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*This chapter describes community college honors programs and courses, emphasizing in particular the Honors College at Miami Dade College in Florida. The chapter discusses pros and cons of honors programs and courses in the context of their appropriateness to the community college mission of open access and egalitarianism.*

## Prioritizing Service to the Academically Talented: The Honors College

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Historically, community colleges have emphasized their societal missions of egalitarianism and open access as integral curricular components. As open admissions colleges, these institutions have been challenged to prepare a wide variety of students with an equally wide variety of reasons for enrolling. Because they are place-bound or have limited finances, some students may choose a community college for their first two years of the baccalaureate. Others who are academically underprepared for college opt to complete developmental classes at the community college, hoping to transfer to a university after finishing such studies. Many more students choose the community college as an avenue to prepare for the world of work through workforce and technical training. Over time, however, community colleges have expanded their curricular foci to include other priorities. One such priority is programming for the academically gifted and ambitious. Through the functional mission of offering honors courses and programs, the community college addresses its societal mission of egalitarianism by ensuring that all people have equal access to educational opportunities at all academic levels.

Honors programs first appeared in community colleges in the 1950s and 1960s (Barnes and Woodward, 1959; Bogdan, 1962; Bradshaw, 1962). These early efforts were usually accelerated courses offered to academically talented students who had expressed interest in specific areas of study. Since that time, community college honors programs have gained considerable

strength. In the 1980s community colleges shifted their emphasis from merely open access and egalitarianism to academic quality, especially related to transfer courses (Byrne, 1998). Today, “about half of two-year colleges now support honors programs—an increase of almost 50 percent over the last decade” (Beck, 2003, p. 5).

This movement has created discussion among community college advocates and critics alike. A powerful argument for honors programs is that they enhance the community college mission by providing qualified students with open access to superior academic courses and programming. Because many academically talented students are place-bound or have other obligations that prevent them from beginning at a four-year university, advocates of honors programs argue that they should be afforded the same opportunities for honors courses and programs that are an accepted part of university curricula. Indeed, they contend that community college honors programs enrich the academic curriculum and may actually enhance a student’s ability to transfer to elite baccalaureate-granting institutions. Thus, advocates argue, honors programs are congruent with the egalitarian focus of the community college mission (Outcalt, 1999).

Critics counter, however, that most community college honors programs employ selective admissions criteria; not everyone has equal access to these programs. Furthermore, as Kisker and Outcalt (2005) point out, many critics believe that honors programs “introduce a note of elitism into the egalitarian goals of community colleges” (p. 3). These critics assert that such selective programming has no place in an open access community college. Furthermore, as Wattenbarger cautions, “would-be honors students could fall victim to sometimes overinflated claims made by community college honors programs” (Beck, 2003, p. 5). In fact, another criticism of community college honors programming is that although there are numerous articles describing the programs, there is little research documenting their outcomes (Bulakowski and Townsend, 1995; Kisker and Outcalt, 2005).

This chapter describes community college honors programs and highlights several models, especially the efforts of Miami Dade College. Pros and cons of honors programs in community colleges are discussed in the context of their appropriateness to the institution’s mission of providing egalitarian access to academic opportunities at all levels.

## **Honors Programs: Forms and Models**

Admission into community college honors programs can be classified into two forms—honors courses open to all students regardless of academic preparation, and restricted enrollment courses for students who meet certain academic requirements (Burnett, 2005). As an example of the first form, North Harris Community College in Texas invites any student to enroll in honors courses. According to the program director, this open enrollment policy is attractive to students who may have struggled in high school but

who have the potential to succeed in college-level academic work. In contrast, the College of Lake County in Illinois restricts admission to students with a high school or college grade point average (GPA) of 3.5, a minimum of twelve credit hours, and a recommendation from an advisory committee.

Although these two colleges illustrate different honors admissions philosophies, both share the perspective that these programs are appropriately included in their college's overall mission and enhance students' academic experiences. What is important to recognize here is that both these institutions manifest the *mission* of the community college by offering *programmatically* honors opportunities. In both examples, the honors program does not exist as ancillary to the college, but rather is an integral curricular offering that provides yet another group of students with a rich learning experience.

Community college honors programs are offered in several formats. Many community colleges add to standard courses by including more academically rigorous content and additional requirements such as labs, special research projects, or experiential activities to enhance students' creative abilities. To illustrate, Michigan's Henry Ford Community College (HFCC) offers an honors program that includes core courses in English composition, science, and the humanities. This program also emphasizes library research, computer databases, and Internet research. The HFCC program is structured around several core courses but is flexible enough to fit almost any major field of study (Henry Ford Community College, 2006).

