

Honors Capstone Project

Honoring Our Roots: A Marketing Plan to Engage Wood Honors College Alumni

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## Introduction

The Wood Honors College at Shippensburg University has cultivated a rich and expansive network of students, faculty, and alumni over the course of the last 40 years. As students and staff members working within the Honors Office, we have a unique perspective, observing both the strengths and the challenges of maintaining meaningful connections in the growing alumni network.

This capstone project builds directly on work we began in August 2023, when we developed a comprehensive social media guide for the Wood Honors College. That effort included a content guide and a content calendar designed to produce uniform, visually compelling posts to engage our audience. The results were substantial, growing our social media presence.

The timing of this project also aligned with a major milestone. The Wood Honors College recently celebrated its 40th Anniversary, an occasion that brought alumni back to campus and emphasized just how important it is to keep those connections alive beyond a single celebratory event. Communicating with a large, geographically and generationally diverse alumni base presented challenges during the planning and execution of the 40th Anniversary Celebration. Alumni span decades of graduating classes, live across the country and beyond, and have varying levels of awareness of and connection to the Wood Honors College. Yet their potential value to the institution is significant, as engaged alumni are more likely to return to campus for panels and events, serve as mentors to current students, and contribute to the long-term reputation and vitality of the program.

To address this problem, we set out to develop a data-driven, multi-channel marketing plan specifically designed to engage the Honors alumni community based on our thorough

review of existing literature on marketing strategy and higher education alumni engagement. .

This plan is based on original primary research, including alumni interviews and a broad alumni survey. Because this project draws on photography, videography, graphic design, data analysis, and written communication, it sits at the intersection of our majors in marketing, communications, media, and journalism, making it a natural and fitting culmination of our undergraduate work.

Ultimately, our goal is to produce a marketing plan that does not simply serve the immediate needs of a single event, but leaves a lasting framework the Wood Honors College can continue to build on for years to come.

## Research Question and Objectives

The question our research aims to answer is what strategies can the Wood Honors College employ in a targeted marketing plan that effectively increases alumni engagement. The primary aim of this research is to create a data-driven, multi-channel marketing plan that encourages long-term engagement between the Wood Honors College and its alumni. To do this, the following objectives were established. Our first objective was to determine the specific academic and social components of the Wood Honors College experience that correlate the most strongly with a desire for post-graduation involvement. We also set the objective of assessing the reach and impact of existing social platforms and identifying friction points, like lack of clear instructions or irrelevant content, that currently prevent alumni from participating in the Honors community. Our third objective was to integrate primary qualitative and quantitative data into a formal SWOT analysis and a tactical marketing spreadsheet that outlines specific, measurable goals for alumni re-engagement over the next year. These objectives were investigated using alumni interviews and an alumni survey.

## Summary of Secondary Research

Marketing plans are essential strategic tools that guide market analysis, market segmentation, and financial forecasting, ultimately contributing to an organization's success, stability, and profitability (McDonald, 2007). The literature confirms the necessity of formal planning procedures, which generally yield greater long-term profit and reduced operational difficulties (McDonald, 2007; McDonald, 1996). Different organizations often adopt a combination of established marketing plan models (Abratt et al., 1994). An effective marketing plan follows a general ten-step process, which starts with defining the market and conducting an audit, proceeds to market segmentation and a specific SWOT analysis, and culminates in setting clear objectives, creating strategies, budgeting, and detailing a first-year implementation program (McDonald, 1996; McDonald, 2007; Moutinho, 1987). For the objectives the Wood Honors College needs to meet, a marketing plan is the best format to meet these objectives.

The execution of marketing plans involves diverse strategies, particularly in the modern digital age. Effective marketing requires a preliminary audit of past practice to assess its effectiveness and identify new opportunities (Holubka, 2018; Hadrian, 2020). Current strategies include a mix of traditional and digital tactics (Islam & Sheikh, 2024). Social media marketing, utilizing platforms like Instagram and Facebook, is highly effective, as studies show it significantly influences consumer decision-making and fosters genuine community engagement (Islam & Sheikh, 2024; Al-Dmour et al., 2024; Benchekroun et al., 2024). Email marketing is also a popular channel, but its effectiveness hinges on ethical practices, personalization, transparency, and obtaining consumer consent to avoid being perceived as irritating or irrelevant (Hartemo, 2016; Valenti et al., 2023). Finally, traditional direct mail marketing is noted to be particularly effective for re-engaging "dormant" customers, while email campaigns are more

successful with existing customers, suggesting the importance of personalization and data-driven decision-making in a multichannel approach (Valenti et al., 2023).

For higher education institutions, the literature emphasizes that engaging alumni is crucial for long-term institutional health, reputation, and recruitment (Dalangin, 2021; Barron, 2015). Alumni provide valuable avenues for promotional narrative by illustrating the positive impact of their education on their careers (Barron, 2015). However, many institutions are unprepared for the highly competitive environment in which they operate (Conway et al., 1994). Successful engagement requires a fundamental understanding of alumni needs (Conway et al., 1994) and can be facilitated by collecting data through both broad questionnaires for less-involved alumni and in-depth, one-on-one interviews for those who are already engaged (Lallukka, 2017; Dalangin, 2021). Case studies suggest that fostering constant, long-term connections through strong marketing and communications encourages alumni contributions and allows the institution to benefit from the authentic promotion alumni provide (Dalangin, 2021; Lallukka, 2017; Barron, 2015). Furthermore, focusing on specific experiences, such as study abroad, can reveal long-term positive impacts that can be leveraged for engagement and differentiation (Mulvaney, 2017).

The current literature confirms the critical role of strategic marketing plans (McDonald, 2007) and adaptable, multichannel strategies (Islam & Sheikh, 2024; Valenti et al., 2023) in organizational success. While traditional models provide a foundation, modern effectiveness relies on integrating digital tools alongside ethical communication practices (Hartemo, 2016). Crucially, the review highlights a significant gap in the research concerning dedicated alumni marketing in higher education (Dalangin, 2021). Although the importance of alumni engagement for recruitment, institutional credibility, and long-term support is acknowledged (Barron, 2015),

the limited research, often involving small data sets, presents a clear opportunity for further exploration to refine best practices for institutional growth (Dalangin, 2021).

