October 30, 2015

MEMORANDUM

TO: Reed Dasenbrock
   Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs

   Carolyn Stephenson
   Chair, Committee on Academic Policy and Planning

FROM: Vernadette Vicuña Gonzalez
   Ronald Cambra
   Director, Honors Program
   Assistant Vice Chancellor for Undergraduate Education

SUBJECT: Honors Program changes

Over the spring and summer of 2015, the Honors Program conducted a comprehensive internal review to examine the internal coherence of the existing Honors Program and to compare our procedures, structures and curriculum with Honors programs and colleges at peer and benchmark institutions.

Currently, the Honors Program has a two-tier structure (the only one of its kind among our peer and benchmark institutions).

- The Selected Studies Program, for eligible first and second year students, requires students to take any two Honors classes (100-300 level) and any two “A-section” classes (usually General Education courses with sections reserved for Honors students, with approved curriculum enhancements). After completing these requirements and keeping their GPA above a 3.2 minimum, students earn a Sophomore Honors Award (noted in their transcript).

- The Upper Division Program, for eligible juniors and seniors, is built around a traditional Senior Honors Thesis in the student’s major, undertaken with supervision by a faculty mentor and additional committee members. After successful completion, submission and review of the thesis and a GPA above a 3.2 minimum, students graduate with “BA/BA in Discipline with Honors” (noted in transcript and on diploma).
  - Final review of student materials had been conducted by Honors Council (made up of nominated and approved former Honors faculty, faculty who have mentored Honors students, and faculty with past experience with the Honors program). Students were able to receive Honors, High Honors and Highest Honors based on strength of thesis and committee evaluation, GPA and other
supporting materials such as CV, personal statement and presentation materials.

- Several departments across campus have worked with the Honors Program to develop specific articulated Upper Division Honors tracks in their fields to help students plan ahead and allow students to substitute Honors courses for electives in the major and courses in the major to stand in for Honors requirements (if they fulfilled the same purpose).

Students participating in the Selected Studies Program are encouraged to go on to Upper Division. Upper Division students are not required to have completed the Selected Studies program, and at least half of our current Upper Division students come to us without having participated in Selected Studies. The numbers of each program were (and are) very lopsided: Selected Studies has ranged between 600-850 students in the last three years. Upper Division has ranged between 150-200 students.

Leading up to this review, we had encountered several problems that indicated structural problems existed with the current Honors Program. These problems were:

- incidents of confusion amongst students and faculty regarding the Honors Program requirements, applications and transitions
  - students with incomplete applications were often unclear on whether they were a part of the Honors program
  - significant incompletion rate of the Selected Studies requirements over the last four years (which is impossible to address without mandatory advising, which we cannot require due to current student:advisor ratio)
  - student confusion regarding application process to the Upper Division program if they have been in Selected Studies, again contributed to by our inability to offer mandatory advising
  - student confusion regarding transition from Selected Studies to Upper Division, and what requirements may or may not be waived, resulting in some students doing more coursework than necessary in the long run
- a high drop-off rate from Selected Studies enrollments to Upper Division enrollments
- an impression on the part of students that the Honors Program meant more coursework that they did not have room for if they wanted to graduate on time or if they had other demands on their time such as jobs, getting research experience in a lab, studying for graduate exams, study abroad, etc.
- inconsistent enrollments in HON and “A section” courses due to students’ confusion about course requirements

We (the director, educational specialist, faculty advisor and Honors Faculty) have been working with a structure that was in place and attempting to find short-term solutions to the issues. When we conducted our review (composed of a comparison of peer and benchmark programs’ curricula, review processes, and overall program structures, along with an internal
survey and focus group study of our current students funded by a SEED grant), we found the following:

- the current two-tier structure of UHM’s Honors Program was an outlier
  - all other peer and benchmark Honors Programs are four year programs with an option to allow transfer students participation in the junior year (this latter part we already have as the Upper Division program)
  - essentially, the current Selected Studies Program has an exit ramp at the sophomore year that the majority of students take, and many gifted and motivated students do not have a four year Honors experience due to misperceptions or the lack of a non-thesis track

- four year programs were much clearer to understand even from an outsider perspective
  - there was consistency across the board and a clear advising map for both students and advisors to use
  - no additional application processes at the first year and upper division levels

- our thesis review procedure and designations at for the Upper Division Program were redundant and somewhat arbitrary
  - only one other program had another review process for the Honors thesis AFTER the student committee had already determined whether the thesis was deserving of Honors
  - the rest of the programs we surveyed had Honors awarded by the student’s committee, and this award stood if students maintained the minimum required GPA
  - our Honors/High Honors/Highest Honors designations are essentially meaningless outside of UHM
    - most programs awarded a simple “Honors” to students completing requirements

On September 2, 2015, Honors Council discussed and approved the following suggested changes to the Honors Program. The following changes are meant to streamline the program’s procedures and bring its structure in line with its peer and benchmark fellows, as well as to address the structural problems we have encountered. Because these changes are significant, we are requesting both VCAA and Committee on Academic Policy and Planning review and approval.

