

**Florida Atlantic University
Academic Program Review for the Wilkes Honors College
Site Visit: 17-19 February 2019
Report submitted on March 18, 2019**

THE EXTERNAL REVIEW PROCESS

On 17-19 February 2019, a team consisting of Dr. Hallie Savage (National Collegiate Honors Council), Dr. Michael Reder (Connecticut College), and Dr. Michael Horswell (Dean, Arts & Letters, FAU) visited the Wilkes Honors College (WHC) on FAU's John D. MacArthur Campus in Jupiter, FL.

MISSION AND GOALS

Overview of Wilkes Honors College

The mission of the Wilkes Honors College (WHC) at Florida Atlantic University is to educate students to the highest intellectual, experiential, and ethical levels, preparing them to thrive and contribute wisely to the general welfare of human society and the planet.

Honors education is characterized by in-class and extracurricular activities that are measurably broader, deeper, or more complex than comparable learning experiences typically found at institutions of higher education. Honors experiences include a distinctive learner-directed environment and philosophy, provide opportunities that are appropriately tailored to fit the institution's culture and mission, and frequently occur within a close community of students and faculty (National Collegiate Honors Council, 2014).

Since its opening in 1999, the WHC has graduated 1,011 students, and currently has 430 students enrolled in courses for Fall 2018. The College's strategic vision for 2025 is to be widely recognized as the nation's premier, public university honors college with a diverse and flourishing student body that reaches 800 students, who are involved in cutting-edge research, community service, and intellectual engagement across the liberal arts and sciences. Guiding principles include offering a liberal arts education of the highest quality; attracting outstanding students from a wide array of backgrounds; building a dedicated and diverse faculty recognized for its excellence in teaching and research; linking teaching, research, and service in order to convey, expand, and apply knowledge; promoting breadth of knowledge, encouraging depth of understanding, and bridging disciplinary divides; respecting differences and recognizing their value in a pluralistic democracy; cultivating critical thinking in the classroom and beyond; introducing students to the challenge of original research and discovery; and producing global citizens.

Given its mission, Wilkes is well-positioned to play an important role in FAU's Strategic Plan, *Race to Excellence*, which aims to "position itself as a globalized, forward-thinking institution that caters to high-ability students," "expand opportunities for undergraduate students to participate in discovery-based learning," and promote interactive, interdisciplinary teams of researchers and scholars.

The WHC is located on FAU's John D. MacArthur campus in Jupiter, FL, which is 38 miles north of FAU's main campus in Boca Raton. Unlike other honors programs and honors colleges across the country, WHC has its own fully-assigned faculty representing a full range of liberal arts and sciences disciplines, and each of its faculty members (currently totaling 41) is evaluated and tenured within the WHC. Each WHC student will graduate with one of two degrees, a Bachelor of Arts in the Liberal Arts and Sciences or a Bachelor of Science in the Liberal Arts and Sciences, and students may pursue a variety of concentrations and minors. The WHC is also unique in that our students may take all 120 credit hours of coursework toward their degree within the

College or they may pursue one of several concentrations designed in collaboration with another FAU college (e.g., College of Engineering and Computer Science). Although students may not replace WHC honors courses with non-honors versions of courses offered by another FAU college, they are encouraged to take advantage of courses offered at FAU that are *not* offered by the WHC.

STRENGTHS

The entire review team is impressed with Wilkes: its strong sense of identity as an Honors College, the quality and diversity of its students and its educational programs (including its faculty), its research productivity and capacity, and its administrative leadership. There are many points of pride for Wilkes Honors College. Specifically, we identify the following strengths.

1. Wilkes Honors College's Strong Sense of Identity and Mission.

Mature Honors Colleges have a mission statement that contains clear, intentional, and specific alignment with the institutional mission statement. The place of the Honors College in the administrative and academic structure is appropriate to its mission and functions. Faculty members and administrators express their passion and commitment to the College and its mission. Students, administrators, faculty, and staff all understand the importance of the rigorous education that Wilkes offers. Students find the education challenging and also very supported by the dedicated faculty and staff—a situation that should be the envy of any undergraduate institution. Conversations with the WHC deans and faculty members reveal their commitment for sustainability and program development. Not surprisingly, alumni report “transformative experiences that reached beyond graduation.” Clearly, those involved in Wilkes understand and are enthusiastic about the distinctive, high-quality education it offers.