## Research Methods

Our research centers around discovering which strategies the Wood Honors College can use to reengage alumni. To answer our research question, we began to collect data via interviews, surveys, and current literature from the field. We had the goal of interviewing some of our most prominent alumni, such as those who have returned for panels, helped organize the 40th Anniversary Celebration, and written pieces for the Honors newsletter. The object of these interviews was to answer why these particular alumni have remained connected to the Wood Honors College. In addition, we conducted a survey amongst all Honors alumni, using the alumni spreadsheet maintained by the Wood Honors College. This survey aimed to assess how our alumni view the Wood Honors College today. We reviewed current literature and studies from the field to further support our marketing plan. The interviews gave us qualitative data and the surveys gave us quantitative data about alumni's perception of the Honors College.

The research methods were intentionally selected to provide a holistic view of alumni engagement, ensuring each objective was addressed through a specific data lens. The secondary literature review provided strategic mapping, offering marketing models like the SWOT analysis and the ten-step planning process.. The qualitative interviews targeted high-engagement alumni to uncover qualitative insights. These insights were then tested for broader reliability through the quantitative survey, which directly supported our objectives by measuring the reach of current communication channels and identifying specific friction points, such as irrelevant content or a lack of clear calls to action. In using both the interviews and the surveys, the research moves

beyond anecdotal evidence to create a data-driven framework for the Wood Honors College's future marketing efforts.

## Interview Process

To begin investigating alumni engagement within the Wood Honors College, we interviewed a selection of alumni. During the proposal process of our capstone, we drafted interview questions that were approved by Wood Honors College Director Dr. Klein and our capstone advisor, Dr. Powell, as shown in Appendix A. We selected alumni to interview based on their participation in the 40th Anniversary Celebration and various alumni panels. We started by choosing 15 alumni, attempting to gather a representative sample across graduation years and demographics. These alumni were then approved by Dr. Klein, who made some suggestions to our list based on the availability of the alumni.

Once we finalized the list of alumni, we began the process of outreach. See Figure A.1 in Appendix A for a copy of the email, asking them to participate in an interview via Zoom or phone. We created a Sign-Up Genius form with times available for interviews. Upon receiving responses from the alumni, we sent a follow-up email with a link to this form. See Figure A.2 in Appendix A for a copy of that email. We did not receive any emails indicating that the alumni did not want to participate. However, for future research if they do not want to participate an email will need drafted as a response.

We executed these interviews using Zoom or phone calls, depending on the participant's preferences. One of us would serve as a note taker, while the other asked the questions. A copy of the questions can be found in Figure A.3 in Appendix A. We listed the participant's name with a list of the questions underneath it and took short, concise notes of what was said, writing down

relevant quotes when needed. We also recorded these interviews for transcription purposes. Once these interviews were conducted, we began the next phase of our project, the survey portion.

## Survey Distribution

The survey was compiled using our initial survey questions from our proposal, along with the information gathered in our interviews and the annual alumni survey sent out regularly by the Alumni Advisory Council. Once we had a rough draft of our survey, we worked closely with Dr. Klein to create the finalized version of our survey, which can be found in Figure B.1 in Appendix B. We created the survey on Qualtrics.

The first part of the survey was an "About You" section, asking the respondents for demographic information like their name, address, graduation year, and current job. We also asked them for their contact information, including email and phone number. The second part of the survey contained three open-ended questions about the respondent's time in the Honors College. These questions were intended to prime the respondents to answer the rest of the questions. The first question was "What was your best experience in the Wood Honors College/Honors Program?," which allowed respondents to reflect on the entirety of their Honors experience and explain in more detail what their best experience was. The second question asked, "What was the greatest benefit of the Wood Honors College/Honors Program in your undergraduate experience?" A later question asks respondents to choose from a list of benefits, but we wanted respondents to be able to express the benefit they felt was best, regardless of the list. The third question was, "Looking back on your Honors experience, what would you like current and prospective Honors students to know?" The purpose of this question was to provide us with ways to connect alumni and current students in our marketing strategies.

The third section of the survey asked respondents about their experience in the Wood Honors College. The purpose of this section was to assess what our respondents actually participated in during their time in Honors, and to determine how they feel the Wood Honors College benefited them in their post-graduation lives. The first question in this section asked respondents to rate their agreement with the following statements, using a 5-point Likert scale: the Wood Honors College/Program met my expectations, the Wood Honors College/Honors Program benefitted me as an undergraduate, and after graduation, I positively view the Wood Honors College/Honors Program. The purpose of this question was to see how our alumni actually view the Honors College as a whole, to determine if the lack of enjoyment with the program itself is why we have a lack of alumni participation. The second question in this section asked respondents what they participated in while they were in Honors. The purpose of this was to assess how their involvement in Honors impacted the participants' responses. The third question in this section asked participants to select all of the post-graduation benefits they felt they gained from being in Honors. The purpose of this question was to highlight what the alumni valued about their time in Honors, to provide ideas for us to use in our marketing strategies.

Also in this section were questions about the value and components of the Wood Honors College. The questions asked respondents to rate the importance of social aspects on a five-point Likert scale. These aspects were based on responses from our initial alumni interviews. The purpose of this question was to determine what held the highest importance for our alumni so we could highlight it in our marketing campaigns. The final question in this section asked respondents to rate the value of different educational aspects on a five-point Likert scale. This question also aimed to determine what aspects should be highlighted in our marketing.

The final section of this survey was largely based on the original alumni survey the Alumni Advisory Council conducts annually. It asks alumni how they would be interested in supporting current Honors students, and how they would be interested in connecting with other alumni. This section also asked alumni if they follow our social media, and how they would prefer to learn about Honors information. This section was extremely helpful for us in determining how to communicate with our alumni, and how they want to connect with each other and current students.

