

Title: Honors Programs in Community Colleges: A Review of Recent Issues and Literature

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Abstract:

The author examined information about honors programs and curricula in 38 community colleges and districts in 19 states from a 24-year period (1974 to 1998). Four primary issues framed the literature review: why colleges have honors programs, what the stated goals are for such programs, how honors curricula are structured, and whether honors programs succeed. Both motivations and stated goals varied among the colleges and districts, but honors programs generally are designed to recognize and meet the needs of excellent students and to encourage excellence. Honors courses take several forms, but many programs rely heavily on special sections of core curriculum courses. Few published reports provide longitudinal data on honors program effectiveness but rely on data from student questionnaires that indicate high satisfaction levels. Nevertheless, some studies report program dropout problems. The author asserts the need for careful and balanced evaluative studies of honors programs.

This review of honors programs and their curricula in comprehensive community colleges is based upon an examination of prescriptive literature outlining such programs and on reports about a number of them, either by researchers or participants. In all, information related to 38 colleges and districts in 19 states was reviewed (see the Appendix to this article for a list). Four major questions framed this study: Why did those colleges that have honors programs choose to do so? What are the stated goals of honors programs? How are honors curricula structured? Do the programs succeed?

Although some of the reports include at least implicit responses to all of these questions, most do not. Because published reports cover a 24-year period from 1974 to the present and new programs today have the advantage of building on two decades of other schools' experiences, comparing programs per se seems inappropriate. No source with which this author is familiar, not even the standard National Profile of Community Colleges: Trends and Statistics, 1997-1998 (Phillipe, 1997), lists schools with honors programs or provides program outlines. Therefore, any valid comparison or statistical evaluation of contemporary programs is, at present, not possible. The handiest source is, in fact, Roueche, Parnell and Kuttler's (1997) 1,001 Exemplary Practices in America's Two-Year Colleges, which gives thumbnail sketches of 13 honors programs in nine states.

This study was designed to provide a global answer to the following question: What are honors programs doing on American community college campuses?

Why Do Community Colleges Choose to Have Honors?

In the 1960s, a strong social movement for egalitarianism manifested itself in the community college emphasis on open access and attention to less well-prepared students. By the late 1970s, however, social and economic trends forced many to consider the implications of this emphasis on access over quality. Typical of this new critique was McKeague's comment that in community colleges "bright students are often unchallenged as instructors tend to concentrate on students who are having difficulty understanding course content" (1984, p. 9).

The refrain that community colleges were serving all comers except well-prepared, highly skilled, and motivated students emerged in the mid-1980s: "In our headlong rush to attain equity for all citizens, the educational needs of our ablest and most highly motivated students were not being met by community colleges" (Behrendt, 1984, p. 3). Cohen (1985) lambasted the "perversion of the comprehensive mission of the community college into a narrow obsession with career training and serving the least able" (p. 3). Lehner

(1984) lamented that the "largely ignored segment of the [community] college population has been the gifted student" (p. 3). Pflaum, Pascarella, and Duby (1985) drew on the behavioral study of R. Moos in their study of the commuter campus of the University of Illinois in Chicago. Moos developed the theory of progressive conformity, which posits that students will respond in kind to rigorous or slack peers and teachers. Hence, this indicates the obvious need for at least one program in the school that embodies high standards of academic achievement. By 1989, Skau concluded that "within the past decade, more attention has been focused on the needs of motivated high ability students and this has [led] to a greater interest in honors programs" (p. 3).

Indeed, the 1980s saw a shift in emphasis in community college culture from egalitarian access, which had largely been achieved, to academic quality (Behrendt, 1984). Higher ability students were entering community colleges because of convenience and rising costs at four-year institutions, and more mature learners were returning to school for various reasons. The 1984 ERIC Digest report on community college honors stated that such programs "serve the dual purpose of meeting the needs of a significant segment of the two-year college student body and of meeting increased public demand for educational quality" (p. 2). In 1982, Friedlander had set the tone for honors apologists with a list of rationales behind honors programs: (a) to help meet the needs of all the people; (b) to strengthen program quality, especially in general education; (c) to attract and retain good students and faculty; and (d) to enhance the public reputation of the school (p. 2).

