PERCEPTIONS OF GRADUATING SENIORS OF THEIR EXPERIENCES IN THE VIRGINIA TECH HONORS PROGRAM

by

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(ABSTRACT)
An ever increasing part of today's higher educational
institution is the implementation of honors programming for
undergraduates. This is a special population of students
whose academic needs are not being met by the rigors of the
traditional educational path. While several studies have
been conducted on these students and their academic progress
within such programs, very little research has been done on
the student's attitudes and perceptions about their
experiences as an honors student during their college
career.

Students graduating with a degree from the Honors
Program at Virginia Tech were interviewed and assessed to
determine their attitudes and perceptions of their
undergraduate experiences at Virginia Tech as an Honors
Program student. Themes from these interviews were
categorized and analyzed for a complete understanding of the
collective experiences of the undergraduate students. A
presentation of the information gathered from the interviews
is the main purpose of the study.

The results of this study should aid educators at
Virginia Tech in better understanding the perceptions and
impressions of honors students about their experiences in the Honors Program at Virginia Tech.
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Institutions of higher education are faced with an unusual group of undergraduate students whose numbers have been increasing every year. More and more students feel that they are no longer challenged by their current academic track, and that it would be beneficial to take part in an institution's academic honors program. These students are so intelligent and advanced that the entire typical secondary educational path is not enough to keep their development at a steady pace. College and universities across the United States have set up honors programs to foster the development of these high level learners.

The term "honors" can carry a variety of meanings. In the broadest sense, honors consists of ways an academic institution attempts to meet the educational needs of its ablest and most highly motivated students (Austin, 1985). Institutions of higher education that provide an honors program have the ability to attract and retain faculty members who are highly committed to the educational mission of the institution (Austin, 1985). In addition, the presence of this type of program attracts students of outstanding academic ability to seek admission to the institution. The specific objectives of honors programs is to "identify the highly motivated student, provide academic
opportunities that challenge the student, establish an environment to foster achievement, and to benefit the academic community by providing an avenue for teaching excellence and the students to take part in it" (Austin, p.7).

Virginia Tech offers this type of educational opportunity to the student body. At Virginia Tech, similar to the views in many other institutions of higher education, the classroom is viewed as a "launching pad for involvement in undergraduate research" (Honors, 1993). Due to the fact that Virginia Tech prides itself in being the state's leading research university, the Honors Program has attracted about 1500 highly academically motivated students. Faculty, staff, and students alike carry a vested interest in providing the best possible atmosphere for learning on the Virginia Tech campus.

The requirements for eligibility for the Virginia Tech Honors Program are rigorous. Entering freshmen must have graduated in the top 10 percent of their graduating class, have a combined SAT score of 1200, with both math and verbal scores above 550 (Honors, 1993). There are a couple of ways in which honors students are able to complete their degree, depending upon which curriculum design suits their academic needs. To graduate with a degree "in honors," the student must complete six hours of honors colloquia, six to nine
hours of independent study/research, a thesis and/or senior project, and any additional departmental or in major requirements (Honors, 1993). The second option in the Honors Program is the Commonwealth Scholar Program, which is for students who are academically eligible for honors courses, but are for some reason unable to complete the requirements for the degree "in honors." The expected highly rigorous undergraduate curriculum is completed, nine hours of designated advanced study, three hours from honors-designated core courses, and six hours from graduate studies or from the colloquia series are necessary to graduate as a Commonwealth Scholar. No matter what route is taken to achieve a degree through the Honors Program, the student benefits in a multitude of ways, both academically and personally.

The benefits of participation in such a program at Virginia Tech is far reaching. The care and concern of the staff and advisors is great. The students' needs are of primary concern to this staff, and every step is taken to ensure the success of the students enrolled in the program (Honors, 1993). Honors students also receive priority in registering for classes, which gives the students a chance to choose more selectively the classes they wish to take, and the ability to have more choice in the professors who are teaching the classes they enroll in. The honors
students also take advantage of a colloquia series of classes taught by outstanding faculty and staff at Virginia Tech. These experiences, along with a summer reading program, opportunities for research, and independent studies, contribute to a comprehensive program dedicated to provide a supportive and academically challenging atmosphere on a campus.

**Research Question**

What overall impressions do graduating seniors hold as a result of participation in Virginia Tech's Honors Program?

**Definition of Terms**

In the context of this study, these terms will carry the following definitions:

**Honors Graduating Senior:** A student who has achieved senior standing at Virginia Tech, and qualifies to graduate with a degree from the Honors Program.

**Honors Program:** An academic program at an institution of higher education that strives: (a) to identify students whose ability and motivation are so high that their academic needs are not adequately met by existing programs; (b) to provide academic opportunities of such caliber that students are challenged to perform at the highest level of excellence possible and become independent learners; (c) to establish an environment that will encourage and foster dignity, self-esteem,
and a sense of their potential; (d) to benefit the academic community by focusing attention on good education and a concept of excellence, giving faculty members the reward of working with gifted students, and attracting to the campus scholars and speakers who would not otherwise be there (Austin, 1985).

**Impression:** A characteristic, trait, or feature resulting from influence; an especially marked influence or effect on feeling sense, or mind.

**Participation:** The effort on the part of the student to actively engage in the completion of the requirements for graduation in Virginia Tech's Honors Program, resulting in graduation in May of 1994.

**Limitations of Study**

Limitations of this study lie in the method with which the data will be gathered. The use of interviewing as the primary means of collecting data carries with it numerous weaknesses. Interview responses will contain some degree of inaccuracy, whether the question be simple or complex. But due to the nature of the information being collected, the use of interviewing as the basic methodology is maintained because it is the most convenient way to obtain the data that is desired and that other techniques for obtaining this type of information are more subject to bias and inaccuracy. Another limitation that is exhibited through this type of
data gathering is the ability of the researcher's attitudes and disposition to influence the nature of the subject and the information being collected. This may include the tendency to generalize data into indiscriminate categories, the presence of the researcher may elicit responses that the subject "thinks" the researcher is looking for, and the presence of or lack of confidentiality and anonymity for the subjects. In qualitative research, subjects are known to the researcher which does not allow for any degree of anonymity. It is important to ensure the subjects with a "high degree of confidentiality." (Berg, 1989)

Qualitative research also relies on validity, both internal and external, and reliability. This implies a level in which the researcher can depend on the data gathered and the implications made to provide the appropriate information for the study. The main item that may threaten the internal validity of the interview style of qualitative research is the instrument or interview protocol being used on the subjects. In terms of external validity, threats include the selection of the group being studied, the effects of the setting for the study, and the constructs within which the study is being conducted (Lincoln, 1985). Reliability can be challenged by carelessness in the act of collecting or assessing the data or by ambiguities in the information gathered or implied by either the subjects or
the researcher. Overall, the use of qualitative interviewing does not provide a perfect and solid foundation for data gathering. An understanding of these downsfalls in the research allow the researcher to make arrangements to ensure a quality body of research.

Because of the small size of the students enrolled in the Honors Program, the sample size of graduating seniors will be very small as well. This type of research is not appropriate for generalizations to other established honors programs; rather, this information will only be directly relevant to the program at Virginia Tech.

As mentioned earlier, a major limitation lies within the bias of the researcher. It is very easy to allow personal attitudes and opinions to taint the results since it is solely up to the researcher to present the data. Attitudes toward the interview process effect the quality of the research at hand (Berg, 1989). It is also very easy for the researcher to lose sight of the main premise of the research; in qualitative research answers to interview questions are neither good or bad, neither true nor false. The researcher is seeking an understanding, not a truth or moral judgement (Bodgan, 1975). It is necessary to be concerned with the personal attitudes and biases of the participants being interviewed; it will be these individual
perspectives that will be the source of the desired information.

Correlated with the personal bias of the researcher is the presence of a loaded interview question. The use of affective words in the questions may arouse an emotional, many times negative, response in the person being interviewed (Berg, 1989). It is important to neutralize the sense of the question by reducing its effect in order to gain a full and uninhibited answer. Another downfall in questioning is the use of the double-barreled question. This is a common situation in which the interviewer asks the participant to answer to two issues within the same question (Berg, 1989). It is essential that the interviewer recognize these and separate the two issues into two different questions, thus ensuring two answers.

Significance of Study

Due to the increasing number of students participating in honors programs in higher education, it is necessary to identify and address situations that the students will collectively encounter. Previous research portrays well-adjusted students with low rates of difficulty in the years they are enrolled. Very few studies have been conducted on the opinions and feelings of these students during these years. It is known what paths the graduates choose to take after completion of the program, but insight is not given as
how participating in the Honors Program has affected these decisions.

Organization of Study

The content of this study is organized into chapters, each pertaining to one area of the study. This chapter introduced the topic, discussed its importance, and explained why it is being studied. Chapter two presents information gathered from existing literature that will provide the background for the study. The third chapter explains the methodology that is used in order to gather the data; namely the interview method of qualitative research. The fourth and fifth chapters explain the results and what conclusions have been arrived at from the gathered data.
CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

The literature on honors programs across the United States is not very extensive. Due to the fact that honors programs in institutions is a very new addition to higher education, not much has been done in the way of research. A review of the current literature on honors programs, a profile of the students participating in such programs, information about reported student satisfaction, will be reviewed in this literature review to provide a comprehensive view of honors education and the population it serves.

Honors education consists of the total means by which a college or university seeks to meet the educational needs of its most highly motivated students (Austin, 1986). As Halverson writes, an honors program is "simply a planned set of arrangements to serve the needs of talented students more adequately than if the matter were left entirely to the initiative of interested persons." (Austin, p.6). Colleges and universities that embody honors education often have a common mission to provide an enriched curriculum, a stimulating learning environment, and a greater academic challenge to the self-motivated student who meets the requirements for a honors program (Harvey, 1986). To fully
understand the quality and importance of honors education in today's higher education, it is necessary to explore the history, basic premises and models, and implications involved in honors programming.

