

The White Paper on the Benjamin Franklin Scholars Program



Student Committee on Undergraduate Education
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Abstract: Since its inception, The Benjamin Franklin Scholars Program (BFS) has provided a unique opportunity to undergraduates at Penn. With the aim of creating a “community of scholars” who are “committed to the power of ideas” and “hungry for knowledge,” the BFS program has sought a select group of students who would excel in an environment of rigorous intellectual pursuit. The Student Committee on Undergraduate Education (SCUE) believes this is a valuable mission for the BFS program; however, as the University begins to remodel BFS, SCUE would like to take this opportunity to propose ideas designed to reinvigorate the program. We envision a Benjamin Franklin Scholars program that cultivates an intellectual community, beginning freshman year, that extends beyond the classroom. Through a residential program, common coursework experiences, and a cohort system, BFS could be a means for building a network of scholars from the time students enter Penn. The first two years of BFS courses would culminate in a more intensive program of study for upperclassmen, with opportunities to participate in challenging Tutorials or complete an interdisciplinary capstone thesis. SCUE feels that the Benjamin Franklin Scholars program has the potential to serve as a means through which the University can provide talented, intellectually curious students with an innovative, enriched education.

Methodology

This document was compiled based on a two-year discussion SCUE has had about the status of Honors Programs at Penn. Interviews conducted include, but are not limited to, Vice Provost Andrew Binns, Dr. Robert Giegengack, Dr. Paul Heiney, Dr. Alan Charles Kors, Dr. Rob Nelson, Dr. Peter Struck and Ms. Linda Wiedmann.

Original Purpose of BFS

Established in the 1970s by President Meyerson, The Benjamin Franklin Scholars Program was created with the purpose of making Penn more competitive with other Ivies, by wooing top candidates who might otherwise matriculate to Harvard or Yale. Through offering students the opportunity to become part of an “honors program,” BFS initially served this purpose well and succeeded in attracting top students to the university.

The early years of the Benjamin Franklin Scholars program coincided with a period of transformation for the University. Under the leadership of Lee Stetson, Dean of Admissions from 1978, Penn’s image evolved from that of a school that was “everybody’s second choice in the Ivies” to an institution where top applicants were competing for admittance. According to Professor Robert Giegengack, former Director of BFS, over the next 40 years, “the whole atmosphere [at Penn] changed because more undergraduates would rather be here than anywhere else.” The University of Pennsylvania now maintains a yield rate comparable to that of other elite institutions, and serves as a top choice for the country’s most competitive applicants.

The Status Quo

Despite Penn’s transformation as a university, BFS has not changed significantly

over the years. The program still serves its original and possibly outdated purpose: attracting top applicants to Penn. Currently BFS has an uncertain position - what is the role of an "honors" program at a select university that draws such a large number of impressive applicants? The program has struggled with this question, and the current function of BFS - as well as the unique purpose it serves within the Penn community - is still unclear. The BFS program continues to seek "undergraduates committed to performing at the highest level of intellectualism," largely through the University's admissions process (though some scholars are admitted as sophomores); however, the role that BFS plays in these students' academic lives at Penn remains ambiguous. While BFS does present elements of an enriched curriculum, the degree to which the program is a cohesive intellectual experience that truly impacts a student's education, is still unclear.

The BFS program's strength continues to be the access it provides to exceptional advising, small seminars, and research opportunities. In addition to benefitting from dedicated and knowledgeable advisors, scholars also receive preferential enrollment in Benjamin Franklin Seminars, intensive courses covering a broad range of topics and taught by talented professors. Though these courses are extremely rigorous, they are often the most intellectually stimulating classes available to undergraduates; furthermore, limited enrollment facilitates lively discussions between faculty and students, making these seminars some of the most rewarding and highly-sought courses at Penn. As two-thirds of seats in BFS seminars are reserved for BFS Scholars, these students enjoy greater access to some of Penn's best curricular options. These opportunities, however, are merely advantages offered by the BFS program - the true purpose of the program in the Penn community today remains vague. While scholars may, and often do, participate more easily in BFS courses, most are unconvinced that these courses serve a meaningful role in their education; moreover, the intellectual community promised by the BFS program has not arrived at its full potential. Thus, the Benjamin Franklin Scholars program has reached a moment when it has not only outgrown its original role, but, more importantly, has gained the opportunity to take on a new identity here at Penn.

