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CHAPTER FIVE

ADMISSIONS CRITERIA AND RECRUITMENT

Admissions Criteria

As is the case with many other aspects of an honors program, the kind of program, and its mission and goals, as well as local campus concerns, will determine the admissions criteria. If the honors program draws most of its population from the high schools in a particular service area, the honors director will probably have ready access to information about what tests those students generally take, what courses may be indicators of academic talent, what high school teachers are best able to identify honors-caliber students, and what programs have traditions that lead students to success in an honors environment. With such knowledge, directors may tailor admissions criteria to the area with little difficulty.

Because most honors programs draw students from a variety of sources, however, such specific admissions criteria geared to one or two high schools may not be complete. The typical admissions criteria often include scores on national tests, academic standing, GPA's, or transfer credits. A flexible attitude towards criteria will allow non-traditional students to enter the program and feel welcome, and specific criteria will enable directors to focus their recruiting effort and compile mailing lists.

The honors program will also have to decide whether to allow students who are not officially in the honors program to take honors classes. Different programs handle this issue differently, but tend to follow the simple funding logic based on enrollment in courses. That is, courses that make a certain enrollment time after time tend to be offered on a regular basis and lend stability to the program. Filling up the honors courses is, therefore, a priority and greatly appreciated by department chairs and deans. Non-honors enrollees may help with these numbers. Some programs make the non-honors enrollee obtain the instructor's or the director's permission. Alternatively, others allow students to enroll in honors courses if they have met with the honors counselor. Critical factors to consider when determining whether to include a non-honors student are the likelihood of the student being successful and the student's particular talents in that discipline. Some

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programs enroll students in the program and into classes based on the same criteria. In this case, all students in the class are going to have comparable skills, test-taking ability, or intelligence.

Given the basic similarities among honors programs in the United States, educators have identified three basic models of admissions criteria:

Uniform Standards

The following items are often used to set uniform standards for entrance into the program and the courses:

- Minimum cumulative GPA;
- SAT or ACT score—this criteria is usually expressed as a total number and as a minimum score on particular sections of the test. Programs often consider what the standard is in the area to define this criterion fairly;
- An essay offering proof of superior writing ability;
- Evidence of special competency or creativity, such as projects or a portfolio;
- Instructor recommendation(s);
- Signs of especially strong student motivation, perhaps determined through interviews, written proposals for academic work, or letters requesting special admission.

The easiest and quickest way to gain admittance to the honors program is to have appropriate test scores or GPA. Students desiring to enter the honors program based on alternative criteria may find that they must navigate extra steps in order to validate their participation, and that is why these criteria may be considered secondary or ancillary. The director, faculty, or honors committee may use these ancillary ways of admitting students who do not fit the primary criteria but who demonstrate great promise. The admissions criteria could be perceived as a barrier by some, but they can be expressed in a non-forbidding way.

The advantage of uniform standards is that they offer an objective basis from which occasional exceptions may be made. The objectivity of this basis provides consistent standards and, therefore, a degree of academic credibility. The disadvantage of this model is that it can be insensitive to underrepresented and non-traditional populations if the main criteria used are just GPA and test scores. The appearance of unfairness may be mitigated by phrasing admissions criteria carefully, by using alternative methods of entry, and by making a special effort to recruit underrepresented students.

Separate Standards

In this case, while admission to the honors program follows one set of standards, admission to individual classes follows a lower, provisional, or more flexible standard. The advantage of this model is that it is inclusive and encourages partial participation in the program for students who are partially qualified or potentially qualified for the honors program. Moreover, this model often can be useful to a new program to boost enrollment numbers and help new courses to be offered. The disadvantage of this model is that it requires elaborate tracking and updating of a student database to follow the progress of students as they become part of the regular honors program. Also, if exceptions become the rule, the program may suffer from the same disadvantage as the open-entry model, which is discussed below. The drawback is that a new program may tarnish its reputation in several possible ways: it could be associated with lower or arbitrary academic standards; students in the courses may not pass as often as they would like; and students who keep trying to get into the program may find it harder to graduate on time and may be disappointed not to graduate from the honors program.

Open Entry

Since many successful honors programs often attract students from all sections of the population, the honors program may need to be open to all interested students. Thus, the student who dropped out of high school, who came back to the community college, who is highly motivated, sometimes older, often a minority student, can be given a chance to excel in the two-year honors program, then become eligible to transfer to a university and compete with other students who went directly to the university. Since underrepresented or non-traditional students often do not fit neatly into uniform admissions criteria, an honors program will need to make provisions for attracting and nurturing these students.

In this light, some programs may choose admissions criteria that are non-selective. Students self-select into honors classes. Honors achievement is recognized when students meet exit criteria for completion of the program. It will be essential to make students aware of the nature and purpose of the program, so that they will choose honors courses and so that this decision has a high possibility of being a responsible choice for the student. Good communication will ensure that students understand the exit criteria before getting too far along in their course of study.

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The advantage of this model is that it is in keeping with the open door ethic of many two-year colleges and is inclusive, not exclusive. The disadvantage of this model is that honors classes may sometimes lack the cohesion, sense of community, and intellectual rigor characteristic of the honors experience.