**History**

The history of honors education reaches as far back as the Socratic dialogue, the Oxford tutorial, the German seminar, and the guild apprenticeship, which today serve as models for current honor programs (Austin, 1986). The first known existence of honors in higher education was instigated by Frank Aydelotte at Swarthmore College in 1922. The initial incentive for honors set the pace for future honors programming, setting the premise for very individualized and institution-specific honors education. Common to any honors education program are certain educational and institutional objectives that pose as guidelines for effective implementation at any institution of higher education. The Halverson report published in 1973 supposes educational objectives to be (a) to identify students whose ability and motivation are so high that their academic needs would not be met adequately by existing programs; (b) to provide academic opportunities of such caliber that the students thus identified are challenged to perform at the highest level of excellence of which they are capable and through which they may become independent learners; (c) to establish
an environment that will encourage the aspirations of and
the achievements by these students and that will foster in
them dignity, self-esteem, and a sense of their potential;
and (d) to derive from the program benefits for the wider
academic community, such as focusing attention on quality
education and a concept of excellence, giving faculty
members the psychic reward that derives from working with
gifted students, and attracting to the campus scholars and
speakers who would not otherwise by there (Austin, 1986).
The institutional objectives that may exist also provide a
base for solid and an effective education. Honors programs
tend to attract students of high quality and motivation to
the campus. Second, the program can help recruit faculty
members whose commitments lie in quality education. Honors
programs also may bring in funding and grants that normally
do not reach the institution, by promoting research and
projects not normally conducted on the campus. Most of all,
the presence of an honors program will enhance the public
opinion and image of the institution as a whole. In all,
honors programming provided a multitude of educational and
institutional opportunities for students and faculty alike
dedicated to higher learning.

Premises and Models

There exist many different types of curriculum styles
in honors today. No matter how many ways the programs
differ, all are dedicated to a high degree of student-faculty involvement and challenging and rigorous academic experiences (Austin, 1986). At many institutions the honors courses have low enrollment numbers and classes are taught by specially chosen faculty. Many programs include a final independent research project that may end in a senior level thesis or oral examination. The typical honors program can be categorized into one of two types of curricula - general and departmental honors.

The general honors program offers alternatives to the regular curriculum course. The information presented in the classroom is explored with more depth, the sections are taught by more long-esteemed faculty members within the department who take a seminar approach to conveying the knowledge. Open discussion is highly promoted rather than the lecture type of learning that is normally implemented in a college classroom. An alternative form of honors education is the departmental type of honors program. Most times this takes the form of an independent study with a faculty member as a preparatory experience for graduate study. This project usually culminates into a senior level thesis or project that is approved by a committee made up of departmental faculty. Another form of honors education that is not seen as frequently in higher education is the honors contract. This type of learning allows students to build
their own plan of study or curricula to be approved by a faculty committee. The facets of the contract will complete the requirements for degree as well as allow different types of interdisciplinary experiences to take place (Austin, 1986). Honors education can take on many forms, including independent studies, special classes, colloquia series, or specific freshman or senior level courses.

Most honors programs encourage the students to complete part of their credit requirements ahead of time, mostly achieved through credit by examination or Advanced Placement credit from high school, or through CLEP (College-Level Examination Program), or other similar accelerated learning programs (Austin, 1986). By completing core requirements ahead of time, the student has the time to take advantage of the multitude of special seminars and programs that may be available for honors students at the institution.

Profile of Students

An issue that is of concern of any higher education administrator, especially those involved in honors education, is the ability to effectively assess the talent of honors students (Jenkins-Friedman, 1986). Considering the labor-intensive nature of any honors program, it is essential that the students to whom the opportunities are offered are the kind of students who will be able to gain the maximum benefit from the programming. Fundamental to
the creation of an effective honors program is the policies for admission and the reasoning behind the decision process. It is important to consider the purpose of admission, the weighing of information collected in the admission process (i.e. test scores, interviews) and the grouping of these data into psychometric (standardized test scores), behavioral (extracurricular activities or work experiences), or developmental (recommendations or personal essays), and consideration of talent characteristics, whether they be intellectual or creative. Along with these decisions on admissions policies and procedures have been established it is necessary to define the honors student.

Renzulli (1978) proposed a model of giftedness based on judgements of highly motivated students as seen by their peers. This proposed model of giftedness is behavioral in the sense that these individuals were judged on the basis of tangible accomplishments, and also prosocial in that the students were recognized for work that bettered society as a whole or advanced their field of study (Jenkins-Friedman, 1986). Renzulli also pointed out that this giftedness is a correlate of above-average intellectual ability, creativity, and task commitment within the individual (Jenkins-Friedman, 1986). There exists a substantial amount of research posing that grades and standardized test scores do not aptly measure a student's ability. But coupled with a measure or
acknowledgement of creativity suggests a direct relationship between creativity and intellectual ability. The important factor of task commitment completes the picture of the highly motivated individual.

Task commitment can be defined as the "ability to immerse [themselves] in a specific problem or general area for an extended period of time" (Jenkins-Friedman, p.35). It has been proven that intrinsic motivation and the capacity for hard work are necessary factors for superior accomplishments in any individual or setting. The presence of high self-commitment, enthusiasm for the task, determination, and self-initiative also play a significant and important role in characteristic of task commitment. An understanding of these intellectual and personal attributes effectively define the honors student.

Understanding these facets of honors education will not be effective unless an understanding exists about the students partaking in this type of educational experience. Women comprise about half the honors population in the country today, while blacks and members of other racial and ethnic minorities join honor programs in disproportionately small numbers despite aggressive recruiting efforts at many institutions of higher learning. Recognizing this type of demographic outlay is key to the understanding of how and why a program reaches the students who are enrolled, as well
as information about those students who, for a multitude of reasons, do not choose to take part in the experience.

There exists many theories as to why certain students do not take an interest in this type of learning. Some theorists posit that the students' possess an inability to meet the steep requirements of the standardized examinations that many institutions use as a basis for admissions to honors programs (Harvey, 1986). Feelings of inadequacy could also be a contributing factor to the low numbers of minority interest. Whether these barriers be self-imposed or institutionally-based, there is a need to rectify the situations that allow these barriers to exist for any student.

Recent trends in higher education have led to the development of more rigorous requirements in core curriculum and more learning opportunities that deviate from the educational norm, promoting the effectiveness of an honors style curricula. Along with the necessity to define the categories of honors education, the students in honors programs, and the initiatives and requirements to partake in honors education, it is necessary to explore the different curriculum designs that prevail in current honors educational programming.

**Curriculum Design**

One opportunity afforded to undergraduate honors
students that is not easily found in the traditional classroom setting is the appearance of team teaching. Even though honors courses, and typical higher education courses in general, are usually taught by one professor, honors education often employs a pair or team of professors to complement or debate on the same course topic. The main benefit of team teaching is that the work load on the professors is shared, the students are exposed to different perspectives on the same topics, and a broader range of expertise is brought into the classroom (Gabelnick, 1986).

The most popular and widely used model of honors courses is the interdisciplinary seminar, or colloquia course. These seminars may address social, political, psychological, scientific, or literary issues. Many times the professors recruited to teach the course are given some degree of freedom in choosing the topic they want to discuss. These are usually small discussion groups that include both written and oral presentations. This is an excellent way to teach students about a variety of topics within the same context, examine them in great detail, and many times engage in active debate about the different positions taken by fellow classmates (Gabelnick, 1986). In this type of course, the emphasis is not only on the material being covered, but also on the development of
discussion skills, critical reasoning, and the basic techniques of research (Gabelnick, 1986).

Another idea in curriculum design is a course or group of core courses that represent a body of information about specific categories of knowledge such as the humanities, behavioral sciences, or physical sciences. The main emphasis in this type of course is to present major texts that represent the best theories, thinking, or ideologies within the field, and give the students a solid base for future thought and research. Usually this is implemented within the student's major course of study, providing a foundation in the basics before the student continues on the program. As a contrast, upper-level honors seminars assume that the students already possess some level of knowledge about the subject, thus providing more of a specific focus on the information, giving more breadth than depth to the level of understanding (Gabelnick, 1986). The main premise of upper-level seminars is known as higher-order reasoning. Students have the chance to acquire these skills, which include synthesizing information to reach and support individual conclusions and form different perspectives. All of this is generated usually through one main piece of research worked on throughout the whole semester, which provides the students with the chance to work on something similar to graduate work.
The majority of honors courses offered in honors programs are special versions of disciplinary courses (Gabelnick, 1986). Two of the most common types of courses in honors are accelerated classes and special sections. Accelerated classes are frequently seen in mathematics and language departments and are open to students with special capabilities in these areas. Usually the material is covered at a faster rate and additional projects or research are required as part of the course. Special sections are enriched courses that introduce the student to introductory philosophical and methodological issues within that discipline and usually require additional papers or oral debate (Gabelnick, 1986). Either type of course offers a viable alternative for the student who is looking for something more challenging and exhibits the qualities necessary to enroll in the course.

The honors curriculum model, or one defined as such, incorporates a number of educational, instructional, and behavioral approaches to undergraduate academic development. The issue here is the diversity of presentation methods, of approach, and of academic context within which the information is presented. Honors course offer this diversity to those students who desire the challenge to develop individual perspectives, theories, and a greater understanding of higher level learning.
One study examining the participation in an honors program and the effect it has had on the academic performance of first year students was conducted by Pflaum, Pascarella, and Duby in 1985. This particular study reflected back to the research done by Astin and his work involving the development of college students. Astin pointed out that students participating in honors programs made significant gains in interpersonal self-esteem, intellectual self-esteem, and artistic interests (Pflaum, Pascarella, & Duby, 1985). These same students were found to be more likely to complete their academic pursuits in college and go on to professional and graduate studies. Overall, the student that enrolls in an honors program has the tendency to follow a more academic track than the traditional college student.

This particular study focused on the first-year college students participating in the Honors College at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). The honors program was developed "to enrich the academic opportunities for its students. The programming emphasizes faculty-student contacts and a stimulating student-peer environment." (Pflaum et al., p.415) The programs in the Honors College focused in faculty-student contact as well as contact with peers of a similar standing. Especially targeting the first-year students, programs through the Honors College included
special, sequential, general education courses with small enrollments limited to Honors College students (Pflaum et. al, 1985). The students had several choices of sequences to choose from to complete this requirement of the honors program, selecting from four quarters in either mathematics or chemistry, from two or three quarters in English, one quarter in social sciences, higher levels of economics or three quarters of English and history revolving around a common theme (Pflaum et. al, 1985).

