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Recruitment and Retention of Students in the Lee Honors College

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BACKGROUND

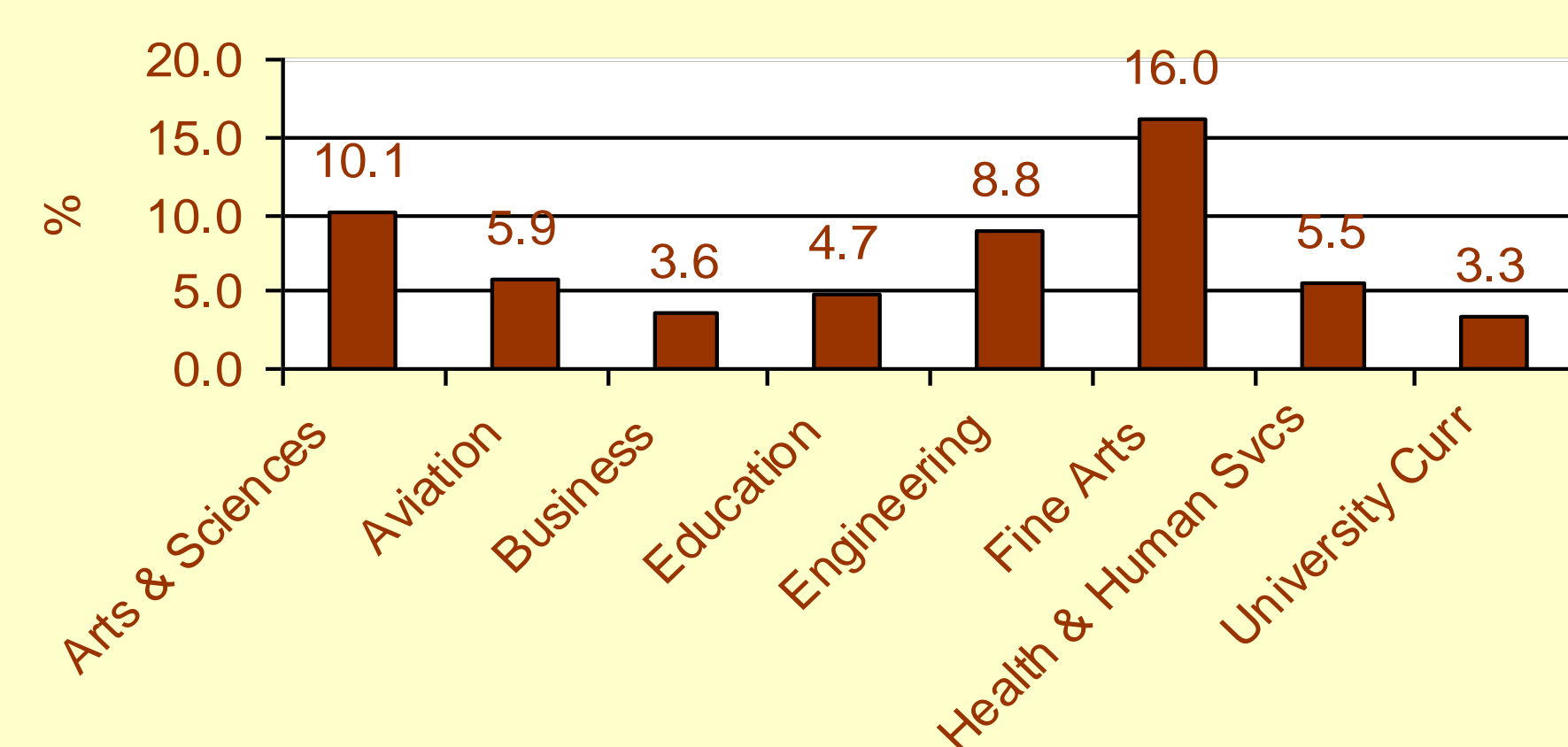
The Academic Affairs Strategic Plan (2009, draft) includes a goal to increase enrollment in the Lee Honors College (LHC) to 10% of the total undergraduate student body. In academic year 2009-2010 LHC students represent 5% of the undergraduate student population at WMU.