To distribute the survey we used MailChimp. This allowed us to create an email containing both the alumni survey and the newsletter, which can be found in Figure B.2 in Appendix B. We were able to distribute the survey to all alumni in the alumni spreadsheet who have a valid email address. Upon the email being delivered through MailChimp, we were able to see the number of click throughs and opens for our email, and we decided to resend the email about a week after it was sent initially to those alumni who had not opened it in the first time. After about two and a half weeks, we closed the survey so we could begin our analysis of the results. To begin the analysis of our data, we downloaded the results into Excel from Qualtrics and cleaned up the data. Any responses that were not complete were deleted. After this phase was completed, our sample resulted in 80 participants, with a response rate of 10%. We compiled the data into a few different graphs and charts to better visualize the data, which can be seen below.

## Results

Once the data was cleaned, we were able to begin our analysis. The first part of the survey was the general demographic information about the respondents, gathering home and email addresses, phone numbers, graduation years, and current occupations. The purpose of this

section was so that we could properly update the Honors Alumni Survey if needed. It also provided us with useful information regarding participant's graduation years, which can be seen in Figure 1 below.

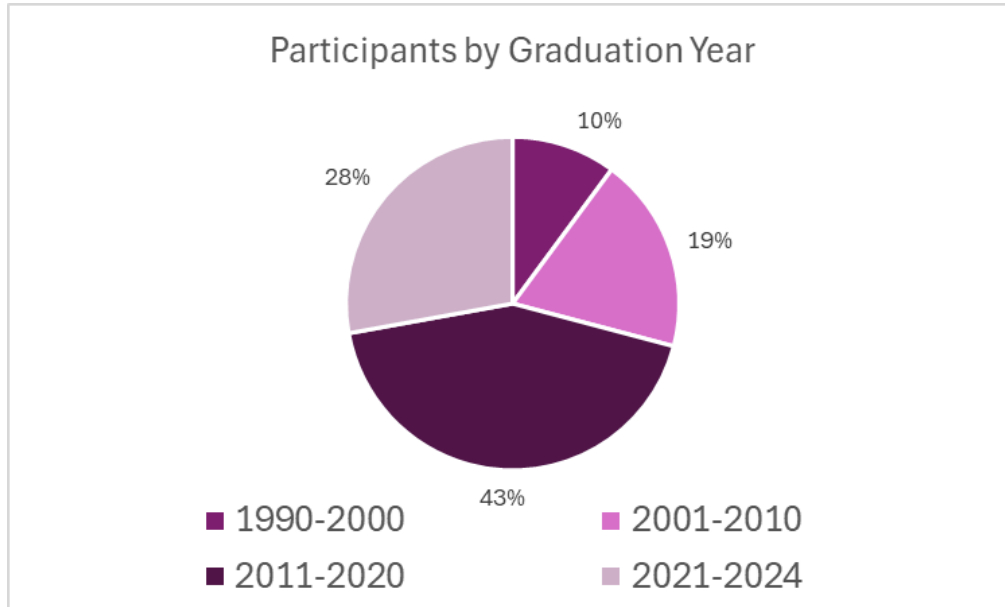


Figure 1. Pie Chart of Participants by Age

The graduation year breakdown of our respondents was heavily favored to the most recent graduation years, with 43% of participants graduating in 2011-2020, and 28% of participants graduating in 2021-2024, which is over half of our respondents. This was expected based on the alumni who participated in the 40th Anniversary Celebration and in alumni panels. However, this presents a flaw in our current marketing strategy as older alumni are not as connected, which gives us room for improvement in our new marketing plan.

Of our respondents, 64% were female, 36% were male. Geographically, 64% of our respondents reside in Pennsylvania, 32% reside in states other than Pennsylvania, and 4% reside outside of the United States. Based on their primary major, not including minors, 47% of respondents were students of the College of Arts & Sciences, 23% were students of the College

of Education and Human Services, 25% were students of John L. Grove College of Business, and 5% were students of the Milton and Doreen Morgan School of Engineering.

The second part of our survey consisted of three open-ended questions, which required qualitative analysis. These responses were analyzed for thematic consistencies, with two researchers working independently and then finding agreement across more than 80% of the resulting themes. In the first of these qualitative questions, participants were asked "What was your best experience in the Wood Honors College/Honors Program?" 59 of the 80 respondents answered this question. Themes that emerged indicated that the experiential learning opportunities of the Wood Honors College were the best experiences. Experiential learning includes day trips taken to Washington D.C. and New York City, as well as short- and long-term study abroad programs, internships, and conferences.

The second qualitative question asked participants, "What was the greatest benefit of the Wood Honors College/Honors Program in your undergraduate experience?" 59 of the 80 respondents answered this question. The themes that were presented included the Honors curriculum and the social community. Participants noted many aspects of the curriculum as a benefit, including smaller class sizes, top professors, and priority scheduling. For the community aspect, participants mentioned that the diverse range of Honors students and the sense of community was beneficial to them.

The third and final qualitative question in this section asked participants, "Looking back on your Honors experience, what would you like current and prospective Honors students to know?" 54 of the 80 respondents answered this question. The theme that was the most prevalent was to encourage prospective students to take advantage of all the opportunities and benefits of

Honors. Some of the opportunities and benefits they gave as examples were study abroad programs, experiential learning, and the capstone program.

Part three of the survey looked at the participants' perceived importance and value of the Wood Honors College. The first question of this section asked participants to rate their level of agreement with the following statements, on a five-point Likert Scale. The statements they were asked to rate were, "The Wood Honors College/Program met my expectations," "The Wood Honors College/Honors Program benefitted me as an undergraduate," and "After graduation, I positively view the Wood Honors College/Honors Program." We calculated the number of each response and input them into a bar graph which can be seen in Figure 2 below.