The structure of the class system of enrollment provided for a great deal of student-faculty interaction in the classroom. In many courses, students were expected to meet with the professor or faculty member outside of regular class hours. Students also had the opportunity for faculty interaction with the assignment of an Honors College Fellow, a professor who worked as a guide and a mentor for the student's years at the institution. All of these provisions ensured a substantial amount of faculty interaction over that of the other freshmen in general.

The Honors College also provided a number of ways to encourage and promote peer interaction. The program offered several facilities for the students to use, including a study room, a computer laboratory, and a social gathering area where students often used between classes and on the weekends. Lunches with peers and faculty were also arranged.
as another way of involving all sides of the college in the Honors College experience. All of these factors were implemented to ensure a positive and developmentally solid experience for the students.

The study provided a number of conclusions about the students who participated in the program, as well as some information about their experience. Overall, the study showed that participation in the honors program had a positive influence of the academic achievement of these first year students. The endless possibilities for peer and faculty interaction provided by the Honors College allowed the students to create an environment for learning that they felt comfortable with and prospered under (Pflaum et al., 1985). A comprehensive view of the study shows the importance of social interaction with peers as well as active engagement of faculty in the academic success of students.

Another piece of relevant research involves the post-baccalaureate plans of students upon completion of an advanced study program. Malaney and Isaac investigated whether outstanding undergraduates were indeed planning to pursue advanced degrees, and whether they were planning to do so immediately after receiving their degrees (Malaney & Isaac, 1988). The study defined students in terms of excellent grades, as well as students participating in an
undergraduate honors program. Honors students were included as a category for a number of reasons. Honors students were "typically involved in advanced educational pursuits, such as more demanding coursework and research" (Malaney & Isaac, 1988).

As a basis for their study, the researchers reviewed Baird and his work with students plans, undergraduate grades, and gender. Baird's research brought out some interesting trends. At each level of grading, men were more likely than women to continue their education in graduate school. Keeping this point in mind, Malaney and Isaac coded the results in terms of gender and honors classification, and undergraduate grade-point average. The work in this study supported previous research in showing a gender difference in post-baccalaureate decisions. The men in this study were twice as likely as women to continue their academic pursuits (Malaney & Isaac, 1988). This study also showed that as hypothesized, honors students were more likely to have established post-graduation academic plans than non-honors students, with the students with the highest level of grade-point average in the honors program immediately pursuing further education. While this study replicated some of the information provided from the Baird study, this study does provide information about the decisions of honors students, especially in terms of gender.
This information can be very helpful to honors program administrators as to the areas in need of attention with their students.
CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to use interviews to describe the impressions of graduating seniors upon completion of the Virginia Tech Honors Program. The data gathered provided educators and administrators in the honors program information useful to understanding the feelings and impressions of the students. This data may lead to developments within the Honors program at Virginia Tech. The data collected from the personal interviews showed what areas the students felt most strongly about, or about what experiences in their Honors education stood out for them either in a positive or negative manner.

The main purpose of this study was to obtain from students their own reports of their impressions of their participation in the Honors Program at Virginia Tech. The type of interviewing style that leaves the student as free as possible to speak from his/her own way of perceiving the Honors Program was implemented.

Design of Study

To collect and define the data that was received from the students graduating from the program, it was necessary to design an interview protocol that supported both the students views and the researchers ability to reflect
effectively the issues brought up by the students. Interviewing was usually defined as a conversation with a purpose. More specifically, the purpose referred to was to gather information (Berg, 1989). The researcher was looking for an understanding of the subjects through open-ended interviewing to yield descriptive data that enabled the researcher to see the situation as the subjects see it (Bogdan, 1975). The assumption here was that the interviewer did not know ahead of time that all of the necessary questions or categories were (Berg, 1989).

By conducting the interviews in an as open-ended manner as possible, the researcher avoided "dictating the structure of a student's thought by the structure of the questions" (Perry, p.7). It also carried the premise that not all of the students questioned will find equal meaning or understanding in the same questions. The researcher needed to leave the students as free as possible to talk in their own manner, in their own ways of perceiving the situation, and in their own ways of viewing the experiences (Perry, p.7). The style of interviewing as described by Perry (1970) allowed the student to review their experience as they recount it in interviews at the beginning of the Spring Semester, 1994. Of course, not each student recalled these experiences in the same order, manner, or setting. However, for this type of study, the researcher was able to
make the assumption that it was possible to identify a dominant form or tendency in which the students were recalling their experiences (Perry, 1970). The interview was set up to be unstructured to avoid dictating the structure of the student's answers through the structure of the researcher's questions. An anticipated outcome of this type of interviewing was the feeling that the researcher can detect "behind the individuality of the reports a common sequence of challenges to which each student addressed in his/her own way" (Perry, p.8).

**Interview Protocol**

It was helpful to derive a specific interview format for this study rather than adopting a previously established set of questions to ensure that the interview was applicable and relevant for the students at Virginia Tech. Most times single interviews do not provide generalizable information. In addition, this particular interview format had not been used specifically in a similar situation before, thus no previous data about the trustworthiness and reliability was available.

**Sampling**

The population of interest in this study was graduating seniors who have applied to graduate with a degree in Honors from the Honors Program at Virginia Tech. These students had been accepted into the program on the basis of their
cumulative grade point averages and their standardized achievement scores. More specific to this study, the students who had applied for graduation in May of 1994, had been enrolled in the Honors Program, and will have completed all of the requirements for a degree in Honors or as a degree recipient as a Commonwealth Scholar, were the ones to take part in the interviews. No specific additional academic or extracurricular requirements were asked of the participants; the students need only have been enrolled in the Honors Program and have applied for graduation in the Spring of 1994.

**Procedures**

Implementing the proper order for conducting the research was essential to providing quality information. In this case, every step from the development of the interview style, to the actual interviews with graduating seniors in the Honors Program needed to be described to get a more accurate picture of the study to be conducted.

**Permission**

The first step in developing this study was establishing permission from the administrators in the Honors Program at Virginia Tech. This communication with administrators was helpful in learning more about the students to be studied, along with finding out the program criteria for admission and curriculum options. Once this
approval had been received, the next step was to obtain permission from the Department of Human Subjects Research for approval to conduct the research on the Virginia Tech campus. A submission of an abstract along with detailed information regarding the interviews to take place was necessary to gain approval.

**Contact**

Once the list of students was obtained, a short letter with information about the research, what the nature of the study was, how they were chosen, and what the interview entails was mailed out to 40 qualifying students around January 14, 1994. The letter was mailed to the students' school address, due to the time frame within which the mailing fell; the students were returning from the holiday break around January 15, 1994. This ensured that the students were aware of the study, as well as prepared for the upcoming appointment for an interview. Approximately a week after the students receive the information regarding the interview, the researcher attempted to contact the chosen students by telephone to answer any questions and concerns the students had, as well as set up a convenient interview time.

**Interviewing**

The interviews were scheduled for one-hour time intervals, leaving time for discussion of the interview
format itself along with any questions the students had about the study. The actual interview was very informal in nature. The ability to receive candid information from the students was very important to the trustworthiness of the study. Each student received an outline of the interview, along with names of professionals involved in the study in case future questions arose. The name of the student were not connected with the specific answers given, but the name of the student was documented to keep accurate records of who was spoken with at what interview time in case of any necessary follow-up contact.

All of this information was conveyed to the student along with their copy of the interview process. It was also important to welcome the student, recall the topic of interest to the student, and at this time it was appropriate to ask permission to record the interview.

**Interview Question**

Perry's style of interviewing was premised on asking one main question, followed by prompts if necessary. For the purposes of this study, the lead question was as follows:

*Please describe what stands out for you about being a student in the Honors Program?*

It was important to note the use of "stands out" in the body of the question. The use of this phrase implies a
structure, or a background from which to work (Perry, 1970). This interview question connoted a feeling of genuine interest in what the student had to say, rather than an interest in the student answering the researcher's questions; the student was allowed to choose what "questions" to answer. An answer to this question came in a variety of forms, and predicting and preparing for these answers allowed the researcher to react and prompt as necessary without losing the original intent of the first question. The variety in the ways in which the student expressed perceptions may suggest to the researcher that the students were speaking for themselves rather than for the nature of the study. Preparing for a generic and nonspecific statement, the researcher employed smaller questions that may be used as a prompt for the student. The terms "thinking of" and "come to mind" worked the same as "describe" in the original statement. These key phrases provided the minimum amount of structure necessary to keep the focus on track (Perry, 1970). The students were speaking honestly according to their "own perspectives, their own interpretations, rationalizations, fabrications, prejudices, and exaggerations."(Bogdan, p.11) This "truth" that emerged was not only one view, but rather it exhibited a picture that was a composite of all views, perceptions, and interpretations of what the students thought about the
program and the institution (Bogdan, 1975).

The second question asked of the students in the interview was intended to reveal information on what the students might suggest to maintain, change or revise about the program as it currently operates. The second question was stated as:

"What experiences have you had that lead you to any recommendations for the Director of the Honors Program to enable him to better serve the students in the program?"

This question was added to the interview protocol in order for the students to have the opportunity to give their ideas back to the program, and give the type of feedback that could most effectively help the student currently working towards a degree from the program.

**Tape Recording**

The use of a tape recorder during the interview was a very effective tool for gathering information. Some of its advantages included freeing up the interviewer to concentrate on the interview conversation rather than the focus being on note-taking, alleviated missing information due to lack of memory or understanding, and provided a check-up for later data gathering and processing. Tape recorders were very useful in research that employed long, open-ended interviews (Bodgan, 1975). For this particular
qualitative study, the purpose of the tape recording was explained to the students being interviewed and they were assured of confidentiality.