These prescriptions found their way into many program proposals and reports. "Honors programs, then, can help the comprehensive community college meet its commitment to make excellence available to all of its students" (McKeague, 1984, p. 6). Honors programs were to be "a coordinated response to the real needs of a substantial number of students" (Bay, 1978, p. 18); "serve the needs of all students, the bright as well as the average and the remedial" (Piland & Gould, 1982, p. 120); "gain [for Moraine Valley Community College] a prestigious reputation within the community it serves as well as within the academic [community] for the academic excellence it nurtures" (Lehner, 1984, p. 3); and serve as a foundation for "the college's commitment to serve superior students" (Thomas, 1983, p. 42). Rankin (1989) noted that a strong honors program might encourage "high school counselors to speak more positively about the college to their gifted advisees" (p. 11), thus over time improving the overall quality of the school's student body and feeding its honors program further.

Certainly one of the most powerful arguments for an honors program is its role in preparing superior students for transfer to high quality baccalaureate programs, thus better serving the students and the community college's reputation. California's Master Plan for Higher Education advocates making transfer concerns a "central part of the mission of the system" and a "central area of faculty responsibility" (Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, 1996, p. 1). The Academic Senate in Sacramento ties programs like honors in the two-year colleges to the bigger picture of success in transfer through faculty mentoring, high retention, strong academic preparation, and "the perception of capability to transfer" (pp. 6-7). According to Ruiz and associates (1984), an honors program likewise plays an important part in the Hostos Community College Integrated Transfer Program to CUNY senior colleges, as it encourages and prepares "above average students to continue their education" (p. 10). The Hostos program was funded by the Ford Foundation as part of an integrated effort to establish successful models for encouraging transfer (the Urban Community College Transfer Opportunities Program). From the perspective of the Foundation, an honors program is a key to successful transfer in so far as it "emphasize[s] the reading- and writing-intensive environment that students would experience on four-year campuses" (Donovan, 1992, p. 2).

In every program report that includes such information, one finds majorities of students already in honors programs intending to transfer for baccalaureate study: 66.2% (Lucas et al., 1995); 50% (Day, 1982); 60% (San Diego Community College District, 1986); 55.8% (Abood, 1993); and 69% (Piland & Abzell, 1984). Eaton (1994) asserts that collegiate-level courses, including honors, promote greater access to baccalaureate degrees, especially for the lower-income student. As programs develop further, transfer rates, both to four-

year institutions in general and to highly selective institutions in particular, will doubtless play an influential role in program evaluations.

What Are the Stated Goals for Community College Honors Programs?

Goals for honors programs follow rather predictable patterns that stem from the general rationale for honors and the functions that honors are supposed to perform. Goals are rarely stated verbatim in reports and must, at times, be drawn from statements about goals or objectives of program elements. For example, in an early report (1974) on St. Petersburg's honors courses, Sampson states simply that they "should stimulate students to a higher plane of achievement rather than [do] more of what regular sections do" (p. 6). Motlow State Community College in Tullahoma, Tennessee, recently created an "integrated honors program which addresses, in an interdisciplinary fashion, the richness of our cultural heritage and the skills necessary to adapt to and profit from change"; it is meant to "enrich our regular curriculum with some of the interdisciplinary materials and approaches that have proven successful" (Motlow State Community College, 1997, p. 5). The 1983 report on Miami-Dade Community College's Emphasis on Excellence Program, which incorporated honors courses, stated its program goals as follows: To challenge, stimulate, and involve superior students with "high academic standards and ambitious career aspirations" (Thomas, 1983, p. 42). North Arkansas Community College's goals for honors include assisting students in being better citizens; inculcating habits, skills, and attitudes to enrich life; exposing students to ideas and knowledge that shaped the world; and allowing the students to relate their fields to the "entirety of the human experience" (Terrill, 1991, p. 10).