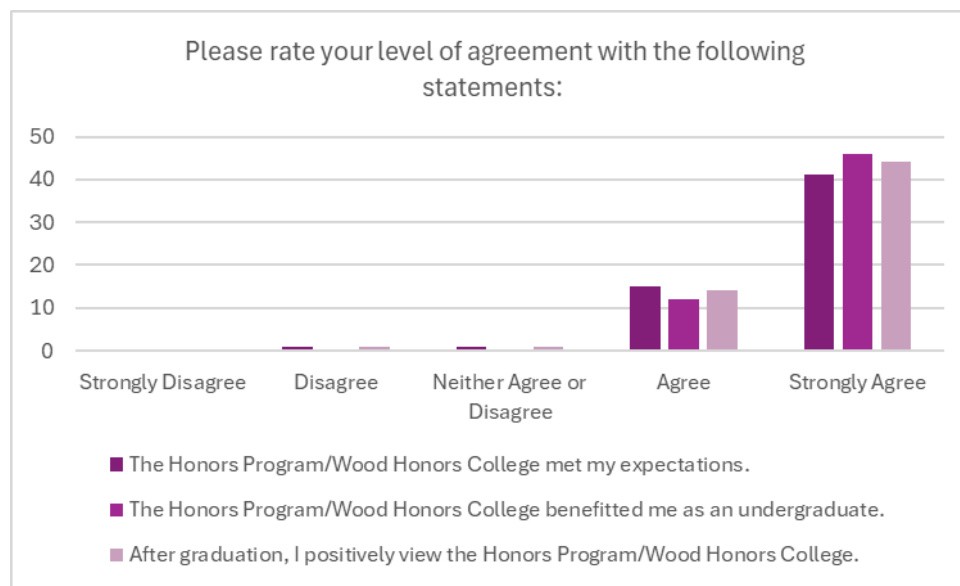


Figure 2. Bar Chart of Participants Responses to Agreement Statements

For all three statements, 96% of respondents indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with each statement. This indicates that our alumni generally have a positive view of the Honors College and the benefits and experiences they gathered from it. This is a helpful analysis, as it allows us to measure positive brand sentiment surrounding the Wood Honors College.

In this section we also asked alumni what they participated in while in Honors. The aim of this question was to determine if the engaged alumni were only engaged because of their

increased involvement in Honors as an undergraduate student. Through this question, we were essentially answering, “Does the average Honors alumni view the Wood Honors College as positively as an extremely involved Honors alumni?” About 35% of respondents served in active leadership roles like Honors Student Organization Committee Chair or working in the Honors Office. This generally showed us that the respondents participation in the survey was not dependent on their involvement in Honors as a student.

The next question in this part of the survey asked participants to check which of the following post-graduation benefits they felt they received from the Wood Honors College. The options they were given were "Developed network/lasting connections," "Teamwork skills," "Interdisciplinary analysis skills," "Project management skills," "Critical thinking skills," and "Helped me advance in my career/post-grad studies." The purpose of this question was to help in understanding what alumni actually remember and value from their time in Honors. Based on the results, the most common responses by respondents were critical thinking skills and interdisciplinary analysis skills, which can be seen in Figure 3 below.

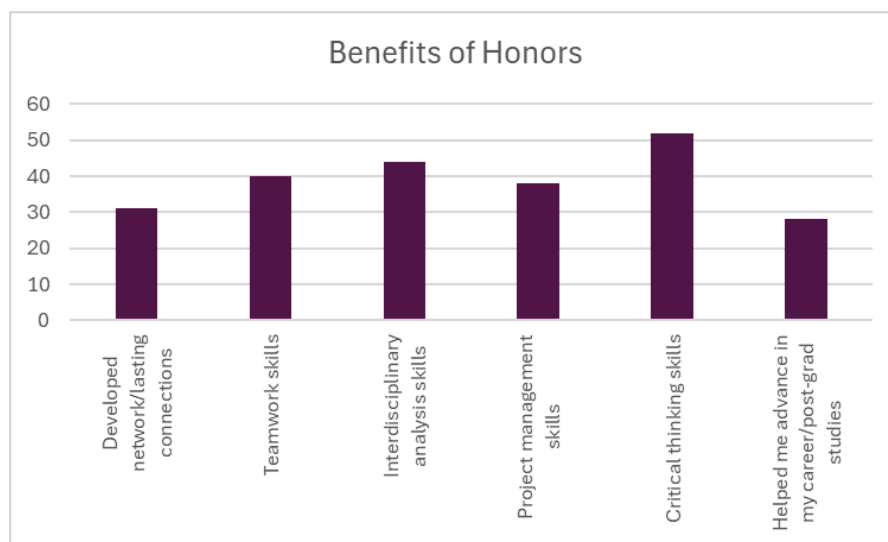


Figure 3. Bar Graph of respondent answers to benefit question

The next question of this section asked respondents about the importance of various aspects of the Wood Honors College. The question was a five-point Likert Scale question ranging from “Very Unimportant” to “Very Important,” with a "Did not Participate" option as well. We converted the responses into averages for each aspect of the Honors College, we removed all "Did not Participate" responses, as these responses would have impacted our averages. Based on these averages, the respondents indicated that the intellectual challenges of Honors, the opportunities for close interaction with faculty, and the community of scholars were the most important to them, which can be seen in Figure 4 below. This is important to know, as it shows us what aspects of Honors to highlight in our alumni marketing efforts, as these were the ones that were the most important to respondents.