Note Taking

Each interview provided information specific for each individual; this information was an essential part of the study as a whole. Upon completion of each interview session, it was necessary for the interviewer to write down any and all information, impressions, or perceptions from the interview that was just conducted. This information was just as important to the study as the information gathered during the actual interview time. About one half-hour was allowed between each interview session in order for this information to be recalled and written down. Participant observation, both systematic and analytical, depended upon the recording of complete and accurate notes about each student. In essence, these notes were considered as potentially as important as every other piece of data gathered during the interview process (Bogdan, 1975).

Transcripts

Once several interviews had completed, it was time for the researcher to go back, listen to the recordings made at each interview, and transcribe the information given during the interview. It was very important that the interview be conducted in a clear, concise manner so that the tape
recording were clear and easily understood. Complete transcriptions of both the dialogue of the student and of the interviewer were important so that the context within the information was given was understood. This conciseness also ensured complete and reliable information that was presented in the findings section of the study.

Data Collection and Results

Once the interviews had been completed, the next step was to sort through all of the gathered data and begin to compile the results. If the researcher found any incomplete or confusing answers, this was the time to contact the students by telephone to clear up any confusion with their answers. The use of a tape recorder as well as writing down information alleviated this problem for the researcher. The information given was reviewed carefully to ensure that the information supports any conclusions that the researcher made.

Data Analysis

Data analysis consisted of examining, tabulating, or combining evidence gathered through the initial interviews of the study (Yin, 1989). In the area of qualitative research, it was helpful to define the analytic strategy to be used to sort through the data. Specific to this study, an explanation building analytic strategy proved to be very effective in drawing conclusions. The information gathered
from the students in the Honors Program at Virginia Tech
provided a base for future study.

Due to the small sample size, it was effective to first
look at each student independently, then report information
from the answers as a whole. Each student provided similar
information in the interview, but reviewing the information
within an individual context delivered a more relevant and
personal point of view. An understanding of the information
as it was presented was essential for an understanding of
the interviews as they progressed. As the data was gathered
through the interviews, it was up to the researcher to go
back, review these findings, identify certain categories or
areas of information that the students repeatedly brought
up, and understand what areas the information fell into.
This comparative thematic style of analysis allowed the
researcher to explore the data from the students in a way
that allowed the students' perceptions to form the themes
reviewed by the researcher. Not all students answered the
interview question with the same information, topics, areas
of study, or experiences; on the other hand certain
experiences or topics fell into identifiable areas of the
student's experience in the Honors Program at Virginia Tech.
Plotting this information as it came along was important for
a number of reasons; mainly it helped the researcher
decipher all of the data and its importance to the study, as
well as provided the time to devote to a complete understanding of each student's experience.

**Presentation of Findings**

Once all of the interviews of the graduating seniors had been completed, it was time to review the information as a whole and present the data in a manner that was helpful to the Honors Program and the readers in general. This presentation of findings represented a "culmination of the research process." (Bogdan, p.142) These findings were a descriptive presentation of the data that had been collected and reviewed through the qualitative process of interviewing. It was important to be able to identify that information that was key to the study; the researcher presented the data in terms of one or more themes, concepts, or areas of interest to the understanding of the students and their experiences in the Honors Program at Virginia Tech.
CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

Participants

The 28 students interviewed as part of this project were students graduating with an undergraduate degree in May of 1994 (see Appendix B). Over half of the students talked with were male, mostly in the scientific fields, with a majority in biology and psychology. A large number of the students referred to the change in administration of the Honors Program, and how the different directors of the program approached the students and the program in different ways, and how this positively as well as negatively affected their experiences. On the whole, the students cited the new director and the changes made in the program as an extremely positive move for the program. Over three-quarters of the students participating in the study have plans for graduate or professional school, with a large number in doctorate degree-seeking programs to start immediately after graduation. Many of the majors at Virginia Tech were greatly underrepresented, especially the liberal arts majors and most of the engineering degrees. Several students shared that when they entered the engineering program, the plans of study did not allow for many additional classes beyond the required course load, so taking part in something such as the Honors Program was not a feasible option at the
beginning for many students at Virginia Tech. There have been large changes in the engineering program and how the inclusion of receiving a degree from the Honors Program is now being promoted. The students referred to these changes as helpful in achieving this degree in honors, even with these changes made during their time as an undergraduate, and how it has tremendously increased the number of engineering students in the program. Several of the students mentioned that the Honors Program and the options that it offered were a draw to Virginia Tech, especially since this was not their first choice of an undergraduate institution. The ability to join such a program, as well as a chance to use their high number of Advanced Placement credits provided for an academic experience that the students felt would challenge them to the degree they were seeking.

**Interviews**

The interviews conducted on students graduating in May of 1994 with a degree from the Honors Program at Virginia Tech proved to be very interesting and intriguing. The students talked with were an exciting and dynamic group of students, very willing to express their views and talk about their experiences candidly and constructively. A majority of the students showed an appreciation for the chance to talk about their college experience and to have someone
there to listen to their suggestions. The interviews were conducted in the Prairie Community Office in Payne Hall, in a private conference room. The atmosphere was relaxed and friendly, and many times the interviews ran over the allotted time because of the comfortable nature and attitude of the students. Most students expressed satisfaction with the interview format, and enjoyed the ability to talk about those topics of direct relevance to their experience, and were very interested in finding out what their colleagues have to say as well.

The interviews went very smoothly with almost no need for additional prompts or probing questions. Only two times did the student express some dissatisfaction with the interview style, and in both cases a little more explanation of how and why the interview was formed helped them better answer the question in their own way. The group of students in the Honors Program was very open, full of information and ideas, and excited to take greater role in the continued growth of the program.

**Interview Process**

The interviews were conducted throughout the month of February, and once that portion of the research concluded, a complete transcript was made of each interview session. Upon completion of the transcripts, each interview was reviewed for the formation of possible implication
categories that occurred in what the students had to say, thus producing the categories of information reported in what the students talked about for both questions in the interview. The first question asked was stated as "Please describe what stands out for you about being a student in the Honors Program?" This question allowed the students to talk about those topics relevant to their experience as an honors student at Virginia Tech, while the second question, presented as "What experiences have you had that lead you to any recommendations for the Director of the Honors Program to enable him to better serve the students in the program?" gave the students an opportunity to express their ideas and recommendations for the Honors Program itself.
When reviewing the actual process of the interviews, it is clear that the style had both positive and negative points. The opportunity to talk on an individual basis with the students was crucial for a full understanding of how they view their experiences and how they express them. A survey or questionnaire would not provide the same quality or quantity of personally relevant information that the interviews provided. A majority of the students expressed satisfaction with the interview format over a questionnaire because they felt as if their own ideas and concerns mattered more than just filling in answers to specific questions.

A shortcoming of this type of interview and questioning was receiving value-laden information from the students about their experiences in the program. While this type of information was helpful and important, it was somewhat difficult to decipher the events and experiences that related to the program as a whole, or if they were just specific to a particular participant. It was important to acquire information that was specific to each person, but this type of information gathering was not necessarily the most accurate in terms of relating to overall information regarding the program.
Discussion of Results for Question One

The first and main question asked of the students during the interview was designed to probe them about their experience as an honors student, and for them to describe what has stood out for them about this experience. The students reviewed their experiences in a "brainstorming" type fashion during the interview, talking about topics as they came to mind. For this question, as well as the second question, the students did not show any degree of gender-specific answering. The answers given by the students were sometimes specifically pertain to their major or area of study, but it was not significant to report gender bias or specific answers to either question. The fact that a strong majority of the students spoken with were male, this point could provide an avenue for future research of experiences in student programs as it pertains to gender. The information given was categorized into four relatively distinct areas, creating a picture of an academic career of research, personal attention by their department and the honors program, taking part in exceptional learning opportunities, and impressive plans for the future.

Personal Attention in Major and in Honors

An overwhelming majority of the students participating in the study mentioned the level of personal attention as a key factor in their success in the Honors Program. The
students felt like being a part of the Honors Program was a chance to stand out from the rest of the student body at Virginia Tech. This level of recognition influenced other parts of their experience at Virginia Tech, reaching into areas of employment, whether it be working as a Resident Advisor or getting involved in departmental work, as well as proving to be valuable when applying to graduate school or jobs. The level of personal attention that the students received also played a role in their level of self motivation. They cited the level of support in the program as a driving force to put in the extra effort to stand out and succeed at a higher level than those students around them.

A point that the student always felt like a person, rather than just a number, was extremely positive and increased their level of commitment to their education. The opportunity to be recognized by name and known for what research they were working on was a refreshing change to the lack of personal recognition received in other areas of the institution. The constant contact through newsletters and meetings by the Honors Program also contributed to their feelings of personal attention. This type of contact provided the students that were interviewed with a level of awareness about the options open to them, as well as information about the program.
Only a few students mentioned that they felt left out of the process of the program and were displeased with the level of attention they received from the professionals connected with the Honors Program. Many of the students attributed their lack of recognition to the fact that they too had not made the effort to become known and involved in the department. Consequently a clear understanding of the exact cause of this dissatisfaction was not explored further.

Undergraduate Research

The opportunity to be involved in undergraduate research was cited as the most important reason to become involved in the Honors Program by almost all of the students that participated in the study. There existed several reasons why this research improved their academic experience at Virginia Tech, including increased faculty contact and recognition, increased receptiveness by their major departments, and the opportunities for future education and research. Connected with the research was the completion of a senior project or thesis related to their research. Many of the students shared how this project was a chance to write an article about their research, to be published in an accredited journal in their field, as well as to fulfill requirements counted toward graduation. The publishing opportunity held a multitude of benefits, namely increased
qualifications for entrance to a graduate program of their choice, as well as the chance to gain recognition for a high quality of research.

Some examples of the student initiated and faculty sponsored research included: one psychology student worked on identifying what made a "good" Tetris computer game player as distinguished from the typical game player; other students worked on such topics as purifying a protein, independent studies in neuropsychology (an emphasis not even offered at Virginia Tech), working on designing a computer program that acts as a coach for rowers on rowing machines in terms of reflective points on the body and feedback on form, position, and ability, research in restoration ecology, research in genetics; and two psychology students were involved in a faculty research team researching eating patterns of women as affected by media images and patterned responses after viewing the material.

