a transition from an honors program to an honors college, they face a transformational moment. No one model defines this transformation. Although not all of the following characteristics are necessary to be considered a successful or fully developed honors college, the National Collegiate Honors Council recognizes these as representative:

** A fully developed honors college should incorporate the relevant characteristics of a fully developed honors program.*

As noted above, the SMBHC incorporates most of the Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program. Without a great deal of additional work, it could be in compliance with all of these characteristics within the next academic year.

** A fully developed honors college should exist as an equal collegiate unit within a multi-collegiate university structure.*

As a relatively new college, the SMBHC appears to be perceived as an equal collegiate unit in many ways at The University of Mississippi. As noted above, however, if it were not for the continued generosity of Mr. Barksdale its budget would be quite inadequate—and no doubt the lack of budget would become apparent in its standing with other colleges on campus.

**** The head of a fully developed honors college should be a dean reporting directly to the chief academic officer of the institution and serving as a full member of the Council of Deans, if one exists. The dean should be a full-time, 12-month appointment.***

The SMBHC Dean sits on the appropriate university councils along with the other academic deans, a major improvement from 2002, and has a full-time, 12-month appointment.

It is worthy of note, however, that the level of compensation for the Dean of the SMBHC lags far behind that of any other dean on campus and is substantially lower than the median salary of Honors Deans at doctoral institutions (\$118,132.00) reported in the March 2, 2007, issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

**** The operational and staff budgets of fully developed honors colleges should provide resources at least comparable to other collegiate units of equivalent size.***

The budget of the SMBHC is a generous one, thanks to the continued benevolence of Mr. Barksdale. As we note elsewhere in this report, however, we believe that the professional staff of the Honors College needs to be enhanced by the addition of at least one honors advisor as well as a fiscal affairs manager and that The University of Mississippi should contribute significantly more in support of honors courses.

**** A fully developed honors college should exercise increased coordination and control of departmental honors where the college has emerged out of such a decentralized system.***

The University of Mississippi meets this characteristic in that the SMBHC is fully responsible for all aspects of honors education at the institution.

**** A fully developed honors college should exercise considerable control over honors recruitment and admissions, including the appropriate size of the incoming class. Admission to the honors college should be by separate application.***

The SMBHC complies with this characteristic. As is the case in any university, however, the decision about the size of the incoming freshman class is made in conjunction with the central administration in the context of the overall mission of the institution.

**** An honors college should exercise considerable control over its policies, curriculum, and selection of faculty.***

The SMBHC has the requisite control over its policies and curriculum. Because of the “growing pains” being experienced at The University of Mississippi in general and the Honors College in particular, the Honors College Dean is not always able to secure all of the faculty he believes best-suited to teach honors courses—but this problem is by no means limited to The University of Mississippi.

**** The curriculum of a fully developed honors college should offer significant course opportunities across all four years of study.***

The wide range of honors courses offered, together with the exploratory research project and the senior honors thesis, provide ample opportunities for honors education from the freshman year until graduation for students in many majors, but adjustments are needed to make Honors educational opportunities available to students from all undergraduate majors. As noted above, we recommend consideration of alternatives to the standard research thesis approach as well as the development of more upper-division Honors courses.

**** The curriculum of the fully developed honors college should constitute at least 20% of a student’s degree program. An honors thesis or project should be required.***

The 29 honors credit hour requirement of the SMBHC complies with this characteristic.

**** Where the home university has a significant residential component, the fully developed honors college should offer substantial honors residential opportunities.***

Honors housing is available as an option for approximately 150 freshmen, and it is reported that continuing honors students have been able to arrange to live together (although not necessarily on the honors floors). Although it is not clear how these arrangements will be affected by the university’s decision to move to undergraduate residential colleges in the very near future, we encourage continuation of the honors housing option (but with the clear goal of having both continuing students and new freshmen living together).

**** The distinction awarded by a fully developed honors college should be announced at commencement, noted on the diploma, and featured on the student's final transcript.***

Graduates of the SMBHC are recognized at Commencement with an honors stole as well as on their diplomas and transcripts. In addition, framed group photographs of the graduating classes are prominently displayed in the Honors College building.

**** Like other colleges within the university, a fully developed honors college should be involved in alumni affairs and development and should have an external advisory board.***

In 2003 a task force was created to consider alumni matters. An alumni data base has been developed, and a visiting alumnus series has been instituted. Bylaws for the SMBHC Alumni Club of The University of Mississippi Alumni Association have been adopted.