The 1994 evaluation of the Maricopa (Arizona) District's 13-year-old honors program cites its primary goal as follows, "to offer academically motivated students an opportunity to expand further their educational and career horizons" (Crooks & Haug, 1997, p. 487). It goes on to list four specific goals: (a) to create a climate of excellence in the school and community; (b) to recognize and reward the talent and motivation of outstanding students and faculty; (c) to promote a sense of scholarship and community in and among colleges; and (d) to raise awareness of the quality and variety of educational services at Maricopa Community College District (Crooks & Haug, 1994). Five years earlier, Skau (1989) reported Maricopa's goals in similar and even more canonical terms: to attract and retain superior students, to recognize and meet their needs, and to reward these students; to improve the image of the college; to challenge and satisfy the faculty; and to serve as a focal point for experimentation on innovative courses, services, and programs. One senses some refinement of the goals over time, for example from improving the image of the college to raising awareness of its quality, but they seem to have remained fairly constant.

In 1986, Heck summarized the honors program goals he found expressed in the literature as follows: to recognize and meet the unique needs of talented and motivated students; to encourage a high level of excellence; to attract and retain talented and motivated students; to benefit the whole campus; to enhance the school's public image; to challenge and reward the faculty; to give academic balance to the curriculum; to serve as a center for innovation; to provide incentives and recognition for excellent students; and to attract and retain faculty. Interestingly, Heck omitted both career and transfer enhancement, key themes that would later be added by a number of programs. Would such a survey of program goals today produce a very similar list?

Although such goals clearly flow from both generic and institution-specific rationale, they provide little guidance for shaping honors programs or curricula. Any combination of goals might be matched with any set of program or curriculum elements, and, indeed, neither could be predicted from a study of the other. The literature seems to suggest that a good deal of modeling was at work, with schools matching a rather limited number of goals with a rather limited number of program and curriculum options.

How Are Honors Curricula Structured?

Honors courses take a number of forms. The simplest is the "in-course" option; students may convert any standard course into an honors course by completing additional requirements, usually in the form of labs, research projects, or creative endeavors. This keeps the high-ability students in these courses while affording them the opportunity to enhance their experience and transcript. Coming Community College in New York relies exclusively on this approach (Roueche, Parnell, & Kuttler, 1997). Also quite common and simple to administer is the independent study or directed reading-and-research course mentored by a single faculty member. This usually builds upon previous coursework, and allows both student and teacher to move beyond the usual survey classroom experience in a highly individualized fashion.

More commonly, honors programs rely heavily on special sections of core curriculum courses. Friedlander (1982) suggested that such courses provide "more opportunities for creative thought and discussion as well as research and questioning" (p. 2). Palo Alto Community College describes its courses as having been "revised and augmented so as to provide additional academic rigor and to require scholarship beyond usual expectations" (Roueche, Parnell, & Kuttler, 1997, p. 674). In their 1984 survey of 19 programs, McKeague et al. (1984) found a clear pattern of "enrichment" in these kinds of courses: more reading (88%); more discussion (88%); independent study or research (81%); problem-solving (81%); more writing (81%); higher-level critical thinking development (75%); and so on. One great advantage of these types of courses, as with "in-course" experiences, is that the course credit is easily transferable, whereas special courses may prove problematic, a point made about Nassau Community College in New York, where the honors program is composed entirely of these special sections with 10 to 12 students in each (Roueche, Parnell, & Kuttler, 1997).