Not all the experiences of students engaged in research projects were positive. For some, there was not enough time to complete the research they started, and this inability to complete the research was looked upon negatively by some students. The students' perception was that they were not as competitive on the applications for graduate programs in their field. This occurred for many students because of the starting date for their research, and the time frame in
which they could complete it. In addition, some of the students did not have plans for the future in the field they were receiving their degree, so working on extensive research such as this was not as profitable as it was for some students.

**Future Plans and Scholarships**

All but two of the students interviewed as part of this research have plans for graduate or professional school. Most of these students intended to pursue a doctorate degree. With a strong emphasis placed on the career track of those students who were currently pre-law and pre-med by the Honors Program, the numbers of students already accepted into a medical or law school was extremely high. For many of the students, it was a matter of choice as to which graduate or professional school they were going to attend; most of the students were already accepted into several graduate school programs.

Considering the high levels of academic achievement of the students in the Honors Program, it was interesting to note that several of the students either applied for or received high-ranking national scholarships, such as the Marshall, Rhodes, NSF, and Goldwater Scholarships. For many of the students, obtaining one of these scholarships would immensely increase their chances of acceptance into graduate school or receiving funding for graduate research. On the
whole, the students were at a standstill in the planning of their futures; the students were waiting on acceptance or rejection letters from graduate schools, as well as waiting to hear from the national scholarship committees.

For those two students interviewed that did not have immediate plans for graduate or professional school, they expressed a desire to enter the work force and gain some hands-on experience to complement their academic experience at Virginia Tech. Both students had taken part in the cooperative education program, and held attractive job offers from those companies they had worked for while completing their undergraduate degrees. Both students mentioned that they did not feel the same degree of encouragement from the Honors Program to go on to work as it existed for those students going on to continue their education. One student mentioned that "there needs to be more preparation for industrial work" with an emphasis that "is similar to the emphasis put on graduate and professional school." This desire for additional support and reassurance of a career choice was coupled with a suggestion of "including engineering background in the staff" of the Honors Program, so that the large number of students in engineering would have a better understanding of their opportunities through the Honors Program.
The other student that expressed dissatisfaction with the help they received from the program was also an engineer who participated in the Cooperative Education program at Virginia Tech. This student did not feel any real "connection" with the program, and felt that in "computer engineering it is difficult to do a lot of research." Basically, the student felt as if "computer engineering and honors are not compatible, especially if you are interested in co-oping." These students did express an interest in going to graduate school in the future, but for now they saw their continuing education as something that was going to take place in a work setting rather than a classroom.

**Colloquia and Honors Classes**

Depending upon the path the student was taking in the Honors Program, whether it be to graduate "In Honors" or as a "Commonwealth Scholar," it was an integral part of their academic experience to take part in one, if not several, colloquia or honors classes. An overwhelming majority of the students mentioned these courses as one of the stronger arguments to participate in the Honors Program. The students cited several characteristics of the classes that made them stand out from the typical academic course at Virginia Tech, and it was these characteristics that provided the exceptional experience that the students regarded so highly.
The format of most of the colloquia courses was one of a seminar style, with less lecture and more class discussion. The students mentioned that this allowed for greater freedom in their learning; in fact, they felt like they had the chance to learn what they "wanted" to learn, rather than just to learn for a test or paper. This type of class setup also allowed for more independent thinking, and this style of thinking was encouraged both in class and in the papers or tests the students had to take. The professors were cited as more open to new ideas within the context of the course subject matter and in the ways the students expressed what they had gained from the course.

The style of grading adopted by most of the professors in colloquia courses was also cited as a major benefit of the courses taken. Most of the professors looked upon the students in a different way, creating an atmosphere where the grades were not as emphasized as much as the learning acquired through the course experience. Students felt like their work was being graded similar to the work done in a graduate level course; the professors graded on a scale more conducive to learning rather than always trying to achieve an A.

One student interviewed did express an extreme dissatisfaction with the colloquia classes she had taken, and failed to see any value in the experiences. She did
express an opinion that her experience was not the norm; her fellow honors students did not ever mention to her any similar experiences in the courses they had taken. Both of her colloquia classes were taught by professors with a different approach than the rest of the colloquium professors, with a strong emphasis on the traditional type of classroom learning, and in actuality her overall QCA suffered because of her enrollment in these courses. But on the whole, the addition of colloquia courses to the undergraduate curriculum was seen as a valuable asset for both the students and their exposure to new ways of teaching and learning, as well as for the professors who had the opportunity to teach the courses.

Discussion of Results for Question Two

This second question asked the students to discuss what type of recommendations they might make to the director of the Honors Program as related to their experience in the program and at Virginia Tech as an honors student. This question in the interview seemed to give the students the greatest opportunity to express themselves. The enthusiasm of the students about the chance to give suggestions and ideas to the Honors Program was very high. Many of them mentioned that rarely do departments ask for feedback on the experience they are providing for the students, and the chance to do so was appreciated. The reactions to this
question could be divided into three categories of response, each providing relevant information regarding current trends within the program, possible areas of change, and new ideas that the students recommended.

**Program Elements to Keep the Same**

There are many aspects of the Honors Program that the students immediately identified as positive and immensely important to the success of its students. The amount of information the students had access to in regards to scholarships, graduate schools, and other post-graduation areas of interest was identified as one of the best assets of the program. Most students felt as if they would not have been exposed to this information if they had relied on their major departments alone. The Honors Program made this information and literature easily accessible, and promoted its use to the students. The two primary ways the students received information about office resources and other important pieces of information were through the newsletters sent to them and through the large meetings held in Smythe 146 by the Honors Program. These meetings kept the students informed at a very basic level, and gave them a degree of awareness above that of the traditional Virginia Tech student.
Another point identified by a majority of the students was the amount of personal attention and involvement they received from the staff of the Honors Program. Both Dr. Dudley and Barbara Cowles were identified as strong sources of attention and encouragement for the students on almost any topic and on all levels. The secretary was also mentioned by everyone as the person who always had the time to work with the students, knew where to find the answers to questions or problems, took the time and effort to help with final drafts of applications or papers, and usually recognized the students by name. This level of personal attention was identified by the students as an enhancement to their overall Virginia Tech experience, especially since at a university of this size and complexity, it is rare to be known as a person with individual needs. The Honors Program and its staff were identified as taking the time necessary to create this level of personal attention with the students.

This level of personal attention extended into the recruiting process for students into the program. The students taking part in the interview process expressed a great desire for the Honors Program to continue its level of effort in recruiting students, as well as work on getting current students more involved in the process as well.
Another point identified by the students as contributing to their satisfaction with the Honors Program was the inclusion of the priority registration system. The opportunity to register for and confirm classes ahead of time was incredibly important to the students. The main reason for its use by the students in the Honors Program was for choosing those professors the students were truly interested in, rather than just taking those classes that could be fit into their schedule. This ability to have more control over their classes was identified by a majority of the students as crucial to their success in completing their academic requirements as well as their research.

Overall, the students reiterated the need for the level of personal attention to be maintained, the amount and frequency of information distribution and accessibility to the students, and the maintenance of the smaller amenities afforded honors students such as priority registration.

**Program Elements in Need of Change or Modification**

Even though the students mentioned several areas of the Honors Program that seemed to work well as they stand, they did express some concern over some areas of the program that they felt needed some level of improvement or greater attention. The students acknowledged the fact that the program cannot be perfect to all students in all areas, but a multitude of them addressed some areas that they felt
would benefit from additional scrutiny.

Most of the students referred to the broad term of accessibility as an area in need of review and improvement. Under this term falls several ideas that the students mentioned such as lack of awareness of resources, lack of involvement with the other honors students, and general accessibility of the program and the people involved with it. This information does run contradictory to what was reported as a positive of the program, in the sense that a majority of the students referred to the personal attention they received as one of the major positives of the program. Throughout the interviews it became evident that even though the students felt like they received attention not available from other departments, they had to find this attention, and do a great deal to maintain this relationship. The Honors Program is not seen as a driving force in keeping this level of connection intact.

Part of this lack of accessibility is the little to no interaction between fellow honors students. Almost all of the students participating in the study mentioned that more involvement with other students would strengthen the allegiance to the program as well as create new friendships among students with common goals. More information and specific ideas can be seen in the next section which offers recommendations by the students for the director of the
Honors Program. Connected with this notion of accessibility is the amount and degree of promotion of the Honors Program to second- and third-year students. These students may still have time to complete the requirements for graduation, but information about the program does not seem to reach them in time. This is something that several students felt would bring more students into the Honors Program and that everyone would benefit. Especially in an academic time period in which few students finish in four years, it might be an additional incentive to stay on and work on a degree if more personal reward was involved. Overall, students currently in the Honors Program felt as if their academic experience would have been enhanced if there could have been more student contact and involvement, as well as helping the Honors Program identify new ways to promote the program to other students, and get them involved in the program at many different levels.

Another area that the students interviewed mentioned as a possible area of expansion was in the area of academics, specifically concerning the research requirement, the honors classes and colloquia, and the professors involved in the teaching of the classes as well as the work with the students doing research. In terms of the students' research, the seniors felt as if the guidelines to fulfill the research requirement had been a little unclear,
especially in terms of reasonable start and finish dates to ensure graduation on time. Several of the students suggested setting up "model" timelines for completion of the research requirement at a steady, non-threatening pace so that more students would take advantage of the opportunity to do undergraduate research rather than being intimidated by it. A suggestion was made for the Honors Program to work more closely with the departments and professors involved with students doing research, to set up these kind of guidelines, and make them more public and accessible.

On the whole the students were very satisfied with their experiences in honors and colloquia classes, but after their experiences they were left with several suggestions for the Honors Program. The students felt as if there was a possibility to expand the amount of classes offered, then there would be greater chance of enhanced learning, rather than just fulfilling a requirement. The students were not even sure something like this is possible, but wanted the program to know that the interest was out there and would be well received. It was also mentioned that the program might do a review of the grading that takes place in the colloquia classes. A great level of inconsistency was viewed by the students, and this caused a level of anxiety about what classes to take; the students' concern lies in the idea that this type of class should offer an alternative to the usual
class grading, but for many professors, it was graded in much of the same manner as a traditional class.