Our Vision - Years 1 and 2

The Student Committee on Undergraduate Education believes that the Benjamin Franklin Scholars program's fundamental mission to provide intellectually-curious students with the opportunity to enrich their education, is an intrinsically valuable objective; however, SCUE has a vision for an innovative, remodeled BFS program that would provide a more coherent, and ultimately more meaningful experience. The model we propose is composed of two segments, the first, bridging freshman and sophomore years, would focus on building an intellectual community of scholars through a residential program, common courses, and a cohort system. This would be followed, beginning in junior year, by a broadening of curricular options, with a focus on intensive courses such as small seminars and Tutorials. Scholars would also be encouraged to complete an honors thesis, with the option of it being

interdisciplinary. This progression would facilitate the cultivation of an intellectual community and new academic opportunities, while continuing to offer BFS students the advantages of the current program.

Residential Program

SCUE feels the first two years should focus on the development of an intellectual community. Benjamin Franklin Scholars, as highly curious students, will benefit from an exchange of ideas, as well as from a system of mutual support and encouragement with peers engaged in similar academic ventures. A residential program, through which students can develop ties beyond the classroom, will foster interaction and collaboration between scholars in a non-academic setting. The Benjamin Franklin Scholars Program has, in the past, experimented with a residential aspect, with mixed success; however, we believe that a residential component could be beneficial to the new BFS program. Intellectual development is not limited to the classroom, and providing scholars with opportunities to grow beyond the realm of coursework is equally important in creating an intellectual community. A challenge, however, is to ensure that residents in the BFS program are still able to be exposed and live with other groups of people as well.

Common Course

The BFS program should also aim to encourage the development of a sense of community in the classroom, during freshman and sophomore years. In this regard, we believe that a common course experience in a cohort system, not unlike that which Wharton students receive in MGMT 100, would provide an early opportunity for teamwork and community building among scholars. This course could be tied to the theme year, which would not only expand the scope of the Provost's theme year, but also allow each class of BFS scholars to have a unique experience. In addition, it would hopefully fulfill a number of the College's General Requirements, which freshmen are often focused on meeting during their first year.

Research Seminars

While the focus of the BFS program over these first two years will largely be the cultivation of a community, SCUE also feels this is an ideal time to develop an academic skill set to help BFS Scholars derive the greatest benefit from their time at Penn. One way in which the BFS program could encourage this progress is through Freshman Research Seminars, a new course model that SCUE has been developing over the past year. This model is designed to introduce students to Penn's broad research community by equipping them with the skills, methods, and confidence necessary to engage in original research as an undergraduate. Through the Freshman Research Seminars, scholars could become acclimated to the University's academic environment, build a relationship with a member of the faculty, and learn fundamental techniques and approaches to research in a variety of disciplines. Though SCUE's work on the Freshman Research Seminar model is still ongoing, we feel that this model could serve an important purpose in the Benjamin Franklin Scholars program. By establishing a foundation for research in the freshman year,

scholars would be best prepared to pursue independent investigation later in their undergraduate careers.

Thus, the first two years of the Benjamin Franklin Scholars program would focus on fostering an intellectually stimulating community both within and beyond the classroom, while also offering students the opportunity to undertake more individual challenges, such as a Freshman Research Seminar. Junior year, however, would introduce more opportunities for individual exploration and growth.

Our Vision - Years 3 and 4

The key to years 3 and 4 in the BFS program is students' exposure to the BFS seminar. Currently, the BFS seminar makes up the core of the program. SCUE feels that these are possible areas of focus for the BFS seminars in the final two years of the program.

Integration of PSL

Through small seminars on narrowly-focused topics, scholars would delve deep into specific areas of academic interest. These seminars could provide an occasion to explore interdisciplinary topics or experiment with a Problem-Solving Learning (PSL) model. As a distinctive pedagogy that challenges students to find solutions to real-life, relevant problems, the PSL model is one that could appeal to the inquisitive, highly-motivated Benjamin Franklin Scholar. By nature, PSL engages students in an interactive learning style and provides a unique academic experience for students who seek unconventional intellectual challenges. PSL courses currently available at Penn include those offered through the Netter Center's Academically Based Community Service (ABCS) program (many of which are currently offered in BFS). However, other advanced and specialized PSL courses could be academically stimulating for Benjamin Franklin Scholars who are interested in investigating real-life problems. The former Ideas in Action courses, previously run by the Fels Institute of Government, might also be revived, and could offer another potential avenue for PSL. In these ways, Problem-Solving Learning is an innovative academic model that demands a practical approach and critical analysis, and one that we believe would be appealing to curious scholars who wish to apply their knowledge and talents.