Enrollment in the LHC is elective for incoming students with excellent grade-point averages and standardized test scores and also for students with outstanding performance after enrollment at WMU. Over the past several years, approximately 15% of students enrolled in the LHC have withdrawn or elected not to complete the requirements for graduation from the LHC.

The LHC has no plans to modify standards for admission or continuation in order to increase enrollment. The proportion of students in the LHC could be doubled through combined efforts to increase enrollment and improve retention. The LHC has established several initiatives related to recruitment of incoming freshmen and reciprocity for transfer students.

The purposes of this project are to (1) examine the honors programs at other universities, (2) determine the factors that contribute to students' decisions to enroll in the LHC and to remain enrolled, and (3) develop recommendations toward the goal of increasing the census in the LHC.

Figure 1. Proportion of undergraduate students by college.



Objectives of the Lee Honors College

1. To provide academic and student-life experiences that foster individual and group development for highly motivated students
2. To provide a challenging but supportive academic program that includes learning communities, unique learning experiences, study abroad, and research/creative activities
3. To sponsor student-life activities in an inclusive social and learning community in conjunction with the Honors Student Association
4. To maintain a residential-life program that supports the academic, social, and cultural goals of the College
5. To ensure timely and caring advising and student support that encourages honors students to share their needs, concerns, and future goals

Other Universities in Michigan

All state universities and many Community Colleges have an Honors College (MSU, WSU) or Program (CMU, EMU, U of M - Literature, Science, and the Arts only). EMU has the lowest proportion of honors students (1.4%) and MSU has the highest with 8% of the student body in the Honors College.

METHODS

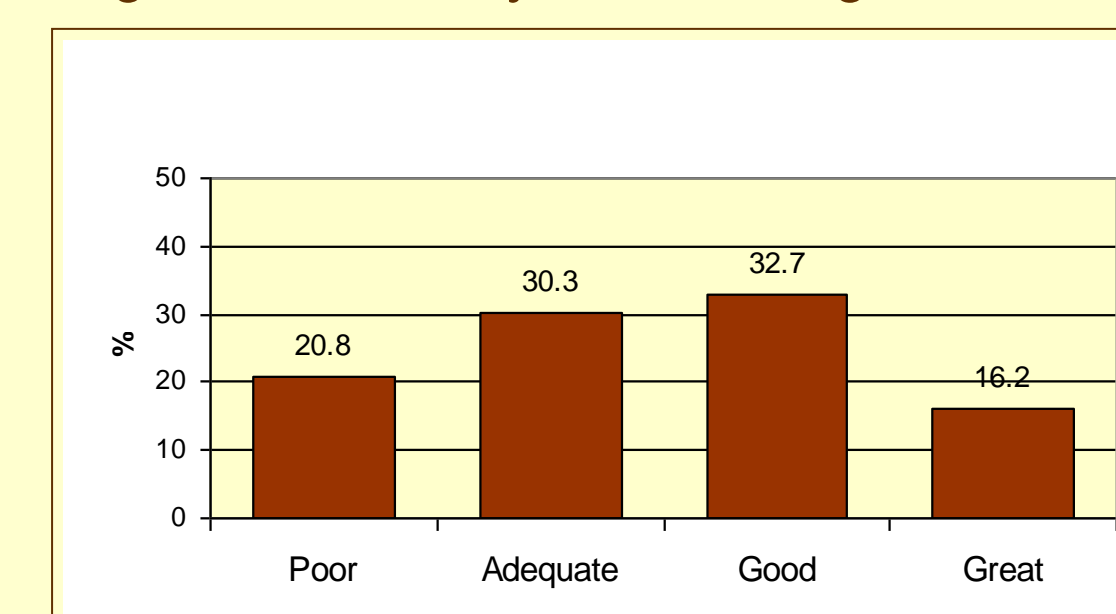
The LHC conducted surveys of students in 2008 (n=288) and 2009 (n=116). Scaled responses and open-ended comments were combined across the two years. Most respondents (68%) were female with about equal division across years of study at WMU: Freshmen (25%), Sophomores (22%), Juniors (24%), and Seniors (29%).

