



Governor's Honors Program

*A Response to the Carl Vinson Institute of Government's Strategic
Plan for the Georgia Governor's Honors Program*

December 2014

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The Governor's Office of Student Achievement is greatly appreciative of the Carl Vinson Institute of Government (CVIOG). Their research methods have highlighted helpful information about the Governor's Honors Program (GHP), and our agency is looking forward to working to address recommendations and themes that were emphasized in the report. For over 50 years, GHP has been considered a premier educational opportunity for Georgia's best and brightest, academically and artistically gifted and talented students. It is our aim to ensure that GHP remains a model for secondary gifted and talented education in our state for another half-century.

GOSA has chosen to publish the CVIOG report on our public webpage in an effort to provide transparency and further engage the many GHP stakeholders that are interested in ensuring that the program remains a resource of the state of Georgia. We welcome ongoing dialogue with the many contributors to this report, whether they are alumni, parents, school and district coordinators, university stakeholders, and members of the Georgia General Assembly. This document will provide confirmation of the findings in the CVIOG report and further detail on our plans to address the seven themes that emerged from the strategic planning work.

Access to All Georgia's Students

The response from both the 2014 GHP class and the surveyed alumni is clear: a diverse student body enhances the GHP experience exponentially. Whether the student hails from a large, urban 3,000 student high school, or whether he or she attends a smaller high school in a rural area of the state, the majority of 2014 participating students and alumni indicated that the existing cultural, gender, racial and ethnic diversity was a significant strength of the program. The CVIOG report highlights that there is still work to do to further ensure that GHP is a fully diverse and representative program for Georgia's best and brightest. GOSA looks forward to engaging school and district stakeholders to better explain the program and the selection process to ensure that we are actively addressing underrepresentation of certain groups of students, both within the broader program and within certain academic disciplines

(i.e., female representation within STEM courses). Within the next 24 months, we hope to utilize the growing research base around best practices for engaging these types of students in academic enrichment programs. This would include providing targeted statewide workshops to educate underrepresented groups about the GHP experience and course offerings in an effort to motivate students to participate in the selection process.

Making Connections through a Rigorous Curriculum

For many years, GHP has offered a rigorous curriculum. An instructional guidance document from 1994 required staffers to “carefully and thoughtfully define a learning experience, and then help each student structure the inquiry” to ensure that “the education experience (is such that it cannot be accomplished) in their home high school.” Historically, this has allowed GHP to provide students the opportunity to engage in new content. However, as the CVIOG report explains, an increasing share of GHP finalists attend specialized magnet or charter high schools. These schools provide a rigorous academic program across a specialized area of study (performing arts, STEM, etc.) with state-of-the-art equipment and access to college-level classes taught by distinguished faculty members. Additionally many of the specialized STEM schools provide hands-on research opportunities and intensive internship opportunities, which may provide students with career exploration opportunities that would have not been available ten years earlier.

In order for GHP to remain a premier educational opportunity for all students across the state, the program must offer a challenging curriculum that is reflective of 21st century gifted and talented learners and goes beyond what is currently available in their respective high schools. GOSA is committed to working with curricular partners from current and former GHP instructors, the Board of Regents, and local educational agencies (LEAs) and will ensure that curricular frameworks are developed to align with the proposed vision and mission of the program, as articulated by the Strategic Planning

Committee. Additionally, GOSA will work to ensure that the curriculum fosters innovation and empowers today's learner.