In regards to the professors connected to the Honors Program, whether it be through teaching or research, the students mentioned a few areas that might benefit from some review. The students felt as if the professors came from just a few departments, rather than crossing into a majority of the disciplines offered at Virginia Tech. They viewed the colloquia classes as an opportunity to "expand" their knowledge, and would be interested in seeing professors and classes from more little known departments and specialty areas.

One of the major points made by the students in regards to an area in need of attention is in the aspect of advising. They expressed interest in some sort of formal advising system. Several students regarded the formation of this type of system as crucial to the success of the students in the Honors Program, to offer advise regarding graduation requirements, research, or getting help for graduate school, or job placement. The help to this point has been seen as invaluable, and to ensure all the students have the opportunity to use it, more formal advising requirements on the part of both the students and the professionals in the program was seen as a step toward more consistency in the program. This type of advising system
would include some type of one-on-one meetings on a semi-
regular basis, to help keep the students informed of their
progress in fulfilling requirements, as well as connect the
students more and create a greater sense of belonging and
allegiance to the program. All of these points were
mentioned by students as something they were interested in
and would have desired from the program during their
undergraduate career.

Lastly, the students referred to the attitude held by
the Honors Program towards the students, in several
respects, as something they felt a little uncomfortable
with. Many students felt as if the current career paths,
whether they be academic or job-related, of previous honors
students were glorified and emulated. While it is helpful
to know what paths other honors students had taken, the
current honors students felt as if their current
accomplishments at Virginia Tech should be acknowledged.
Also they felt a lack of permission to be proud to stay on
at Virginia Tech for graduate school. Instead the students
who went on to "bigger and better" schools or professions
were shown as the successful ones; the students mentioned a
desire for a greater sense of achievement for what they have
already done, not just for what they are going on to do.

Looking at this sense of elitism, many of the students
would like to see colloquia classes open to the rest of the
students at Virginia Tech. To ensure that the honors students have the opportunity to sign up for the colloquia classes first, no other students should be allowed to sign up until the honors students have. Then if there are still open seats in the class, many of the honors students felt as if these spaces should be opened up to others, especially lower level students who might be interested in the Honors Program. By only allowing honors students into these classes, the students felt as if a sense of elitism is created, something that is disliked by a majority of the students talked with.

**Recommendations**

The last area of discussion that pertains to question two has to do with new ideas and recommendations that the students had for the Honors Program, whether they be expansions on current practices, or totally new projects or ideas that involved both the students and the professionals in the program. The students offered ideas almost too numerous to mention, but after careful review, the information can be summarized into (a) greater feelings of connectedness, (b) classes and research, and (c) miscellaneous ideas.

Improving the level of student involvement in the Honors Program focused on two general areas for action - how the current students can work together with the program to
create a greater sense of cohesiveness, and how the students can help with and be more involved in the recruitment and maintenance of the honors student body. Connected with the student suggestions for a greater sense of awareness and allegiance with the program, they offered a large number of new ideas on how this feeling could be strengthened. Group gatherings like beginning and end-of-the-year socials, roommate fairs, and planned football tailgates were ideas mentioned by a majority of the students talked with, as well as space in Hillcrest for more informal gatherings for the students, whether they be planned or not. On the whole, the desire for a sense of belonging, and how the students might take an active role in it, was something regarded highly by almost all of the students.

In addition to these ideas on how the students could spend more time together was the desire for the students to be more involved in recruiting potential honors students, as well as make it a smoother transition for new students into the program. A suggestion made by quite a few of the students was to create some type of program where students visiting Virginia Tech with their families might be paired up with a current, upperclass honors student. The purpose of this would be to help show them around campus, orientate them to the Honors Program from the student's perspective, and provide some type of overnight, on-campus housing for
the student, so that they would have the opportunity to experience as much of Virginia Tech, from the honors student perspective, as possible.

Along with this initial "buddy system" is the idea that students could work as "student advisors" to the first and second year students, or for the students just getting involved in the Honors Program. This program would be used as a complement to the already existent advising done by the professionals in the program, and would be able to offer the student a hands-on perspective on the classes, professors, and research requirements and how to fulfill them successfully. This passing of knowledge was something several of the students said they would have been more than happy to take part in, and in fact feel like they would have benefitted from themselves. As well as acting as an "advisor" to the students, the students advised that a handbook about the Honors Program, put together by the students in the Honors Program, would benefit not only those students just starting the program, but those students who are interested but are not fully aware of what is offered. This handbook would be along the same ideas and guidelines as the handbook already made by honors students for medical schools. These are just a few of the ideas that the students mentioned as possible additions to the Honors Program that the students could do to provide a better
picture of what it means to be an honors student at Virginia Tech.

In regards to the suggestions made about classes, plans of study, and the research aspect of being an honors student, the honors students mentioned several of ideas that would act as an addition to existing practices, or enhance the current program in some way. This information can be divided into the areas of advising, colloquia and honors classes, and research. Even though some of these ideas and topics have been mentioned in other themes in the research, it is helpful to review them within this area of context.
Connected with the already stated view on more formal advising and cohesion with the Honors Program is the idea that the students would like to feel a greater understanding from their departments about what it means for them to be an honors student. So one possible new recommendation for the Honors Program was to create a stronger bond or sense of relations with the different disciplines at Virginia Tech, especially in those areas where the larger number of honors students were concentrated. This might be left up to the advisors, especially if they could get a feel from their advisees what areas or programs are in need of this type of information. An addition idea generated by several students was the notion of interim progress reports prepared by the student's advisor, and used as a gauge of progress and successful completion of requirements for the program. Knowing that the registrar is in charge of such information for graduation from the university, the students felt like there was an extra need on the part of the honors students for some type of additional check points and information that would keep them on target for graduation with a degree from the Honors Program. Lastly, in connection with an interim progress report was presented the idea of more formal requirements for plans of study. Some students mentioned that they had filled out such a plan, and found it to be very helpful in planning their academic path.
while at Virginia Tech. But this opportunity was not used by all students; the students interviewed felt as if all students would benefit from this type of formal, concrete scheduling and that its implementation would be crucial.

In the area of classes connected with the Honors Program, whether they be the colloquia or general honors, the students suggested that a larger number and variety of classes be made as accessible as possible. Taking into account budget cuts and departmental funding, the students promoted expanding the whole honors course system, and allowing other students to fill in the additional space as open in each class. In addition to increasing the numbers, the honors students referred to the possible positive consequences of having syllabus material available ahead of time, some type of general ideas and concepts as provided by the professors to be kept on file, so that when planning their courses the students would be able to fill in with those classes they were truly interested in, rather than just taking those colloquia courses that fit into their schedule at the time. Making provisions for this type of planning ahead would make it easier for the honors student to create a fuller picture of their academic experience as well as gain the knowledge that the work they are doing is going to carry them to graduation.
In the area of research, the students were very satisfied with how the Honors Program encouraged and helped with the research aspect of the program. The only point mentioned by a majority of the students was the notion of more promotion of the Honors Program, especially the research aspect, and the work that the students do to the departments. Included in this idea is the suggestion that the Honors Program and the major department work together to get the students started on their research in their junior year, so that students are able to get all of the work done and have the time to write the thesis before graduation in their senior year. To be able to do this level of work with the departments, the students felt as if there needs to be more understanding of the need for the students to do the research, for both graduation and for graduate school, and for departments and the Honors Program to strengthen their ties.

The last area of information that the students talked about is not specific to one particular area, rather the students have provided some miscellaneous yet valuable ideas for the Honors Program to consider. A main concern expressed by several students had to do with the intense focus on graduate and professional schools on the part of the Honors Program staff. Those students who did not plan on continuing their education after graduation felt left out
of the advising and support system that the program offered to those students planning on graduate school. On the whole, students felt as if the Honors Program would benefit if it took on a more practical, more job-oriented focus. Not to say that graduate school bound students should be neglected; rather they suggested working on some type of balance with some professionals in the program specifically named as the advisors for graduate schooling and specific advisors to help those students getting into the job market.

The other suggestion made by several students was for the Honors Program to offer, maybe in conjunction with Counseling Services, leadership and motivation seminars to honors students. The students felt as if they would benefit from this type of programming targeted at a smaller group of students with common academic and career paths and goals. These skills would benefit everyone, and especially help in bringing the honors students together more, and aid in building the sense of community and cohesiveness desired by a majority of the students interviewed.

The interview process was not without its faults; since this was the first time such an interview style was implemented, it was essential to look at the areas in need of improvement. To make the research more comprehensive, the inclusion of focus groups along with the individual interviews would provide a more complete body of information.
from the students. These focus groups would allow the students a time to talk about their perceptions of their experiences in the Honors Program with other honors students, providing a backdrop for future discussion and elaboration of points made during the groups.

Another point to make about the interview process is the recognition that it may not be necessary to interview every student who is graduating. As the interviews are conducted, it is relatively easy to decipher the different themes as they emerge, and where the information provided by the student might fall in these categories. During the research, it became evident that a saturation point was reached about halfway through the scheduled interviews. The students in the Honors Program had such similar experiences that similar and correlated information was provided by a majority of the students. It is valuable for the researcher to progressively process the data during the research process, identify when this saturation point in the data has been reached, and conclude the interviews at this point and begin correlating the information given.

**Personal Observations**

This type of research has provided a much richer picture of the honors students at Virginia Tech. This is a dynamic and animated group of students who have taken advantage of the opportunity to do undergraduate research,
be involved in their departments, take on extra classes in addition to the core curriculum classes, as well as be involved in student groups, honor societies, work as resident advisors and work-study students, and yet still had the desire and the time to talk about the whole experience. In addition, these students have impressive futures planned for themselves, such as attending graduate, law, or medical school, or seeking employment in their respective fields. The extremely friendly and open disposition of a majority of the students showed that these were not students just focused on their academic development, but rather it proved that these were students who have received an education both inside and outside the classroom and have become well-rounded individuals with a great deal to offer their field or discipline.