2. Quality of Wilkes's Faculty.

The Faculty Members the Review Team met with at Wilkes are enthusiastic and engaged. They clearly care a great deal about their students and WHC as a whole. They seem committed to working closely with and mentoring their students. A review of the CVs of the faculty members that were included as part of the self-study, educational levels, their teaching breadth and depth, and their professional productivity all seem commensurate with a top-honors college faculty. Students attest to the academic challenge in Wilkes coursework. We noted frequent student-faculty collaboration and a willingness to promote student success. Faculty development is available to support creativity and interdisciplinary course design. Honors faculty need to engage in a continuous process to refine and infuse a consistent philosophy regarding honors education at FAU. Faculty development activities scheduled once a semester augment the regular faculty deliberations.

3. Quality and Diversity of Wilkes Students.

The profile of the students who attend Wilkes is strong, with GPAs and test scores that are significantly higher than the general FAU student population and with test scores that compare favorably with other selective institutions and private colleges emphasizing the liberal arts and sciences. WHC also has an impressively diverse student body, with 25% of students who identify as having a Hispanic Background, and with just over half of the students identifying as non-white. Even though FAU as a whole is a Hispanic Serving Institution, with just over a quarter of their students identifying as Hispanic, the diversity of Wilkes is impressive. The Wilkes Honors College is distinguished in yield of a diverse student body when compared with peer Honors Colleges and Programs.

4. Quality of Wilkes's Undergraduate Educational Program.

Design of the honors curriculum is clearly focused and reflects a purposeful alignment with the College's mission. A four-year curricular sequence offers carefully designed liberal arts experiences that meet the needs and abilities of the undergraduate students it serves. The reviewers are impressed by the rigors of the Wilkes Honors College curriculum, with its wide variety of concentrations and its very strong host of required Core Requirement

5. Wilkes's Research Productivity and Capability.

The research record of Wilkes is impressive, especially given the intensive teaching and mentoring responsibilities of the faculty. In this context, peer-reviewed publications per faculty compare favorably with the rest of the University (1.3 vs 2.2). Grant submissions are trending upward over the evaluation cycle, with last year seeing 10 proposals totaling

the WHC academic marketing campaign? It seems that this effort is very recently underway, especially with the new investments in Recruitment and Admissions on the campus. However, the marketing materials reviewed do not capture the intellectual energy present on campus, nor do they convey the impressive quality of the Wilkes experience and all of the advantages it has to offer. WHC offers a distinctive, rigorous, and individualized educational experience at a fraction of the price of comparable schools. The Wilkes materials do not do justice to the many wonderful and impressive things WHC students do while on campus and go on to do after they graduate. The materials also lack a unified visual identity. The Program Review team was particularly impressed with the coffee mugs display that represent graduate schools, law schools, medical schools, and career advancement in highly prestigious graduate programs and jobs. The display powerfully illustrates the success of Wilkes College graduates, but that kind of clear and palpable student success is not being transmitted widely. We do not believe FAU is telling the Wilkes story in the most productive ways possible.

The reviewers also considered that the name itself may not connect with students and their parents—for most high school students, “honors” is a type of more accelerated class. For the types of students Wilkes wishes to enroll and should be attracting—those looking at top-ranked state schools or private universities and liberal arts and sciences colleges, the name Wilkes Honors College of FAU may not resonate. The need is to better message what the experience is without relying on the word “honors” to carry that message. Clearer linkages of the experience to the unique research partnerships, faculty mentoring, and experiential learning opportunities seem to be needed.

2. Growing enrollments and maintaining the quality of the Wilkes experience and education.

The reviewers recognized that the mandate for increased enrollment will be a challenge to maintaining the honors-level quality of the Wilkes education. This was a common theme in nearly all of the conversations we had at Wilkes and with Boca administrators as well. WHC’s current resources—faculty, facilities, scholarships, curricular offerings—are already at near capacity. Teaching Lab space is full. Courses and curricular offerings are currently at a reasonable level, but more students will mean that more courses and sections be offered, both within and outside of STEM. Small classes and an individualized educational experience help makes the education exceptional, and help attract the kinds of students that Wilkes wishes to enroll.

STEM student research opportunities in labs, including Scripps, Max Planck, and Harbor Branch, is already competitive, and unless that capacity also grows, students will not get the same research-intensive experiences that are currently the hallmark of a WHC education. And some full-time WHC faculty do not have adequate research space to undertake their own research with students. With a large influx of students, unless the faculty grows considerably, there are not adequate numbers of faculty members to mentor and assess sophomore writing portfolios and advise Honors Theses—two of the features that help define a WHC education.