Some colleges, like Florida's Hillsborough Community College (HCC), have created honors institutes or departments. In addition to offering over forty honors courses, the HCC Honors Institute offers students three forms of honors distinction: graduation from the Honors Institute if they complete a minimum of eight honors courses (twenty-four credit hours); graduation with an Honors Certificate if they do not fulfill all Honors Institute requirements but complete at least twelve hours of honors classwork with an overall GPA of at least 3.0; and graduation with Distinction in Honors if they complete the Honors Institute with a minimum overall GPA of at least 3.0 (Hillsborough Community College, 2004). Honors students also receive priority registration privileges and opportunities to participate in field trips, study abroad programs, and specialized leadership activities.

Valencia Community College (VCC), also in Florida, offers an honors program for some one thousand students on four campuses. The program attracts a large number of valedictorians and salutatorians from local feeder high schools, as well as students from surrounding states and foreign countries. Almost half of these students receive full tuition scholarships; approximately two-thirds receive full tuition scholarships when they transfer to four-year colleges and universities, although not all of the university scholarships are formally linked to successful completion of the VCC honors program.

Santa Monica College (California) offers each term a Scholars Program to four hundred students who want to take courses focusing on "mastery of subject matter demonstrated through writing, research, critical thinking,

and analysis” (Santa Monica College, n.d., n.p.). This program focuses on designated sections of general education classes and sets class enrollments at twenty-five students. Students may graduate from the honors program after completing fifteen units in the Scholars Program with an overall GPA of at least 3.0. Partially as a result of its Scholars Program, Santa Monica College boasts that it is “number one in transfers” for the past fifteen years to the University of California system. Scholars Program students receive priority admissions consideration to University of California, Los Angeles, and several other universities, along with special counseling, workshops, priority registration, smaller class sizes, and special college tours.

Established in 1968, the Honors Program at Rockland Community College (RCC) in New York was designed to challenge students by strengthening the curriculum in the liberal arts and sciences. The RCC Honors Program boasts a rich history of personalized and intellectually stimulating offerings for students who desire to participate in a few honors classes, as well as those electing to complete specific honors courses as an honors concentration. Two curricular tracks are offered: the Mentor-Talents Students track for students in the arts and sciences, and a Management Development track for business, management, finance, marketing, or programming students. Nearly 100 percent of RCC’s Honors Program graduates have maintained a 3.0 average at four-year colleges (Rockland Community College, n.d.).

Students have two ways of participating in honors programs at the College of DuPage in Illinois. They may elect to enroll in individual honors courses, or they can participate in the Honors Scholars Program. Each quarter, the College of DuPage enrolls hundreds of students in honors courses; the Honors Scholar Program currently has over seven hundred members. The college boasts that 100 percent of its students completing the Honors Scholars Program have successfully transferred to universities, and one participant has become a Rhodes Scholar (College of DuPage, 2006).

Prince George’s Community College (PGCC) was the first Maryland community college to establish an honors academy and honors program. The PGCC Honors Academy program is a selective admissions program. In addition to honors classes, students are expected to perform at least fifteen hours of community service work each semester. PGCC also has a number of articulation agreements with private and public universities and colleges to ensure successful transfer of its honors courses. In 2002, PGCC and St. Mary’s College announced a dual admissions program for Honors Academy students; both institutions provide financial assistance for students, scholarships, and other support (Prince George’s Community College, 2002).

Other programmatic features of community college honors programs include opportunities for cultural, community, and civic engagement. For example, the Honors Program at San Jacinto College (Texas) includes opportunities for students to make presentations at national, state, and local conferences, and to publish papers in a regional honors journal (San Jacinto College, 2006).

## The Honors College at Miami Dade College

Miami Dade College (MDC) in Florida has one of the most notable Honors College programs in the United States. Before 2001, each MDC campus had its own honors program; each program operated independently and did not share curricula or evaluation criteria. To better meet the needs of gifted students, to provide constancy among campuses in eligibility and maintenance requirements, and to offer a progressive curriculum with meaningful service and enrichment opportunities, MDC's president envisioned a unified, stand-alone honors program. Thus, the former separate campus programs were dissolved with the understanding that currently enrolled students would continue to receive their benefits until they completed their program. In 2001, the Honors College at MDC was created as a separate college in the greater Miami Dade College District, and an inaugural class of 75 students was admitted in fall 2002. This first class was housed on the Wolfson Campus; in fall 2003, the Honors College expanded to include 75 new students at each of the Wolfson, North, and Kendall campuses. This expansion allowed for greater accessibility to honors classes for students throughout the entire county. In fall 2004 the Honors College enrolled a total of 365 students.