On the whole, the students in the Honors Program offered a great deal of insight into the program itself and the students who take part in it. The type of student drawn to the Honors Program is portrayed as a highly self-motivated, academically and research driven individual with a desire to be known at a large institution as a person, whose needs have been identified and met through the Honors Program or the other students in it. To a large degree, this has occurred for many of the students interviewed. But to consider that not all of the students have reached this
goal, they were more than helpful in offering suggestions to the Honors Program about ways to maintain, modify, or create aspects and programs that would not only benefit the students at Virginia Tech, but would enhance the overall experience in the program as well.
SUMMARY

To understand the components of each theme or category that evolved through the interviews conducted on graduating seniors in the Honors Program it is helpful to condense the information collected. To provide a comprehensive picture of an honors student, the experience they have taken part in at Virginia Tech, and how they have seen and received this experience, it is essential to summarize as follows:

PERSONAL ATTENTION IN MAJOR AND IN HONORS PROGRAM

* A chance to stand out from the rest of the students at Virginia Tech
  -Opportunity to be more involved, worked as RAs, work studies, and research assistants
  -Nice addition to graduate school and job applications
* Program staff are highly motivating and encouraging
  -Promotes self motivation while providing helpful levels of encouragement
* Levels of personal contact
  -Honors Program staff always treated the student like a person with individual needs
* Newsletters and meetings
  -Overall positive feedback on frequency and content of the newsletters
  -Meetings were viewed as helpful and met the students' needs accordingly

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH

* Cited as the number one reason to take part in the Honors Program
* Increased faculty contact and receptiveness to students within major departments
* Opportunity to write a thesis
  -Preparation for graduate level work
  -Possible opportunities for publishing research
* Some students cited timeline not effective enough for most students to complete the research in time for graduation
* Some students did not plan to continue in the same field—in these cases the research was not seen as imperative

**FUTURE PLANS AND SCHOLARSHIPS**

* Majority of students expressed an interest in graduate school to the doctorate level
* Most emphasis placed on the pre-med and pre-law students
* Many students qualified and applied for Rhodes, Marshall, Goldwater, and NSF scholarships

**COLLOQUIA AND HONORS CLASSES**

* The format of the classes cited as the most positive aspect
  - more like a graduate level class
  - allowed for more personal learning styles and promoted individual thinking and work
* Wide range of classes offered
* Enjoyed the level and types of classwork
  - opportunity to express own views within a class setting
  - provided a change from the typical lecture class
* Grading style
  - students received more individual attention for their work
* Only one student cited a bad experience with colloquia classes taken

**PROGRAM ASPECTS TO KEEP THE SAME**

* Amount and frequency of information available to students
  - literature on scholarships and academic opportunities
* Quality and frequency of newsletters and meetings
* Maintain degree and quality of personal attention
  - high degree of time and effort on the part of the staff
-provided an enhancement to the overall Virginia Tech experience
-level of interest and enthusiasm in recruiting new students
* Inclusion of research requirement for graduation
* Opportunity for priority registration

PROGRAM ASPECTS IN NEED OF CHANGE OR MODIFICATION

* Level of accessibility
- increase level of awareness of others about the program
- increase level of involvement of current honors students
- more publicity to the campus and upperclass students

* Academics
- research needs clearer guidelines and timelines for completion
- classes need more consistency in grading and evaluation
- more consistency in choosing of professors for colloquia classes

* Addition of more formal advising system

* Attitude towards students
- need to lessen the feeling of elitism
- greater understanding of levels of student motivation and discipline

RECOMMENDATIONS

* Greater feeling of cohesiveness and connection between the students
- socials, more planned group interaction
- lounge areas for students to spend time together

* Recruiting or buddy system
- visiting students stay overnight on-campus with a current honors student
- provision of upperclass student "advisors"
- handbook for Honors Program made by the students

* Classes, research and plans of study
- installation of formal advising system
- interim progress reports
- more promotion of research in major departments

* More practical focus on student needs and goals
* More job oriented advising and information
CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusions

The Honors Program has provided a program of academically accelerated and motivated students who are looking for additional challenges academically that can complement their experience at Virginia Tech. Most institutions of higher education offer such programs to their undergraduate population, combining undergraduate research, dynamic faculty teaching accelerated courses, and the chance to accent their degree with opportunities that may promote them in graduate school or the workforce. The students at Virginia Tech proved to be a group of graduating seniors with high expectations for themselves, both academically and in life experiences, who regard their education highly, and have the intelligence, drive, and desire to make their time at Virginia Tech a productive and rewarding one.

Defining what it means to be an honors student can be a most difficult task. To be an honors student means attempting to diversify the academic experience and personalize their education. This can take on a number of forms and methods: doing undergraduate research in genetics, psychology, or engineering mechanisms, taking colloquia or honors classes taught by faculty much in the manner of a graduate level course with the chance to speak
candidly about their opinions and views, or working on an independent study and writing a final paper or thesis with the possibility of getting it published. No matter what the honors students at Virginia Tech has done to make their experience so specialized, the students have had the opportunity to explore and express themselves in their field in a challenging way.

Profile of Programs and Students

The students graduating in May of 1994 with a degree from the Honors Program were the participants in this study. Approximately 40 students were contacted to take part in the research. Interviews were conducted in one hour time intervals, while the students were asked two questions relevant to their experience in the Honors Program. This was an opportunity to talk openly and personally about their views and experiences at Virginia Tech as an honors student, as well as provide valuable information for the study and the Honors Program itself.

The main focus of this research was to answer the question "What overall impressions do graduating seniors hold as a result of participation in Virginia Tech's Honors Program?" This question was approached by the interview questions, and was answered in a number of ways by the students. This question holds significance for a number of reasons, not only reserved for the Honors Program at
Virginia Tech. Due to the increasing numbers of similar programs, this type of research may provide direction for future studies, once the importance of what the students think and perceive is discovered. So much is known about what students do after they graduate from a program, but little is known about what they "experienced" while attending. This type of information can be crucial to the effectiveness of a program and how they meet the needs of their students.

Not much information is available in the current literature about honors programs. This type of student service has research that provides a picture of what type of student takes part in such a program, and what this participation may mean for future accomplishments. A report by Halverson in 1973 outlined some expectancies for honors programs in order for them to competitively provide for their students. Mentioned in the report are the ability to identify those students at the institution who could benefit from such a program, provide opportunities in addition to the curriculum that could enhance the student's experience, encourage an environment that fosters this level of learning, and include a focus from the faculty that promotes the students and their expanded motivation for learning. Through this research it is evident that the Honors Program at Virginia Tech has been able to provide these expectancies
for the students who desired an enhanced academic experience.

The Honors Program also offers courses and plans of study similar to the basic and reported models of honors education. The colloquia and honors classes fall into the typical honors education seen at other institutions. The exposure and requirement for undergraduate research is a focal point in any honors model, and at Virginia Tech this part of the program is stressed and greatly promoted with the students. In fact, this is reported as the number one reason to be a student in the Honors Program. The students who wish to take part in any honors program of study represent a type of student with the interest and motivation to go beyond the traditional requirements of an undergraduate degree, and this research has shown the program at Virginia Tech has been able to offer this type of education to its students.

The students at Virginia Tech who have taken part in the Honors Program fit into the reported profile of an honors or gifted student in higher education. The students strive for the labor-intensive nature of the program, and are interested in participating in this high level of learning. Similar to many curriculum designs, the Virginia Tech program provides an emphasis on individual learning through seminar style courses and independent research
topics chosen by the students. Much of the current research has focused on what the students have done with these acquired skills, not on what the students thought about the whole process and experience. The research done at Virginia Tech on the graduating seniors in the Honors Program provides a complement to the existing research on honors students by providing information on what the students perceived about their experiences as an honors student, as well as ideas and suggestions for the program itself.

Research

The information gathered in the interviews conducted with graduating seniors gave educators and administrators useful information regarding the experiences, needs, interests, and suggestions of the students who have participated in the program. The students provided insightful and interesting information that can be made specifically relevant to the program at Virginia Tech as well as generalized to honors programs at other institutions.

The first question asked of the students in the interview was stated as: "Please describe what stands out for you about being a student in the Honors Program?" This open-ended question allowed the student to talk about those topics that they felt described their experience the most clearly. A majority of the students referred to the same
topics, areas of study, or categories, which was evident as the interviews continued. The interviews were tape recorded in addition to the researcher taking notes during the time the students talked, and upon completion of the interviews complete transcripts were made of each interview to provide a comprehensive picture of the perceptions of each student.

Data Analysis

As each interview was reviewed independently, it became evident that several themes or categories of information emerged. As the students repeatedly referred to these areas or topics, it became evident that a comparative thematic style of analysis provided the necessary form of analysis for this project. The information gathered in each individual interview provided a complete and comprehensive understanding of the experiences of students in the Honors Program at Virginia Tech as perceived by the students currently graduating from the program.

Implications from the Research

A careful review of the results of the interviews showed that the students reviewed their experiences in the first question in four themes or categories: personal attention in their major and in the Honors Program, undergraduate research, future plans and scholarships, and colloquia and honors classes. The students cited a high level of personal attention from the administrators and
staff of the Honors Program, something that they felt students miss out on in other departments at such a large university. The students also mentioned that, in their major departments, being designated as an honors student made a difference in the attention and research interest on the part of the professors and staff. The opportunity to do undergraduate research was seen as the number one reason to take part in the Honors Program. The chance to do this level of work was highly regarded, especially by those students intending on going to graduate or professional school; the experience with this level of research gave the students the competitive edge necessary to gain entrance to some of the most competitive programs in the United States. This opportunity also afforded some of the students the chance to publish their work in scientific and research journals.

Having had these opportunities, the students in the Honors Program proved to be a highly impressive group of students with lofty, yet attainable, goals. A majority of the students already had been accepted into competitive graduate or professional programs, many with the ability to continue working on their research. A few students had chosen to seek employment in their field, especially those students who had taken part in the cooperative education program or internships and had competitive job opportunities
because of this experience.

The classes taken, whether they were the colloquia or honors classes, were enjoyed and respected as part of the program requirement. The students talked about the ability to take a seminar type class where they were able to take an active role in the topic of the class, take part in a learning situation that stressed critical and individual thinking, and allowed the students to gauge and measure their own achievement. They mentioned that these courses should be open to the rest of the student body, regardless of whether they are honors students or not. They felt as if every student could benefit from such a learning opportunity.