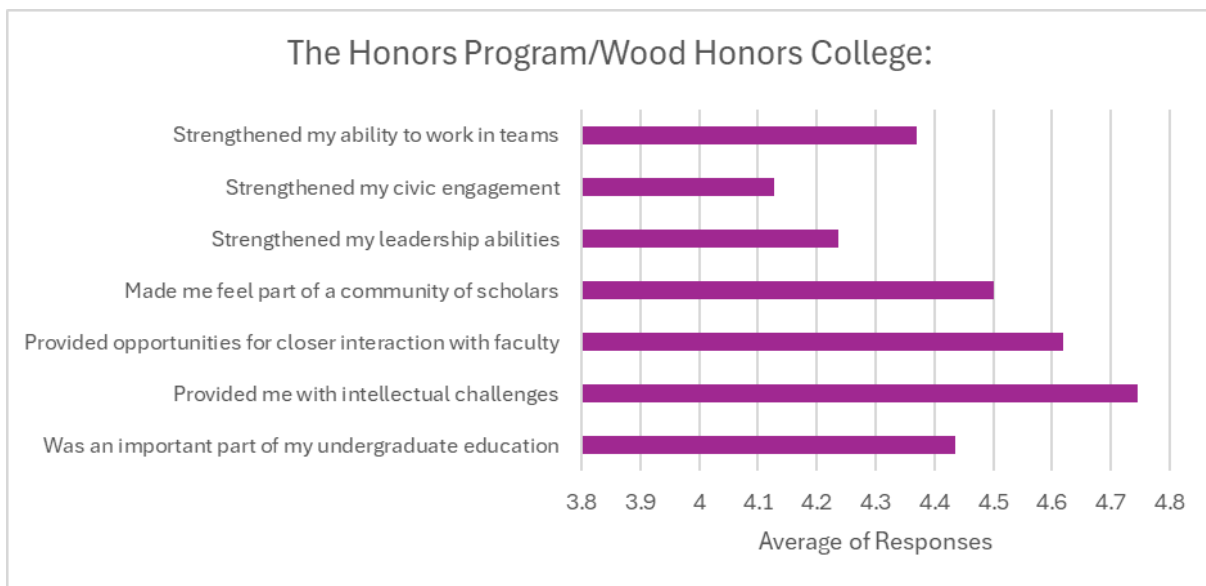


Figure 4. Bar Graph of respondent answers to importance question

The last question of this section asked respondents about the value of some of the components of the Wood Honors College. The question was also a five-point Likert Scale question ranging from Very Invaluable to Very Valuable, with a "Did not Participate" option as well. We converted the responses into averages for each component of the Wood Honors

College, we removed all "Did not Participate" responses, as these responses would have impacted our averages. Based on these averages, the respondents indicated that priority scheduling and the Honors general education courses were the most valuable to them, which matches the responses from earlier in this section, asking participants what they perceived the greatest benefit of Honors to be. The graph displaying the averages are shown in Figure 5 below. The responses of this question help us in our marketing plan as it shows us what alumni value about Honors that they may be willing to come back to talk to current students about.

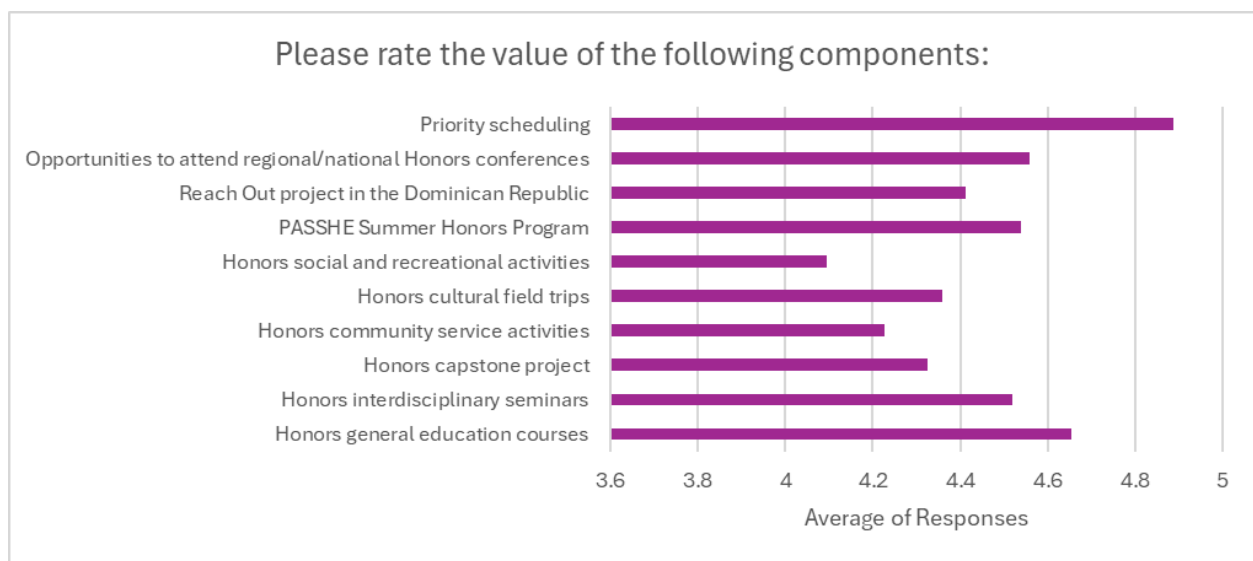


Figure 5. Bar Graph of respondent answers to value question

The final section of the survey contained several qualitative questions. The first question asked participants to check if they were interested in supporting current Honors students in several different ways. 46 out of 80 respondents answered this question. 82% of respondents indicated that they would be interested in participating in an alumni panel, which gives us an opportunity for alumni engagement by creating content around being on a panel.

The next question asked participants to check if they were interested in connecting with other Honors alumni. 32 out of 80 respondents answered this question. 100% of respondents

indicated that they would be interested in participating in an alumni gathering of some form, whether in person or online. This gives us ample marketing opportunities to organize and advertise these gatherings.

The last two questions of the survey asked about our current marketing efforts, asking if respondents follow the Wood Honors College on social media and how they would prefer to communicate (social media, email and/or newsletter). 50 out of 80 respondents answered these questions. 60% of respondents said they follow us on at least one social media platform. Of the 40% of respondents that do not follow us, the reasons they do not follow us were that they do not use social media in general or that they were unaware we have social media. This presents a huge marketing opportunity, as we should be growing awareness of the Honors social media with alumni. This gives us an opportunity to create consistent social media content targeted specifically at alumni. In regard to how alumni prefer to receive communication, 94% of respondents indicated that they preferred email as a form of communication, and only 30% said social media is their preferred method. This presents an opportunity to grow our email marketing. However, if we want to increase the benefit of our social media, we need to increase our posting and engagement so alumni are aware that we have a social media presence.

Overall with the combination of our primary data collected here, and the secondary data of our literature review, which is summarized above, we were able to advance to the next phase of our project.

## Marketing Implications

Based on the research we conducted, we were able to perform a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis and set clear marketing goals and objectives.