The MDC Honors College is designed to meet the needs of a select group of goal-oriented, academically talented students. The Honors College curriculum provides a gamut of rich collegiate experiences for students, and includes both academic and support services. It is important to note that the MDC Honors College has been supported and promoted by MDC leadership and is considered one of the district's priorities. The MDC Honors College prides itself on adhering to the standards set by the National Collegiate Honors Council and being "fully institutionalized so as to build thereby a genuine tradition of excellence" (Miami Dade College, 2004, p. 1).

Several distinguishing factors characterize Miami Dade Honors College. First, the program has been endorsed by the administration, supported by the faculty and staff, and widely accepted by enrolled students. Second, the program has been phased in slowly to accommodate a variety of approaches over time. Third, the program includes both academic and student support services. A generous financial aid package, collegewide support services, and enrichment activities including attendance and participation at national and regional conferences, internships, mentoring assignments with corporate coaches, study travel tours, university transfer counseling, a personalized educational plan with seamless registration, and an individual Honors College e-mail address are just a few of the resources available to MDC honors students (Miami Dade College, 2004). All students admitted into the Honors College receive the Honors College Fellows Scholarship Award, which includes the equivalent of in-state tuition, a book allowance, and a stipend. The award is renewable for each term as long as the student is in good standing and maintains a 3.5 GPA.

**Honors Students.** The majority of MCC's honors students are Hispanic (73 percent), followed by black (14 percent), white (10 percent), and Asian (3 percent). Sixty-eight percent are female. Students are more traditional in age: the average student age is nineteen, although students range in age from seventeen to forty-eight. Approximately 96 percent of the honors students who were first-time college students enrolled at MDC immediately after high school graduation. Since Miami Dade College serves an ethnically diverse student clientele, it is not surprising that Spanish is the native language of almost half of the students (49 percent), with students speaking over eighteen different languages. More than half are U.S. citizens (63 percent); the remaining are from twenty-six different countries (Cuba, Colombia, and Venezuela are the most common).

Most honors students graduated from thirty-six of Miami Dade County's public high schools and nine of its private high schools; the remainder graduated from out-of-county schools or were home-schooled. The average high school GPA of admitted students was 4.17, and the average SAT score was 1273 in 2004 (up from 4.16 and 1271 in 2003). Honors students majored in forty different programs, with pre-bachelor of arts, biology, and business administration most frequently chosen.

These demographics reflect the larger community served by the college. Critics who believe that honors programs are not egalitarian should note that Miami Dade's program serves a diverse clientele of students. Furthermore, the high levels of minority and female participation suggest that this program is truly geared to all students.

**Honors College Program Elements and Outcomes.** Miami Dade's Honors College has provided a rich array of experiences for both students and faculty. Students are required to attend biweekly colloquia featuring guest speakers and faculty presentations, have opportunities to participate in study travel events such as the Salzburg Seminars, Washington Center Seminars, Business and Dining Etiquette Seminars, and innumerable cultural and social activities.

The rigorous courses provide students with a high degree of faculty interaction and multiple opportunities to engage in learning communities formed by discipline interests. Important aspects of the curriculum include the development of leadership skills and the assessment of ethical and civic responsibilities. To graduate from the Honors College, students must retain a 3.5 GPA, complete six credits in leadership courses and twenty hours of service per term, and earn a minimum of thirty-six credits in honors-designated courses.

The retention rate for students participating in the Honors College is 88 percent. In addition, nearly all honors students have been admitted into their first-choice university, including such institutions as Yale, Columbia, Georgia Tech, Washington University, Amherst, Cornell, Georgetown, Mount Holyoke, Northwestern, the University of Chicago, New York University, Barnard, Smith, and the University of Wisconsin. Graduates whose first choice is Florida International University (FIU) receive a generous full

tuition scholarship and are admitted into FIU's Honors College. MDC holds similar agreements with the University of Miami and Florida Atlantic University (Miami Dade College, 2004). Moreover, administrative support and the integration of the program into the fabric of the college have clearly established this endeavor as one of the college's priorities. Indeed, faculty and student interactions that have resulted from the program have helped create an engaging scholarly community that enhances students' self-esteem and encourages them to break out of their comfort zone and seek knowledge and their place in the world.