The information formed four broad yet comprehensive themes that covered the experiences of the students as they perceived them. These themes can be useful as a resource for the Honors Program to better provide a program that the students find helpful and additive to their academic experience at Virginia Tech.

The second question asked of the students in the interview was stated as: "What experiences have you had that lead you to any recommendations for the Director of the Honors Program to enable him to better serve the students in the program?" This question provided the students an opportunity to share their ideas, concerns, and suggestions.
about the program, the requirements for graduation, and the components of the student's experience. The question was answered with three categories or themes of information: program elements to remain the same, program elements in need of change or modification, and recommendations. These themes provide the Honors Program with informative and constructive ideas as to what the students want or need in an honors program at Virginia Tech.

The students were highly complementary of the Honors Program and many of its facilities. A majority of the students cited the large meetings, newsletters, and personal attention to the work the students did as the main things that should remain the same. The amount and quality of interaction with the administration in the program and in their respective departments was seen as commendable, and the students felt as if the program met their needs very well. The priority registration was also mentioned by a majority of the students as a positive and much liked advantage over the regular way of registering for classes. This gave them an opportunity to set up a schedule conducive for research hours and classes with professors of interest.

The students also talked about a few policies or areas of the program that are in need of revision or changes. Many of the students felt as if information and resources for the students was not accessible enough, and that they
miss out on a number of scholarship and academic opportunities. A large number of the students also mentioned a desire for greater personal attention, especially in the area of plans of study and job placement. They felt as if the program could benefit from increased publicity on campus, hopefully reaching more upperclass students who might be interested in taking part in the program. The largest and most emphasized modification was the recommendation for the inclusion of a formal advising system for the honors students. They felt as if upperclass students, along with the administrative staff, could provide helpful information and guides to completing the program and its requirements effectively. This idea was mentioned by almost every student interviewed.
Lastly, the students took the opportunity to offer many new ideas and suggestions for the program. Once again the notion of a formal advising system was mentioned as a new idea, as well as a revision, to the current program. The students also mentioned an interest in putting together a handbook for the entering students, with bits of helpful information that the upperclass students could share, especially in the areas of research and plans of study. The students also stressed the need for more student interaction within the program, with lectures or socials as a way to get the students together more. They also wanted a role in orienting visiting students to the campus and student life by installing a buddy system where visiting students might be able to stay with a current honors student. All of these ideas were provided in a way that was effective and possible to implement. Their ideas were rooted in knowledge of the program and how future students could benefit from their suggestions.

Directions for Future Research

These interviews and the information they provide give a strong framework for other areas of study at any institution of higher education, department or accelerated degree program. This type of research, with individual interviews where the students are given the opportunity to form the questions as well as the answers, can be
implemented in almost any area in which there is an interest
in learning what the participants in the experience have to
say. This is effective because an understanding of how the
experience is perceived can give the program, department or
university program an informative guide to changes,
modifications, or expansions.

This research protocol could be very effective in any
other area within student affairs, academics, or most any
student service department. Inclusion of an area or
emphasis on gender of the students, staff, and faculty
involved in the Honors Program could provide a useful and
poignant addition to the picture of the program. Gaining a
perspective on the students and if their gender has an
impact on their choice of major and interest in completing a
degree through the Honors Program may prove to be helpful.
The inclusion of a mentoring program within each major or
the Honors Program itself may lead to future research on
gender and its impact on enrollment in a student service
program. An understanding of the usefulness of such
information is essential to creating a program or service
that the students feel as if their needs are truly being
met. Needs that they themselves have had the chance to
express.
Implications for Practice

This research has provided a number of implications for research in honors programming, higher education, and how to meet the needs of the students at any institution. These interviews have highlighted a number of issues that need to be understood and valued in order for further research to target a student group. This research with honors students has shown several ideas about this type of student that was not considered previously. This is a bright and intelligent group of students, who under stereotypical understanding, are independent learners with a high degree of self-motivation and little need for outside help. These interviews has shown part of this idea to be true; but, on the other hand, it has shown that they are a group of students who enjoy, and in fact are looking for, a higher level of personal attention. The interest in doing these interviews was extremely high, and the amount and desire to share information with the program shows that these students do not want to be left alone. Instead these students are looking to give more.

This desire for attention gives educators a greater understanding of the students they are serving and what they need: there exists a need for more personalization in higher education. The students do not attend college just to receive a degree in classroom learning, but, in fact,
have the ability and desire to learn more. The students interviewed expressed a strong desire for more personalized attention through formal advising and progress reports, especially in terms of their fulfillment of the requirements of the Honors Program. This additional personal attention, while it may be difficult at large institutions, can be seen as essential to a complete and well-rounded individual.

Connected with this idea of more personalization and individualism in higher education comes the idea that there needs to be more emphasis on student decision making and involvement in the education that they receive. This could include more attention to freedom in learning. This may mean less rigorous and group specific requirements for graduation, by letting students have more freedom in creating their own plans of study and working on research and taking classes that are of interest as well as fulfilling a requirement. The participants in this study expressed an interest in helping advise entering students and orienting them to the program. It is understandable that this is already a focus of most institutions, but, due to large numbers of students or lack of available facilities, this is not always possible. This research has reiterated the need for this kind of attention to student abilities and needs and what a focus of higher education could be -- the focus on students and their ideas,
perceptions, and suggestions on how to meet their needs in their education.

Overall, the research on this group of students provided information through the interviews that corresponded with the mission and services of the Honors Program. Listed in the University Honors Program description are opportunities for: (a) priority registration, (b) Honors colloquia, (c) credit for undergraduate research, (d) assistance with application to major scholarships, and (e) small group interaction with faculty (Honors, 1993). All of these topics were mentioned in the information gathered in the interviews, which shows what most students experienced. Whether it was mentioned as a point that needs to be maintained, reviewed, or modified, the students recognized these points and aptly covered them in the unstructured interview format. The Honors Program had reached the students in the areas set forth. The Honors Program is a place for "the highly motivated student to develop organizational and leadership skills while attaining the highest quality education," (Honors, p.7) and the students interviewed expressed the determination to obtain this experience, and avidly expressed the desire to help improve the experience for future students as well.
REFERENCES


University Honors Program, informational booklet, Fall 1993.

Appendix A

January 13, 1994

Dear Virginia Tech Honors Student:

I am conducting research on the perceptions of graduating seniors of their experiences in the Honors Program at Virginia Tech. Each student graduating through the Honors Program in May of 1994 will be contacted and invited to participate in this project.

Your participation is voluntary. However, the results will more accurately represent Virginia Tech Honors Students if you are willing to participate in the interview process. It should take no longer than one hour to complete the interview.

Beginning the week of January 17, 1994, I will contact you by telephone to talk with you about your participation in the project. This project has been approved by the Institutional Research Board at Virginia Tech as well as the Honors Program.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me (953-0740). Since this project has been fully approved by the Honors Program, Dr. Jack Dudley (231-4591) can be reached as well if you desire further explanation of the purposes, goals, or implications of this project. My graduate advisor, Dr. Don Creamer (231-9705), is also available to answer any questions that you may have. Your participation is vital to the success of my research.

Thanks for your help!

Sincerely,

Julie A. Barcomb
Graduate Student
College Student Affairs
College of Education

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Appendix B

Participants

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<th>Major</th>
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Vita

EDUCATION
Master of Arts in Education, College Student Personnel Services, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech), Blacksburg, Virginia, May 1994

Bachelor of Arts, English, minor in Sociology, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia, May 1992

PROFESSIONAL WORK EXPERIENCE
Community Assistant, Residential and Dining Programs, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia, August 1993- May 1994
* Assist Area Coordinator with administration of a community of 2500 residents, 52 Resident Advisors, 2 Graduate Hall Directors, and 2 Head Resident Advisors in 4 residence halls
* Hire, train and supervise 50 Night Monitors involved in a campus security program
* Advise 4 Residence Hall Federation Hall Councils
* Participate in RHF training programs, including Executive Board Training, Fall Training, and Fall Retreat
* Advise and support educational programs relating to diversity and wellness
* Monitor individual hall fund accounts and manage overall programming approval process for approximately 440 programs by resident advisors
* Prepare monthly program and account progress reports

RELATED PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE
Residential and Dining Programs Practicum, Residential and Dining Programs, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia, August 1993- December 1993
* Served as Co-Chair of 1994-95 Resident Advisor Recruitment and Selection Committee
* Revised and coordinated new RA informational media, including slide show presentation and media advertising
* Assisted in development and presentation of informational meetings targeted at undergraduate students

Cooperative Education Practicum, Cooperative Education Program (CO-OP), Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia, January 1993- May 1993
* Assisted in coordination and presentation of the Virginia Tech 1993 CO-OP Connection Job Fair
* Observed and assisted CO-OP advisors
* Conducted survey analysis of evaluations from the 1992 and 1993 job fairs
* Assisted with media services across campus in printed advertising of the 1993 job fair on campus

* Supervised 11 summer orientation linen crew members
* Coordinated residence hall room set-up and linen distribution for approximately 10,000 visiting parents and incoming students

**Summer Conference Staff**, Residential and Dining Programs, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia, May 1992-July 1992
* Assisted in residence hall room set-up, key distribution, and linen distribution and pick-up for summer conferences

**Staff Assistant, Prologue Summer Orientation Program**, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia, June 1991-August 1991
* Performed registration/data entry for incoming new students and families
* Managed registration and information desk

**Staff Assistant, Liberal Arts and Sciences Academic Program**, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia, August 1989-August 1992
* Assisted director with Virginia Tech Prologue Orientation sessions within the College of Arts and Sciences in preparation of student database and coordination of academic college advising session materials
* Assisted academic advisors and office support staff in scheduling, academic semester registration process, and processing student database information

**PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIP**
* Member, National Association of Student Personnel Administrators
* Member, Association of College Personnel Administrators
* Member, Virginia Tech Association for Student Development, Social Events Chair (September 1992 - October 1993)
* Member, 1994 Graduate Student and Faculty Forum Programs Committee (August 1993 - February 1994)
* Member, National Residence Hall Honorary