Specially-designed honors courses occupy a major place in several programs. These may range from small, one-credit seminars to sequences of courses designed to fulfill the general education core requirements. Many are interdisciplinary and often thematically based. For example, Nevada's Clark County Community College ties its honors curriculum directly to its Greenspun Center for Technology, with courses concentrating on word-processing, computer languages and business software, science fiction, history of technology, technological values, and technical writing (Roueche, Parnell, & Kuttler, 1997). Motlow (Tennessee) State's two-course honors sequence centers on "the culture of Appalachia as a microcosm of America," especially in racial terms (Motlow State, 1997, p. 3). In 1996, Fresno City College participated in the American Association of Community Colleges' "Exploring America's Communities" project, during which time "[t]he college's Honors colloquia included several conversations on the meaning of diversity, ethnic identity and commonalities of American culture (to the extent one exists)" (Fresno City College, 1997, p. 5).

Although these courses may well stimulate and satisfy the mind, will they satisfy admissions officers at four-year institutions? Though virtually never discussed, this is a very important issue that community college leaders involved in creating honors curricula must confront. Coordination, and even close cooperation, with local colleges or universities can and does work, as in the California system (Roueche, Parnell, & Kuttler, 1997; Donovan, 1992), but students who desire to move beyond the community college's normal transfer options may have difficulties transferring interdisciplinary courses or sequences.

Some schools (such as Nassau and Coming) rely on one type of course, but most blend course types into a set of options, some number of which a student needs to complete for an honors credential. Some of these may be mandatory and often involve critical thinking and writing seminars. In their 1984 study, McKeague and associates (1984) displayed the frequency of course types in their 19 programs: 84% had special honors sections of standard courses, 68% had special courses, 63% had interdisciplinary courses, 53% had in-course honors options, and 53% had special research opportunities. In 1985, Cohen suggested the following typology of honors curricula: course-centered programs with honors sections of regular courses, which he sees as inexpensive and useful, but a sign of a weak institutional commitment; prescribed curricula, which may last a full year, be holistic, and present a variety of options; core-oriented programs that revolve around a common theme in an interdisciplinary manner, and that may in the process enhance some transferable skills

and cognitive-attitudinal development, though possibly at the expense of content; individualized or contract courses, which are easy, inexpensive, adaptable, and flexible; or comprehensive programs that use two or more approaches.

Although not discussed in the literature surveyed, certain factors no doubt influence the shape of a college's honors program. Though goals seem to have little influence beyond rationalizing such a program, the following probably do determine the options chosen: attitudes of the administration; size of the school; demographics of the clientele; region (including whether the college is rural or urban); relationship of the school with local four-year institutions; resources (both staff and financial); faculty support or opposition; community support; and an institutional history of offering honors (success begets persistence, failure reticence).

The true honors program, then, is a composite of curricular options and extracurricular opportunities designed to support the development of a motivated and challenged core of bright students. It also has a positive effect on the faculty involved, as suggested by adopted goals, prescriptive literature as in Friedlander (1982, 1983) and Cohen (1985), and program evaluations. In his study of mid-career faculty growth, Cohen suggests four benefits that honors programs provide to participating faculty: minimal commitment, decreased size of classes leads to relatively large benefits for both faculty and students, increased intimate contact with high ability and motivated students, and an augmented level of overall satisfaction. If the program is successful, it seems that everyone gains.

Do the Curricula and Programs Succeed?

Nolan and Gill (1981) suggest the following steps in evaluating programs such as honors programs using a faculty owned and operated model: (a) develop a list of exit competencies; (b) create questionnaires for current students and alumni, for non-persisters, and for the employers or university professors of past participants; (c) distribute the questionnaires; (d) tabulate results; (e) evaluate the data in light of survey validity; and (f) distribute the results to stakeholders, highlighting effectiveness, need for change, and guidelines for future developments. Most program reports are dated a few scant years after inception, so little may be found in the way of longitudinal data, and few of the published reports follow this model. In fact, most go beyond the subjects suggested to include faculty and administrators and to use methods beyond questionnaires.

Skau (1989) notes that evaluation is vital and that students, faculty, administrators, and the program director and committee all "have a concern for the integrity and quality of the program and all should be part of the evaluative process" (p. 6). Methods of assessment found in reports include classroom visits, telephone interviews, focus group interviews, tabulation of student data, conferences among participating faculty, and self-evaluations, in addition to questionnaires.