Science disciplines that have been a hallmark of the College. The challenge to set a realistic College size is at the core of Wilkes' Honors College's performance on retention and graduation rates.

There are approximately 30,000 attending FAU with the Honors College enrolling 430 or 1.4%. National trends document approximately 5-7% of undergraduate enrollments are honors students. An expansion of the current student enrollment to 800 would be consistent with these national trends. Ultimately, a strong recruitment-retention continuum will raise institutional outcomes provided that sufficient resources follow a rise in honors enrollment. This balance between enrollment and quality and the challenge of setting shared, realistic size goals should be at the core of the Honors College's strategic planning efforts for the coming years.

The Review Team observed one of the biggest related challenges is the potentially large and sudden influx of high school juniors and seniors into classes and labs at Wilkes. The first class of 50 high school juniors reportedly will matriculate in 2020. Already working close to capacity, it is unclear how such a sudden shift will change the intellectual life on this small, academically intense campus. At the main FAU campus the partnership with the Henderson high school works in part because those students are easily absorbed into a campus of more than 20,000 students in hundreds of different courses offered each day. Given the focused curriculum and the small classes at WHC, having an honors-level college class or lab with a third (or even a half) of its students aged 16 or 17 could challenge the quality and/or change the identity of the WHC.

Discussion

CONCLUSIONS

The Review Team noted several strengths in the Wilkes Honors Programs, including strong sense of identity and mission, quality of the faculty, quality and diversity of the honors students. At the heart of honors education is the curriculum. Wilkes Honors College meets best practices and incorporates the following curricular ladder:

1. A required course emphasizing basic skills in communication and critical reasoning
2. A sequence of general education, and/or special topics courses
3. A research seminar that keeps students on track toward a required thesis
4. A capstone experience of individual research or creative work

The partnerships with research institutes, high quality internships, and study abroad experiences distinguish the Wilkes Honors College as a unique honors undergraduate program. Florida Atlantic University is to be commended for the development of such excellent research productivity. The administration of Wilkes, including Dean, Associate Deans, Chairs, and Administrative Staff is well qualified and effective in their leadership roles.

Opportunities for development of Wilkes Honors include: 1) growth of new student recruitment, regionally and nationally 2) faculty development within the College, and across FAU campuses. Increased visibility offers many opportunities to distinguish the academic reputation of the College and FAU nationally as well as internationally 3) Development of the External Advisory Board and alumni support of the Honors College.

Challenges and threats for the Wilkes Honors College are the preservation of the high quality undergraduate experience with new enrollment patterns. Doubling the size of the undergraduate enrollment potentially dilutes the high quality academic program that is developed. Concomitantly, introducing a new population of secondary students without considering the unique learning needs of both undergraduate and secondary students will also significantly influence the Wilkes Honors College's performance indicators. It is the Review Team

2. Set incremental increases to annual recruitment goals that culminate in 800, guided by the essential balance between enrollment and academic quality; the plan should minimally include the following:

- Number of students admitted based on revised admissions criteria
- Scholarships needed to support this level of growth
- Lab space and facility plans to accommodate increased numbers
- The capacity of partners like Scripps and Max Plank
- Faculty needs for instruction to maintain current quality
- Courses needed per semester based on curricular model
- Residential plan as part of a state-of-the-art living/learning environment

3. As the enrollment increases, add more administrative support. For example, currently, there is only one faculty secretary for the entire faculty. Further, as the faculty obtains more extramural grants, the burden of grant administration may need to be lifted from the Business Manager, who currently fills that function.
4. Wilkes needs to clearly articulate its admissions criteria and ensure it is consistent with its student learning outcomes. The written essay is an excellent predictor of student “readiness” for the sophomore portfolio and development of written communication skills. The selection of admissions criteria that embraces academic challenge is preferred practice for undergraduate applicants as well as secondary students. Quantitative approaches that rely on objective scores may be simpler but may result in passing over qualified candidates whose abilities may not always be demonstrated in traditional admissions criteria.

staff to discuss and engage what it means to effectively teach and mentor this impressive group of engaged, talented undergraduates in Wilkes' distinctive setting. Given its strengths, Wilkes could become a national leader in honors pedagogy and teaching, both in STEM fields and beyond.

7. Given its success in research dissemination, Wilkes (and FAU overall) should consider developing student par