Participation in the activities related to the objectives of the LHC were generally reported by less than half the respondents, with the exception of community service or volunteer work:

Activity	Proportion (%)
Internship, field, clinical, co-op experience, or independent study	42%
Community service or volunteer work	81%
A learning community, seminar series, or exchange of ideas with faculty and students	52%
Work on a research project with a faculty member	25%
Developing a career plan with a faculty member or academic advisor	42%
Study abroad	20%

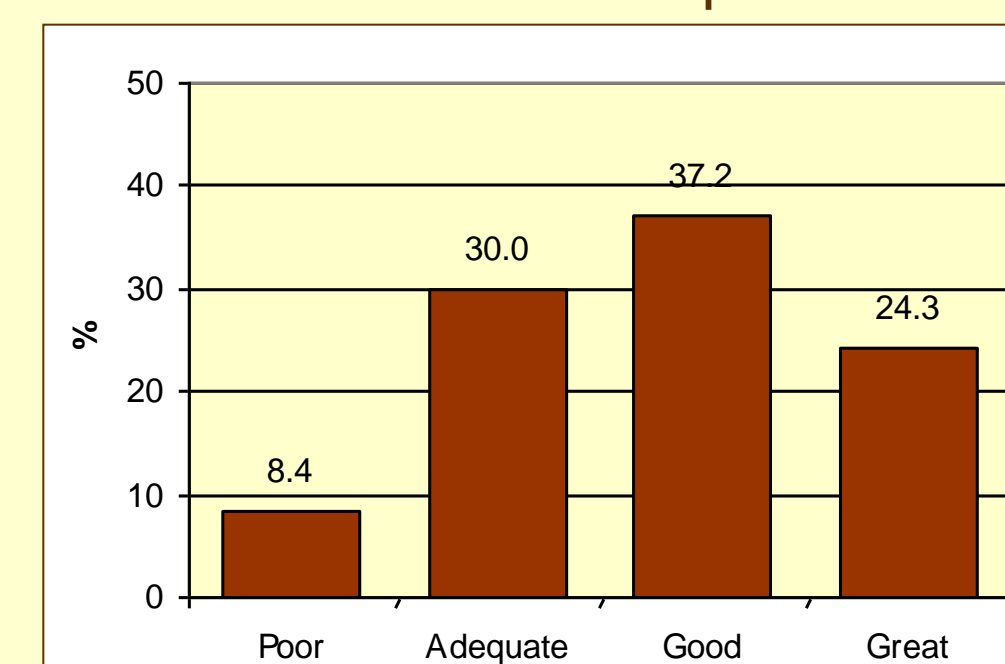
Advising was rated as "good" or better by 49% of students.

Figure 2. Quality of advising.



Most students (62%) rate their overall educational experience as "good" or better. Most respondents (88%) answered "yes" to "Would you enter the LHC again?"

Figure 3. Overall educational experience with the LHC.