### SWOT Analysis

The primary data collected from alumni interviews and surveys was synthesized into a SWOT analysis to identify the internal and external factors influencing the Wood Honors College's marketing potential.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● High brand sentiment (90%+ agreement)</li><li>● Clear value drivers (experiential learning)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Underutilized email channels</li><li>● 40% social media non-follow rate</li><li>● Lack of clear call to action for alumni</li></ul>
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● 100% interest in alumni-to-alumni networking</li><li>● High demand for virtual/in-person gatherings</li><li>● Niche nostalgia content, based on the fond memories of their time in Honors, will create strong positive associations with the Honors brand</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Communication fatigue from university-wide outreach</li><li>● Alumni time constraints</li></ul>

The internal strengths of the Wood Honors College are anchored in a high degree of brand loyalty. With over 80% of respondents willing to participate in panels, the challenge is not a lack of interest but a lack of infrastructure. This is underscored by a primary weakness identified in the survey; while 94% of alumni prefer email communication, Honors currently lacks a consistent email marketing strategy. This gap creates a friction point where alumni are willing to engage, but are not being reached through their preferred channels. Furthermore, the

opportunities for engagement are highly social. The 100% interest rate in alumni-to-alumni networking suggests that the Wood Honors College should pivot its marketing from College-to-Alumni updates to Alumni-to-Alumni connection building. However, this must be balanced against the threat of communication fatigue. Because alumni are inundated with general university requests, the Wood Honors College must leverage its unique niche identity, focusing on the academic and social components identified as most important in Figure 4, to differentiate its messaging from broader, more generic institutional outreach.

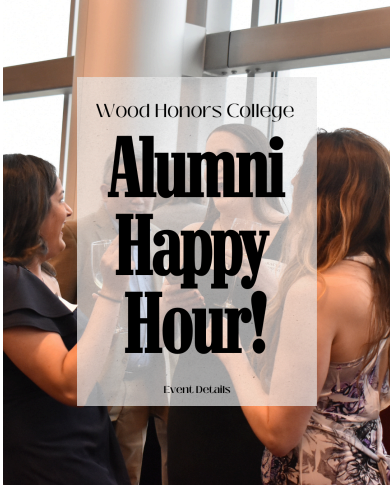

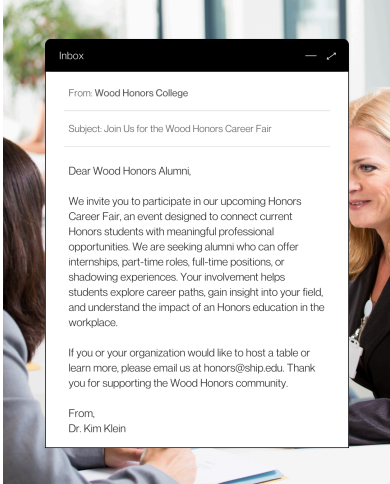
Based on our research and the SWOT analysis, we were able to generate some actionable goals, objectives, strategies, and tactics. We choose to arrange these in a spreadsheet format.



Goal: Reengage Wood Honors College alumni					
Objective:	Generate more likes and shares on the Alumni Facebook page by creating a stronger alumni-focused outreach campaign by December 2026. Our KPIs are a 20% increase in likes and shares.	Strategies:	Create social media posts, mailings, emails, etc. using old photos and memorable Honors moments. Past social media analytics indicate that alumni are more likely to interact with content that is relatable to them.	Tactic:	Highlight alumni accomplishments via social media. Analytics show that alumni are more likely to engage with posts about alumni.
				Tactic:	Create an alumni-focused mail and e-mail campaign.
				Tactic:	Create a monthly email newsletter for alumni to update them about Honors and keep them engaged.
Objective:		Strategies:		Tactic:	

	Begin an initiative to connect current Honors students to alumni through structured events by August 2026. The goal is to connect 20 students to alumni to build stronger mentor-mentee connections.		Create opportunities for alumni to connect with students through coffee chats, service opportunities, and panels. Survey results show that alumni are interested in connecting with students through these avenues.		Host an Honors Career Fair with alumni to offer internships and employment to students.
				Tactic:	Create a one-on-one alumni-student connection opportunity via coffee chats. Alumni expressed interest in connecting with students.
				Tactic:	Invite alumni to participate in various panels for Honors students.
Objective:	Create opportunities for alumni to connect with one another. Survey results show that alumni are interested in connecting with fellow alumni in both virtual and in-person events.	Strategies:	Host semesterly virtual and in-person alumni events by April 2027. Our KPIs will be attendance and registration.	Tactic:	Host regular alumni events to create opportunities to connect with each other.
				Tactic:	Select an Honors alumni as a delegate between the Wood Honors College and alumni. Gather feedback on events.
				Tactic:	

## Actionable Marketing Strategies

After deciding which tactics would be the most effective for the Wood Honors College to engage alumni, we created mock-ups for future Honors student assistants to utilize. With these templates, students can easily create social media and other content to distribute to alumni to continue the work of re engagement. These mock-ups are based on our research, which indicated the best ways to connect with alumni.

Mockup	Channel	Purpose
	<p>Instagram, Facebook, Email</p>	<p>Regular events for alumni to attend, such as a happy hour, will encourage alumni to connect with each other. Survey results indicate that alumni are interested in connecting with fellow alumni in both virtual and in-person events.</p>
	<p>Instagram, Facebook</p>	<p>Inviting alumni to speak to Honors students at panels opens a line of communication between Honors alumni and students. Survey results indicate that alumni are interested in connecting with students and speaking on panels.</p>
	<p>Email</p>	<p>An Honors Career Fair would connect students with alumni. Survey results indicate that alumni are interested in sharing job and internship opportunities with students.</p>

 <p>Calling Wood Honors College Alumni! Join our Coffee Chat Match and connect with a student or alum for a meaningful conversation.</p>	<p>Instagram, Facebook, Email</p>	<p>An alumni-student coffee chat program would connect students and alumni. Survey results indicate that alumni are interested in connecting with current Honors students.</p>
 <p>Wood Honors College Alumni Day in the Life</p>	<p>Instagram, Facebook</p>	<p>The purpose of this reel is to showcase to current students what alumni do in their everyday professional lives, opening a dialogue between students and alumni. Survey results indicate that alumni would be interested in sharing such content.</p>

## Discussion

The results of this study provide a data-driven foundation for the Honors College to move from a passive alumni relationship to an active, omni-channel engagement strategy. By combining the qualitative insights from high-engagement alumni, via the interviews, with the quantitative trends from the broader alumni base, via the survey, several key themes emerge that inform the college’s future marketing efforts.