Most evaluations begin with profiles of the students involved, including both demographic information and records of participation (such as persistence and grades). Like college or university-level honors programs, community college programs tend to serve largely White female audiences with the requisite academic credentials. According to questionnaires, cost is the largest determinant of attendance at the community college. The average (mean, modal, or median) age of participating students varies widely among institutions: eight Florida and Illinois schools showed 59% at 17 to 18 years of age (Piland & Abzell, 1984); the College of Lake County in Illinois showed 97% between ages 17 and 25 in 1995 (Bulakowski & Townsend, 1995); female Arizona honors graduates, however, had an average age of 36 (Dykus & Newlon, 1995), and the San Diego District (1986, 1987) reported that more than 50% of participants were over 29, with a modal age over 34. San Diego further reported that over 25% already had a college degree, and 65% had previous college experience. Racially speaking, Whites tend to be overserved whereas minorities are underrepresented, though patterns are broadly in line with overall college demographics. Furthermore, honors

students tend to stay in school longer and maintain higher grade point averages (though honors faculty admit to skewing grades to the high end).

According to Lucas and associates (1995), honors students earn slightly over 10% more income after graduation than the norm for the school's graduates. They also cite a higher rate of transfer to four-year institutions beyond the level of state college. Nonetheless, they admit that there is "no clear evidence, other than the colleges they transferred to, that honors students gained any more from their education at Harper College than did the general population" (p. 3). Because the average number of honors courses completed by participants was 1.5, the weak conclusions may reflect the slight exposure as much as any ineffectiveness on the part of the individual courses.

"There is a paucity of empirical data documenting the positive effects of community college honors programs on recruitment, retention, and public image," wrote Bulakowski and Townsend in 1995 (p. 486). In the aggregate, however, these are matters for the institution rather than the individual student or teacher. Crooks and Haag (1994) claim that "the value of a program must be determined by examining the perceptions of the program's major participants" (p. 493), which they proceeded to do for the Maricopa system. Not surprisingly, the results were positive all around. Nonetheless, other studies suggest problems of dropout from the program or the school: For example, San Diego lost one-third of its students the spring of 1987, its second year; Bucks County Community College had to discontinue honors courses in 1988 because of lack of participation (Rankin, 1989). Other studies suggest that although many students may join programs, few complete them; this is especially true of highly structured ones.

Conclusions

Despite the evidence suggesting that satisfaction levels are high and more tangible results are lacking, programs continue to be devised, then innovate and thrive and fail. Roueche, Parnell, and Kuttler's (1997) 13 programs are all success stories, and their participation growth rates suggest that students are eager to join up. North Arkansas Community College's honors program grew from 25 students to 123; Merced Community College's program (California) from 10 to over 100; Pierce College in Los Angeles turns away 75% of applicants to their program; and the Eastern Utah Honors Residence claims a retention rate of 97%. The rationale is growing hoary with age, the demand for "quality" in these colleges is continuing and growing, and the transfer function of community colleges is increasing in importance. Combined with general patterns of student, faculty, and administrator satisfaction, and relatively low costs of provision, honors programs appear to have found a genial home in the modern comprehensive community college with few philosophical complaints about elitism.

The very popularity of the concept, however, should call forth further careful and balanced studies of what has worked and, perhaps more importantly, what has not and why. As the role and importance of the community college in America continue to evolve, so also will the place and role of honors programs within it. Reports of assessment and evaluation that promote efficiency and effectiveness are useful for all concerned.

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Abstract:

A review of honors programs in 38 community colleges and 19 states from 1974 to 1998 revealed honor programs were generally rely on core curriculum courses and are designed to motivate and encourage excellence in students. Studies indicate students report high levels of satisfaction with honor programs, but some studies have reported high dropout rates.

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