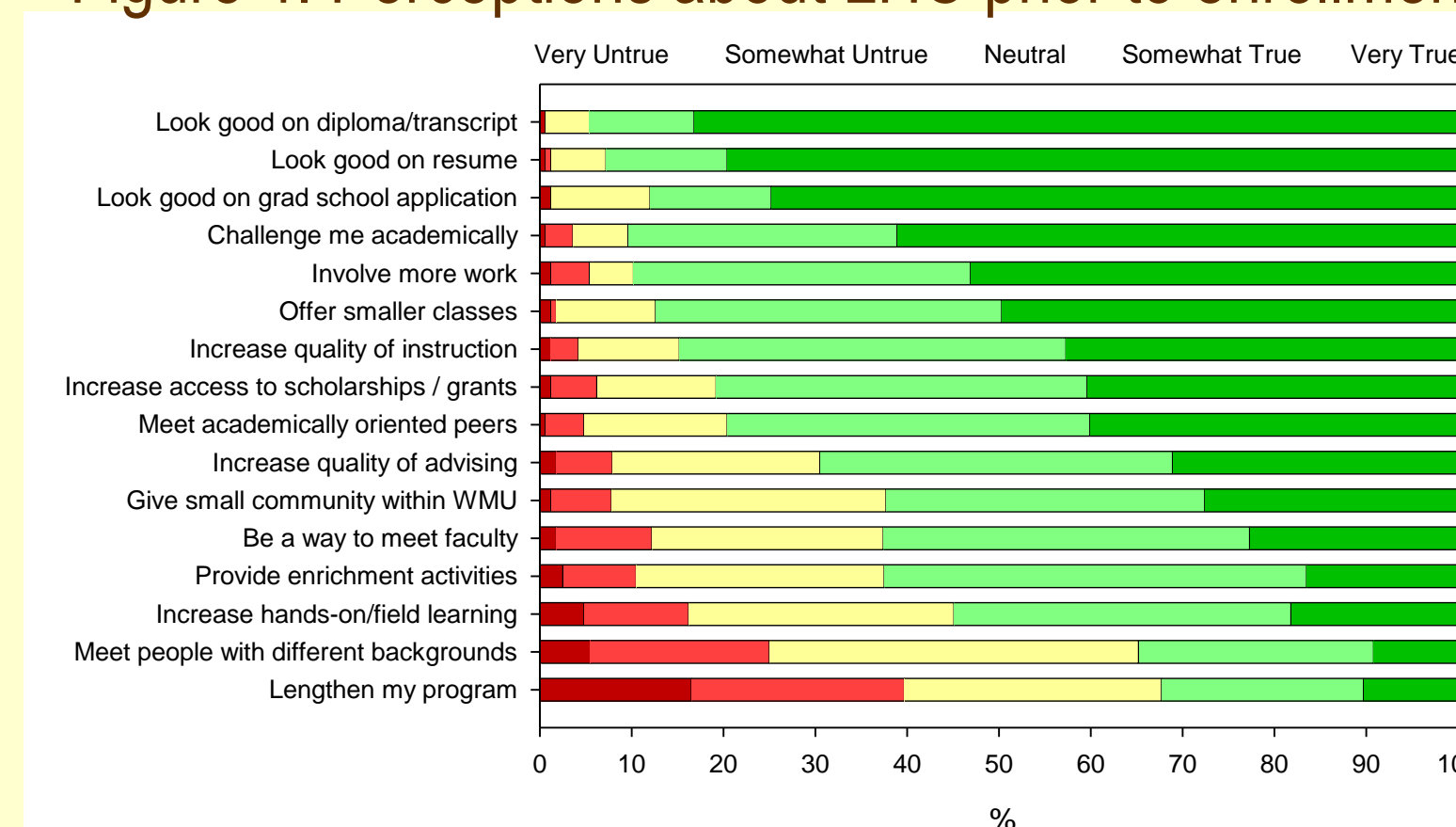
Respondents (n=147; 41%) provided "additional feedback" in 2008/09. Most (65%) related to availability of courses. Of these, most (76%) related to a need for more course offerings. Advising was the subject of 19% of the feedback with the majority of comments related to lack of consistency between LHC and major advisors and availability of personnel. Fees were mentioned by 19% of respondents in 2009, all in a negative direction. The benefit of priority registration was mentioned in 10% of the comments and 9% commented on thesis/capstone projects, with 12 of 13 comments expressing lack of certainty about the process.

RESULTS

An on-line survey was conducted in February 2010 with 184 respondents (67% female) with approximately equal representative across years of enrollment. Responses reflected college affiliation (Arts and Sciences 46% of respondents). Nearly half live in Honors housing (14%) or have in the past (33%). Most students were admitted to the LHC as incoming freshmen (88%).