A significant finding of this research is the disparity between alumni sentiment and active participation. While Figure 2 indicates that nearly 100% of respondents view the Honors College

positively and believe it benefited them, the current engagement levels do not reflect this view. This suggests that the primary obstacle to engagement is not a lack of interest, but rather functional friction. As noted in the literature (Hadrian, 2020), a marketing audit is necessary to identify these friction points. Our survey identified two major friction points. 94% of alumni prefer email, yet the college's primary outreach has been social media-heavy or inconsistent. 40% of non-followers were simply unaware that the Honors College had a social media presence. This confirms that the lack of engagement can be fixed through better and more consistent posting and utilization of email.

The S.W.O.T. analysis highlights a crucial opportunity, the Honors College possesses a niche identity that differentiates it from the broader university. Respondents identified "community of scholars" and "intellectual challenge" as their highest-valued social and educational aspects (Figure 4). In the context of the communication fatigue mentioned in the S.W.O.T. analysis, the Honors College should focus on the nostalgia factor. Our qualitative data shows that "experiential learning" (trips, study abroad, conferences) remains the most vivid and positive memory for alumni. Marketing content that leverages these specific, high-impact memories, such as "Throwback Thursday" posts of D.C. trips, will likely resonate more deeply than generic institutional updates.

Perhaps the most actionable insight is the 100% interest rate in alumni-to-alumni networking. The data suggests that the value proposition for alumni is the opportunity to connect with each other. By implementing the proposed "Alumni Happy Hours" and "Virtual Gatherings," the Honors College shifts its role from a sender of information to a facilitator of community. This aligns with the findings of Islam & Sheikh (2024) regarding the effectiveness of fostering genuine community engagement over simple information dissemination.

The data in Figure 1 shows recent graduates were the most sampled demographic in our sample (2011–2024). While this is common in digital-first research, it presents a strategic challenge. Younger alumni are more likely to engage with current students (mentorship/panels), while older alumni may have more resources to support the Honors College long-term but are currently less connected. The marketing plan must therefore be segmented. Recent alumni should have a focus on "giving back" via panels and career fairs (82% willingness). Older alumni should have a focus on "reconnection" via direct mail or personalized emails, as suggested by (Valenti et al., 2023) for re-engaging "dormant" segments.

Ultimately, the Wood Honors College does not need to "sell" its value to alumni; the alumni already recognize it. Instead, the Honors College must provide clear, low-friction pathways for alumni to be reminded of that value, to encourage engagement. By moving toward a monthly email newsletter, matching the 94% preference, and focusing content on the "scholarly community" and "experiential learning," the Honors College can transform passive goodwill into a robust, self-sustaining alumni network.

## Case Study

To test the findings of our research, we designed and implemented a two-part case-study. Based on the alumni survey, we know that alumni want to be contacted over email and social media. We decided to create an email campaign to be sent out to the alumni to encourage them to follow our social media. The content of the email was focused on connecting alumni with our social media, informing them of the type of content posted on our pages, and providing direct links to our Instagram, Facebook, and Alumni Facebook page. We also encouraged them to reach out to the Honors email account to share their professional achievements to be spotlighted on our social media.

We looked into the engagement analytics of our social media prior to sending out this email blast, to compare to after it is sent out. Prior to sending out the email, our Instagram had 649 followers. There is not a separate alumni page or account on Instagram. The main Honors Facebook page had 955 followers. The Honors Alumni Facebook page had 253 followers.

One week after the initial email was sent out to 774 alumni, 52% opened the email, but only 3% clicked on any of the links. We had five alumni unsubscribe from emails, and four either soft or hard bounced from the inbox. This is contradictory to what we expected, as 94% of our survey respondents indicated they would prefer contact over email. After a week, our Instagram following increased from 649 to 652. Our main Facebook page increased from 955 to 957, and our Alumni Facebook page increased from 253 to 263 followers.

After a week of this email being live, we posted an alumni shout-out post to our social media to see how engagement increased or decreased for this kind of post. Prior to sending out the email, our Instagram averaged 50-60 likes per post, with zero comments on average. There is not a separate alumni page or account on Instagram. The main Honors Facebook page, averaged 5-7 likes per post, generally with no comments and the Honors Alumni Facebook page averages only 2-5 likes per post, with some alumni spotlight posts getting 10-15, again with no comments.

After the post being live for a week, on Instagram the alumni shoutout post got 84 likes, which is above the average. On our main Facebook page, we received 29 likes and three comments on this post which is vastly more than usual. So, we can see that these alumni shoutouts do very well on our social platforms. Overall, this case study proved to be effective and worth repeating in the future. There was an increase in engagement on our social media, and a decently good response to our email.

## Conclusion

The Wood Honors College has a strong foundation to build an effective alumni engagement strategy. Alumni overwhelmingly view their Honors experience positively, value the academic rigor and sense of community it provided, and express genuine interest in staying connected with current students and with one another. The data makes clear that the obstacle to engagement is not apathy, but the absence of a consistent communication strategy that reaches alumni through the right channels and gives them clear opportunities to participate.

The findings reveal several priorities. Email must become the primary channel for alumni outreach, given that 94% of respondents identified it as their preferred method of communication. Social media content, particularly alumni spotlights and experiential learning posts, should be developed with alumni in mind, alongside current students. Structured programming, including alumni panels, career fairs, coffee chats, and semesterly gatherings, will convert passive positive sentiment into active participation.

The case study confirmed that alumni-specific content performs better than general institutional posts among alumni, and that a single email campaign can produce a measurable increase in social media engagement. These results, while preliminary, support the strategic direction outlined in this plan and suggest that consistent implementation will yield continued growth.