1. The Honors/High Honors/Highest Honors designations will be replaced by an Honors designation starting Fall 2015.
   a. All graduating Honors candidates with a GPA above the 3.2 minimum and a thesis evaluation from their committee indicating Honors will receive Honors.
   b. The Honors Council will no longer review every single candidate for graduation for Honors. Instead, they will only review cases that are borderline or clear No
Honors (operate as a kind of appeals review committee) and review cases that have been endorsed for an Honors thesis award (operate as an awards committee).

c. This means that the faculty mentor/committee in the field will have a greater voice in the process as befitting the experts in the field

d. It leaves a mechanism in place (the Honors thesis award) to recognize those students who in the past would have received Highest Honors on their Honors thesis without overlapping with Latin Honors (which is purely based on GPA)

e. It also leaves a mechanism for borderline cases to receive further review by Honors council

2. The Honors Program will phase out its Selected Studies (first and second year) Honors program in Fall 2016.

   a. The class entering Selected Studies in the Fall of 2015 and Spring of 2016 will be the last students who are eligible for a Selected Studies Sophomore Honors Award notation on their transcripts. Accordingly, this transcript notation will be phased out with this class.

3. The Honors Program will move to a four-year program, aligning it with its peer and benchmark fellows, and creating a culture where Honors students continue to have Honors experiences throughout their four year undergraduate journey.

4. The Honors Program will develop two four-year tracks: one culminating in a Senior Honors thesis, and a non-thesis track with other types of capstone experiences that will be submitted as a portfolio.

   a. The transcript notation for these tracks were determined at the Honors Program retreat in October, and will likely be: “Four Year Honors Track (Thesis)” and “Four Year Honors Track (Non-Thesis)” similar to MA Plan A and B notations.

5. The existing two-year Upper Division track will remain operational in order to allow for transfer students and other late bloomers to join the Honors Program for the purposes of conducting a Senior Honors thesis or assembling an Honors Portfolio. A portfolio option at the two-year track will also be created.

   a. The transcript notation for Departmental Honors should also be changed (after the Honors retreat discussion) to distinguish between the four-year tracks and the shorter track focused only on the thesis and/or portfolio: “Two Year Honors Track (Thesis) and Two Year Honors Track (Non-Thesis).”

The Honors Program will be working this academic year to lay out the structure of these changes, including curriculum maps, aligning course SLOs with program and institutional learning objectives, working with the STAR system to include Honors, and creating additional courses to add experiential Honors options to our current curriculum. We held a retreat in late October to begin the work on our transition to a four-year program. We are planning to roll out the four-year tracks in time for the Fall of 2016 incoming class.

2425 Campus Road, Sinclair Library, Honolulu, HI 96822.
Phone: (808) 956-8391; Fax: (808) 956-3525; Email: honors@hawaii.edu; Web: http://honors.hawaii.edu

An Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Institution
In the meantime, we note two items that are needed to accommodate our transition for the AY 2015-2016 year:

1. For students entering Selected Studies this academic year, the Sophomore Honors Award transcript notation will remain an option, even if they opt to become part of the four-year track.
   a. Once all the Selected Studies students from AY 2015-2016 have finished their Selected Studies journey, Selected Studies and the Sophomore Honors Award notation will no longer be in effect.

2. From the Fall of 2015 to Summer of 2016, the Upper Division transcript notation will be limited to “BA/BS in Discipline with Honors” (a change from Honors/High Honors/Highest Honors).

In short, the Honors Program is undertaking key changes this academic year that will address existing problems through long-term and structural solutions, and align its overall organization, policies and review process with its peer and benchmark institutions. As Honors becomes a more important offering at UHM and, more generally, at research universities aiming to attract and retain talented undergraduates, it is incumbent to adapt and adopt existing best practices that have been successful in other institutions.

Approved / Disapproved:

____________________________________________

Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs

____________________________________________

Date