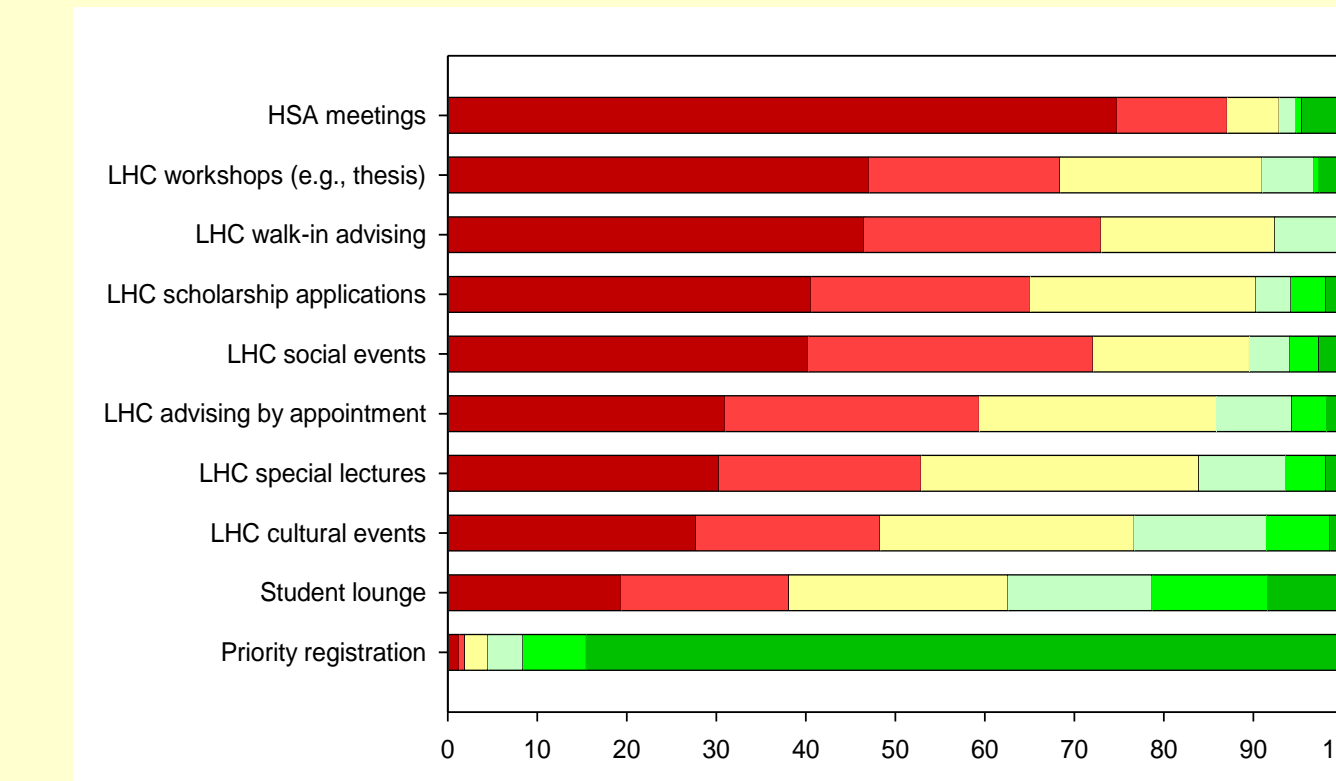
Recruitment. The LHC was important in a decision to enroll at WMU for 47% of respondents. Other influences are depicted in Figure 4. "...the LHC made WMU very competitive when I compared it to attending the University of Michigan or Purdue University..."

Figure 4. Perceptions about LHC prior to enrollment.



Engagement. Very few students report consistent participation in LHC sponsored events, with the exception of priority registration.

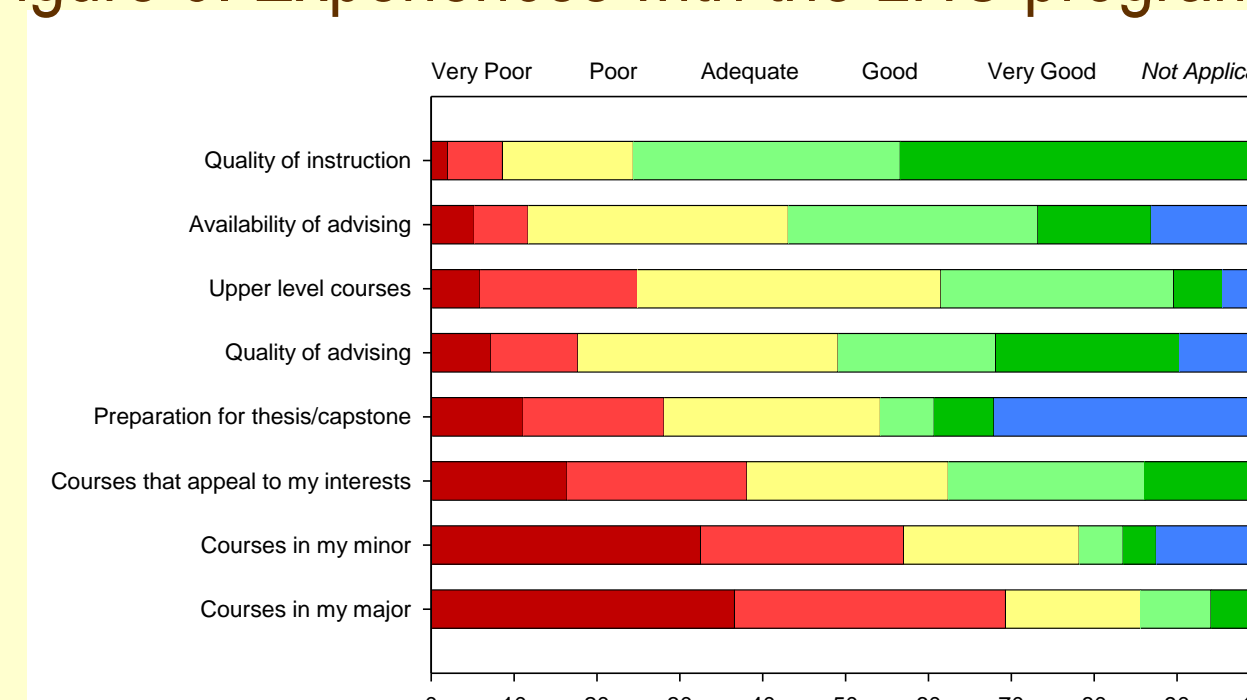
Figure 5. Self-reported participation in LHC activities.