The marketing framework developed here is intended to serve as a lasting foundation rather than a one-time effort. With the templates, goals, and tactics provided, future Honors student assistants can continue reaching alumni without starting from scratch. As the Wood Honors College moves forward, this plan offers a practical path for turning alumni interest into sustained, long-term engagement.

## Appendix A

### **Figure A.1 *Initial Interview Email***

Hello \_\_,

Our names are Megan Sawka and Katelyn Snare, and we're student assistants in the Wood Honors College. For our Honors capstone project, we're interviewing alumni to learn more about their experiences in the program and how it has shaped them after graduation.

We were wondering if you would be willing to do a short interview with us. It would take about 20 to 30 minutes and can be scheduled at a time that's convenient for you, either virtually or by phone. Please let us know by Wednesday, September 3, if you're able to participate.

Thank you for considering this. We'd really appreciate your insights.

Best,

Megan Sawka and Katelyn Snare

### **Figure A.2 *Follow-up Interview Email***

Email to Alumni to Schedule Interviews

Hello \_\_,

Thank you for agreeing to an interview! We really appreciate your time. Please sign up for a 30-minute interview spot at the link below. If none of the times work, please let us know. We are more than willing to be flexible!

Link: <https://www.signupgenius.com/go/10C0F48ABAD2BA6F5CE9-58115135-honors>

Thank you,

Katelyn Snare and Megan Sawka

### **Figure A.3 *Interview Questions***

General Demographic Information:

Name

Gender

Undergrad Graduation Year (from Ship)

Major(s) & Minor(s)

Current Occupation

Perception Questions:

Describe your experience in the Wood Honors College.

In what ways were you active/involved in the Wood Honors College?

In what ways did the Wood Honors College benefit you as an undergrad?

In what ways has the Wood Honors College benefitted you post-grad?

Why have you continued to be involved in the Wood Honors College post-graduation?

## Appendix B

### Figure B.1 *Honors Program/College Alumni Survey*

#### Part One: About You

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

(Title / First Name / Last Name / Maiden Name, if applicable)

Street Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City/State/Zip Code: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail Address: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Undergraduate Graduation Year: \_\_\_\_\_

Major(s)/Minor(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Graduate/Professional Studies (list any post-baccalaureate studies you have undertaken/are undertaking):

Institution(s) | Degree(s) | Area(s) of Study | Year Degree Earned

Current Occupation/Job Title: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Part Two: Open-Ended Questions

1. What was your best experience in the Wood Honors College/Honors Program?
2. What was the greatest benefit of the Wood Honors College/Honors Program in your undergraduate experience?
3. Looking back on your Honors experience, what would you like current and prospective Honors students to know?

#### Part Three: Your Wood Honors College/Program Experience

##### Quantitative Perception Questions

Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements:

(1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

- The Wood Honors College/Program met my expectations.
- The Wood Honors College/Honors Program benefitted me as an undergraduate.
- After graduation, I positively view the Wood Honors College/Honors Program.

##### Honors Involvement (Select all that apply)

- Honors Student Organization Officer
- Honors Student Organization Committee Chair
- Honors Resident Assistant
- Worked in the Honors Office

##### Post-Graduation Benefits (Select all that apply)

- Developed network/lasting connections
- Teamwork skills
- Interdisciplinary analysis skills
- Project management skills
- Critical thinking skills
- Helped me advance in my career/post-grad studies

##### Program Value & Components

Please rate the following on a scale of 1–5.

(1 = Very Unimportant, 5 = Very Important)

The Wood Honors College/Honors Program:

- Was an important part of my undergraduate education
- Provided me with intellectual challenges
- Provided opportunities for closer interaction with faculty
- Made me feel part of a community of scholars
- Strengthened my leadership abilities
- Strengthened my civic engagement
- Strengthened my ability to work in teams

Please rate the value of the following components (1 = Very Invaluable, 5 = Very Valuable):

- Honors general education courses
- Honors interdisciplinary seminars
- Honors capstone project
- Honors community service activities
- Honors cultural field trips
- Honors social and recreational activities
- PASSHE Summer Honors Program
- Reach Out project in the Dominican Republic
- Opportunities to attend regional/national Honors conferences
- Priority scheduling

#### **Part Four: Planning for the Future of Honors Education**

I am interested in supporting current Honors students by (check all that apply):

- Participating on an alumni panel (in-person or Zoom)
- Providing an internship opportunity at my place of employment
- Supporting a scholarship for an Honors student
- Learning more about the Honors Alumni Advisory Council
- Participating in the Honors Day of Service with Honors students and other alumni
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

I am interested in connecting with other Honors alumni through (check all that apply):

- Honors Homecoming gathering
- Regional in-person alumni gatherings (preferred location: Shippensburg, Harrisburg, Philadelphia, Washington D.C., Pittsburgh)
- Online alumni gatherings (e.g., lectures, trivia, other: \_\_\_\_\_)
- Other ideas for alumni gatherings: \_\_\_\_\_

Do you follow any of the Honors social media accounts? Why or why not?

How would you prefer to learn about Honors news and upcoming events? (Social media, email, newsletters)

#### **Figure B.2 *Email to alumni with survey and newsletter***

Dear Honors Alumni,

We hope this message finds you well. As we reflect on the past semester and the recent celebration of the 40th anniversary of Honors at Shippensburg University, we are excited to share updates from campus and to reconnect with you through this spring edition of the Honors Newsletter.

\*newsletter link\*

Following the celebration of our 40th anniversary, we want to continue reflecting on the history and future of the Wood Honors College. We are conducting the Honors Alumni Survey as part of our capstone project.

The goal of the survey is to better understand your experiences as students and as alumni. Your feedback will help guide future decisions and strengthen the Honors community for years to come. The survey should take no longer than 5–10 minutes to complete. Please note that your responses will be used strictly for internal purposes and will not be shared with third parties.

We kindly ask that you complete the survey by Friday, October 24, using the link below:

\*survey link\*

Thank you in advance for sharing your thoughts and helping us continue to shape the future of the Wood Honors College.

Megan Sawka & Katelyn Snare

Wood Honors College Seniors

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