Quality Faculty Matters

In order to provide an intensive academic environment at a level commensurate with the student's abilities and prior experiences, the program must be able to attract the most talented teachers from high schools and universities, as well as real-world experts in specific fields. GOSA is committed to recruiting, hiring, and providing on-going professional development opportunities and support for GHP staff to ensure that they are well equipped to deliver high-quality gifted instruction. GOSA realizes that the teaching load is intensive and that quality instructors have a variety of summer programs in which they could choose to participate. In this competitive market, GOSA plans to explore providing additional compensation to faculty for the 2015 summer experience. Additionally, GOSA would like to be able to fund a pre-planning weekend to allow the summer faculty an opportunity to collaborate, plan, and receive specialized training regarding secondary gifted instruction (curriculum implementation, acceleration, and differentiation). Finally, Georgia has a wealth of world renowned leaders in academia, industry, the arts, and policy. GOSA anticipates actively cultivating these leaders to participate in GHP as guest lecturers or visiting scholars in a way that is most meaningful to GHP participants and aligns to the program curriculum.

Program Setting, Operations, and Duration

The program setting is incredibly important to the sustainability of the program. Given the specialized needs of the GHP student population, the teaching and learning facilities must be exceptional and conducive to in-depth study. Additionally, given the age of the student population and the immersive environment, if possible, the program should be conducted in an area that is somewhat remote from larger urban areas. The setting must also provide adequate housing accommodations, instructional support (computer labs, lab equipment, research library, etc.), and performing areas

capable of being comfortably utilized by GHP participants, faculty, and staff members. Towards that end, GOSA is committed to working in cooperation with the Board of Regents and private institutions of higher education in Georgia to ensure that GHP remains in the university setting that is best suited for the program.

GOSA also acknowledges the desire of many GHP stakeholders to return the program from four weeks to six weeks. There are two issues that prevent GOSA from altering the current length of the program. The program has a finite appropriated annual budget that would fund either a greatly reduced number of students for a longer length of time or the current number of students for four weeks. It is important to note that, according to the National Conference of Governors' Schools 1994 directory, the operating budget for GHP was \$1,004,480 for 660 students. The FY15 state appropriation for GHP is \$961,934 for 691 students. Adjusting for inflation and cost of living, the program would have to significantly reduce the number of participating students to operate at six weeks. Additionally, a return to six weeks would also prohibit participation by many students and potential faculty members as school systems in Georgia have varying academic year calendars. Given these reasons, GOSA is choosing to maintain the current program length at this time.

Evaluation and Data Analysis

GOSA strongly agrees with the CVIOG recommendation to provide ongoing evaluation of the program to ensure transparency, accountability, and to identify themes of success and improvement. Going forward, GOSA will continue to survey student participants, faculty and staff, and parents to ensure that the program goals are met and to quickly address potential concerns for subsequent years. GOSA will conduct annual evaluations utilizing survey software for the 2015 and future GHP participating classes. Our agency is deeply committed to meeting the needs of GHP students and the state of Georgia.

Engaging GHP Alumni

The GHP alumni are an extensive, talented, diverse, and well-accomplished resource for the program. GOSA looks forward to continuing to work with GHP alumni to raise awareness of the program, to assist in fundraising opportunities, and to participate in GHP events (staff opportunities, interview events, etc.) in a meaningful way. GOSA looks forward to proactively continuing the conversation with the many alumni who have shared their experiences and vision for program sustainability.

Marketing and Development

The ability to sustain the Governor's Honors Program will depend on maintaining a strong academic program and a diversified funding base. Although GHP is primarily funded through the largesse of the General Assembly, GOSA is determined to pursue additional funding from donations and in-kind contributions. GOSA recognizes that in order to solicit financial gifts of this nature, the agency must market the benefits of the program, both to individual participants and to policy makers/potential donors. GOSA is in the process of establishing a 501(c)3 that would allow the agency to receive such charitable contributions.

Conclusion

GOSA firmly believes that GHP is an important asset to the state of Georgia. Gifted and talented students hold tremendous potential for the leadership of the state. The CVIOG report allows GOSA the opportunity to celebrate the strengths of the program and provides significant opportunities for improvement. GOSA plans to work collaboratively with a variety of stakeholders to ensure that GHP is a sustainable model of secondary gifted instruction for Georgia's brightest and most creative students.