"My main reason for staying in the LHC is the people that are truly there for the students and not themselves."

Retention. Among respondents 74%* would enroll in the LHC again and 64% report that the LHC has enhanced their experience at WMU. Students report lack of diverse course offerings related to their area of study as a significant drawback to continuing in the LHC (57% poor/very poor in my major). Areas most often mentioned included Education, Engineering, Languages, Fine Arts, Health and Human Services. Students also reflected negative views on the LHC fee initiated in Fall 2009 "...why are we being CHARGED to be in the honors college?"

Figure 6. Experiences with the LHC program.



*Although the proportion of students who would re-enroll is lower, the form of the question and scaled response differed from previous surveys so this does not necessarily indicate a change in student perception.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The LHC is achieving many of its stated objectives and has already initiate a number of strategies to meet these suggestions. The recommendations serve as a starting point toward achieving WMU's strategic goals.

Recruitment. The LHC serves as an important recruiting tool for WMU. The LHC appeals to students seeking academic challenge, quality instruction, smaller classes, and like-minded peers. An invitation to enroll, parent encouragement, and scholarships are influential in students' decision to enroll. Recruitment materials and presentations should emphasize these strengths. Scholarships and grant awards should increase [Strategy 2.3].

"...the fact that it was solidly established and the lengths to which the LHC staff went to help the students succeed were THE deciding factors for me to attend Western."

Retention. Most students (76%) report good or very good quality of instruction in honors courses. Availability of courses, particularly at upper-levels is a problem perceived by 69% of students. Only 21% of students report good/very good preparation for thesis/capstone projects. Student engagement in LHC social and supplemental activities is low.

Make the LHC a model for campus-wide strategic initiatives

- Increase students' exposure to research and awareness of research programs on campus [Strategy (S) 1.2]
- Develop mechanisms for students to connect with capstone mentors. Faculty liaison to the LHC for each department/college (MSU has a "Fireside Chat" at the homes of faculty)
- Increase course offerings in languages [S 1.3]
- Increase course offerings, particularly upper level, goal-directed targets in need areas
- One advisor for ~1200 LHC students is inadequate to meet the students' needs, improve advisor:student ratio & cross-train advisors in each college for honors advising [S 1.8]

Next Steps

- Survey those who withdrew from the LHC
- Future surveys of students should include some incentive to respond (e.g., opportunity to win a gift certificate) and use multiple methods to increase response rates (e.g., Facebook).
- Work with Deans, Chairs and Directors, Faculty, and Academic Advisors to (1) develop sample/model programs, (2) target specific majors/areas of student interest, and (3) explore ways to streamline LHC and major/minor requirements.
- Develop incentives for faculty and departments to provide course offerings and individual learning opportunities
- Combine social, nutritional (free food), and learning opportunities in weekly 'lunch and learn' meetings (Northern Illinois hosts "Souper Wednesdays")
- Reduce the number of reflection papers for freshmen attending cultural events

Acknowledgements

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