Tutorials

Tutorials provide another intellectually stimulating way for Scholars to engage with the academic material. The Tutorial System, a model that originated at Oxford University, provides students with the opportunity to learn through intensive written work, critique, and discussion. Students are paired and assigned a "tutor" (a professor), with whom they meet on a weekly basis. At each session, one student presents an essay, to be examined by the tutor and his peer. The two students dictate the course of the discussion, while the tutor mediates - thus, both students have an opportunity to critique and to be critiqued, while challenging each other and themselves. The Tutorial is an especially rigorous course; however, it can also be an exceptionally valuable and rewarding intellectual experience. Furthermore,

the Tutorial would offer Benjamin Franklin Scholars a truly distinctive experience, above and beyond the traditional classroom experience.

Thesis Capstone

The unique opportunities offered in junior and senior year would ideally culminate in a capstone thesis project, which would bring a sense of cohesion to four years worth of coursework. One possibility for this project is an interdisciplinary thesis, through which scholars could draw from numerous interests or experiences among a variety of disciplines. As the aim of the Benjamin Franklin Scholars program is to encourage intellectually curious students to pursue a broad, "total education," we feel that an interdisciplinary thesis opportunity would best allow students to incorporate their various experiences into a cohesive project. The foundation for such a program already exists - current BFS students have the option of completing an interdisciplinary thesis outside of a department, under the guidance of a faculty member and with the course designation BFS 999. Currently this is not a widely used option; however, with the infrastructure already in place, there is much potential to make an interdisciplinary thesis project an integral part of the new Benjamin Franklin Scholars program.

Another idea is to have a final class that includes all BFS students who wrote a thesis. In this senior seminar, the students could be required to present their thesis, communicating the specialized knowledge they have gained within their field to their peers who will mostly be in other fields.

Thus, SCUE's vision for a new program seeks to incorporate common course experiences, individual growth, and unique academic opportunities into one coherent, multifaceted, comprehensive model, based on a foundation of intellectual community.

Administration

BFS Advisory Board

SCUE believes that an integral aspect of the reorganization of the BFS program should be the creation of a BFS Undergraduate Advisory Board. An advisory board would allow a group of students to become leaders in the program, guiding the community of scholars toward specific goals and mentoring younger BFS scholars unfamiliar with the program. Ideally, the board would be composed of representatives from all four classes, thus giving each class an investment in the program's events and activities. Having organized and supervised the early progress of the CURF Undergraduate Advisory Board in 2008, SCUE would be in a position to create a BFS Advisory Board housed within the Center for Undergraduate Research and Fellowships (CURF). This board would be an independent entity within several semesters, capable of planning events and facilitating communication within the program.

Admissions

With regard to admissions, the nature of the Benjamin Franklin Scholars Program's historical role in the University's admissions process inevitably complicates admission into the program itself. SCUE feels that the current practice of inviting students in to the BFS program upon admission to Penn should continue; however, we believe that opportunities for undergraduate students to be accepted into the program should be expanded. For example, one idea is to allow students to apply for the program when they apply to Penn. Presently, it is extremely difficult for students to become Benjamin Franklin Scholars in their freshman or sophomore years. It is sometimes the case that a student's high school record may not accurately reflect his or her potential to be a successful scholar - consequently, we feel that students' participation in BFS courses or engagement in research should be more heavily weighed factors for admissions later in a student's Penn career.

The Relationship between BFS and the Four Undergraduate Schools

SCUE believes that BFS should be thought of as a home for honors programs in each of the four schools. Currently, Engineering (Rachleff Scholars Program), Nursing (Nursing Undergraduate Honors Program), and Wharton (Joseph Wharton Scholars) all have their own honors programs.

With the creation of Integrated Studies, the College will now have its own Honors program. In fact, it seems as if the first two years of community building would most likely be implemented in the College through Integrated Studies.

SCUE believes that JWS, Nursing Undergraduate Honors Program, and Rachleff Scholars should also consider creating their own community-building exercises through unique first-year curriculums and possibly residential programs as well.

For example, JWS provides a model for the growth of Honors programs within schools. In its current form, JWS connects admission as well as much of their curriculum to the BFS plan of study. The program also has a common course that is taken in the freshman year. But it does not have the residential component.

After the first two years of community building, the four programs would come together for the final two years of BFS seminars. In this way, CURF and BFS would largely serve as a hub and home for honors programs in all four schools. The BFS Honors program would have school-based as well as University-wide aspects built into them for a cohesive four-year experience.

Conclusion

The Benjamin Franklin Scholars program has the potential to offer a unique opportunity for Penn students; however, the role and purpose of this program in the Penn community are at a moment of re-imagining. SCUE believes that the BFS program has a solid infrastructure and a valuable mission on which to build an innovative new model. We feel that by combining common experiences with individual exploration, unique academic options, and a strong sense of community,

Penn can place itself at the forefront of elite universities and provide an unparalleled intellectual experience.