**Individual Honors Courses.** Initially designed to meet the needs of a select group of goal-oriented, academically talented students who could endure more strenuous intellectual examination, benefit from more faculty-student interaction, and thrive in a highly focused, multidimensional learning environment, the Honors College has entered into yet another phase. Recently, MDC began offering independent, stand-alone honors courses for students who want to challenge themselves and earn honors credits for graduation but who cannot enroll in a full program of study. These courses are especially important for the many Miami Dade students who work full-time. The college anticipates that these individual honors courses will allow even more students to benefit from a challenging and intensive academic experience, as well as productive interactions with other students who share a similar passion for learning (Miami Dade College, 2004).

### **Are Honors Programs Appropriate for All Community Colleges?**

Critics have argued that honors colleges are not appropriate for all community colleges, given differing sizes, missions, and foci. Indeed, some commonalities exist among community colleges offering honors programs—at least those reviewed in this chapter. Most of the colleges are larger institutions with five thousand or more students, offer a variety of curricular programs, and are located in or near major metropolitan areas. One might surmise, then, that a larger student body and more diverse curricular offerings are required for the successful operation of an honors program. Another important feature common to the honors programs described in this chapter is the strong support of senior administration and staff. This support and the acknowledgment that an honors program is central to the mission of the college seem to provide stability for its development and sustainability. Moreover, all of the colleges discussed in this chapter have a committed and trained faculty willing to develop curricula and provide academic support for students. Finally, one cannot deny the importance of the students who participate in honors programs. Whether measured through retention rates or successful transfer to senior institutions, students who have positive experiences in honors programs become the best advertisers.

**Table 5.1. Honors Colleges: Pros and Cons**

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Pros</i>	<i>Cons</i>
Mission: Access	Honors colleges extend commitment to equal access to academically rigorous programs, especially for place-bound, minority, and under-served populations—an extension of egalitarianism.	Honors programs detract from commitment to other key curricular priorities; they are one step toward elitism.
Baccalaureate degrees and transfer: Access	Honors programs promote greater access to baccalaureate degrees, including scholarships for honors students to prestigious universities and colleges. They may enhance transfer success.	Honors colleges may discourage gifted students from attending prestigious universities as freshmen.
Community college size: Access	Honors colleges tend to be located at larger community colleges with greater capacity to deliver comprehensive offerings.	Honors programs may not be found in smaller community colleges with limited capacity to offer such courses and programs.
Classes	Honors classes are often smaller, so students receive more personalized attention.	Classes are often limited to honors students (or have selective enrollments), thus segregating students from more typical community college students.
Curriculum	Honors curricula consist of a variety of stimulating learning experiences for students.	There should be similar experiences and challenges for students in regular courses as for those in honors programs.
Faculty	Honors programs have trained and certified faculty who provide a high level of academic leadership for honors students.	Honors colleges may create faculty hierarchies. For example, faculty who teach gifted students may be more highly rewarded than those who teach regular or developmental students.
Nonacademic factors	Honors colleges can enhance students' self-esteem.	Honors programs may cause students to expect similar nurturing at four-year institutions.

Can honors programs be successfully implemented at smaller community colleges with less curricular diversity? Absolutely. Most—if not all—of the programs described in this chapter started as small programs with limited courses. In fact, smaller community colleges may have an advantage



over larger community colleges because faculty-student relationships are more likely to be personalized on smaller campuses. Furthermore, honors programs are not just limited to liberal arts majors, but embrace students in business, sciences, management, and other fields.

## **Pros and Cons of Community College Honors Programs**

Whether one is an advocate or a critic of community college honors programs, there are several pros and cons of such programs. These are summarized in Table 5.1. The table is by no means an exhaustive list; rather, it summarizes some of the controversial issues surrounding community college honors programs.

## **Conclusion**

The larger question of whether honors programs are congruent with the open access and egalitarianism mission of community colleges is, perhaps, only a matter of rhetoric. After all, the community college's societal mission to be responsive to its local community requires institutions to offer curricular programming to meet emerging needs and wants. When community college students needed developmental education courses to succeed in college-level work, community colleges changed their curricula to add these classes. Likewise, when increasing numbers of community college students aspired to the baccalaureate and asked for a rigorous curricula to prepare them for prestigious universities, community colleges changed their curricula to address those needs and wants. Like developmental courses that serve as bridges between secondary and postsecondary institutions, honors courses can be stepping-stones to four-year colleges and universities (Kisker and Outcalt, 2005); both curricular adaptations are key examples of responsive programming that meet emerging student wants and needs. Like developmental education and other key areas of the community college curriculum, honors courses and programs are well within the community college's mission of providing open access and opportunity to all students.

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