In actual practice, most programs have various combinations or permutations of the above models. The configuration of criteria of successful honors programs usually is flexible and sensitive to local campus concerns. A key dictum is that one should try what seems reasonable and then adjust the criteria as experience reveals the need for change. Inevitably, the criteria will need modification; no criteria should be thought of as absolute.

Entrance criteria and maintenance criteria for honors programs are sometimes different. The criteria to remain in good standing after entering a program may be slightly lower. For example, a program that may require a 3.25 GPA for entry may consider a student to be in good standing as long as the student's GPA is at least 3.00.

Then, too, entrance criteria and graduation criteria may differ in the other direction. A program may admit a student with 3.25 GPA but may expect the student to attain a 3.50 GPA before becoming eligible to graduate from the honors program. With recognition of different levels of achievement (3.50, 3.25, 3.00), it is possible for both lower maintenance criteria and higher graduation criteria to exist in the same honors program. The logic of the criteria should accommodate the students and the mission of the program.

Since some two-year college honors programs' curricular offerings consist mainly of honors-option contract opportunities, a word needs to be said about the participation criteria for these programs. An honors contract provides supplementary honors activities in conjunction with regular courses. In this case, the student who undertakes a contract may be required to meet the criteria for entry into the honors program. Within comprehensive honors programs, the criteria for undertaking these small-scale, directed-study projects may sometimes be higher than the minimum standard or maintenance criteria. The logic here is twofold: honors directors may need to conserve scarce resources, like faculty time and lab resources, and honors students will be more likely to succeed in an honors contract situation if they are the highest-caliber students.

Recruitment

Recruitment of students is always a paramount concern of any successful honors program. The most innovative and exciting curricula, the most dynamic and stimulating instructors, all come to naught without honors students to take advantage of them.

Reaching the Audience

The honors program at a two-year institution should begin with thoughtful and attractive offerings for the kind of students being recruited. Once the target audience of the program is clear, whether this is the top 10% of students whom the college traditionally serves or the top 5% of high school graduates whom the college has not recently attracted, the rule to follow is simple: **do anything to get the word out in a timely, accurate, and reliable manner. Then do it again and again and again.** Persistence is often what determines the difference between success and failure.

Recruitment Tools

Tangible Benefits

Since recruitment will consist of publicizing the honors program to the widest audience possible, the director should be clear on all the benefits of the program. Any discussions of such benefits will include a great variety of advantages. Some benefits such as special scholarships for honors students upon entry, during participation, or upon graduation are tangible; in fact, one program offers to all of its graduates scholarships of one kind or another at a four-year school upon graduation. Then, too, there may be other perks such as priority registration, extended library privileges, or library privileges at other institutions. Some programs guarantee admission to a four-year school. There may be the obvious distinctions of having "Honors Program Graduate" on one's transcript and on one's diploma. Another obvious advantage is having letters of recommendation written from the context of the honors program. Although these mundane advantages may not be the heart of any program, one should, nevertheless, be quite comfortable in enumerating them and should not underestimate their attractiveness to students.

Intangibles

The heart of the honors program will no doubt be in intangibles that provide high-quality education to able, high-achieving students. Whether that means providing a classical, humanities-based,

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interdisciplinary curriculum, a modern scientific and technological education at the frontiers of knowledge, or an honors post-modern vocational experience, remembering to communicate all of the advantages of the honors program is wise. These intangibles multiply as extracurricular experiences, community-building exercises, cultural enrichments, and academic enhancements are designed. Students who graduate from the honors program may be able to tell how they impressed an interviewer by discussing their leadership role in designing an honors program brochure or how their research for one class has evolved into a topic for a master's thesis. Therefore, having the mechanism in place to track students is essential. These successful experiences help future students and their parents and teachers understand how important honors education can be; an honors program can be marketed based on them. In the end, honors students realize that they have experienced an enhanced and fulfilling education that takes advantage of all of the cost savings of the two-year college experience.

Recruitment Targets

While any marketing effort should try to reach the largest audience possible, targeting the promotional efforts at specific audiences will make them more effective. The whole community of the college and its entire service areas will want to know about the special honors program offered at the local two-year institution, but many of them will not need to register for classes. An honors program has to reach out specifically to those parties interested in a high-quality college education. Several of the relevant groups of people are detailed below.

Reaching Students Already at the College

Many successful two-year programs are successful because they are inclusive. Recruiting students into the honors program from the current college population is a common way to increase enrollment and serve students. The following suggestions can be used in any combinations and can be adapted to fit any program:

- Data processing services can generate mailing labels and a list of all students with a GPA at or above the minimum standard of the program. These students may receive a letter, a brochure, or other important flyers containing information on the program, including honors program newsletters and descriptions of current or upcoming courses.
- Letters of invitation to join and certificates of accomplishment can be sent to students who make the dean's list or president's list each semester.

- At those institutions with a college-wide placement test, data processing should be able to generate mailing labels and a roster of all high scorers in a category, such as all those who qualify for freshman composition.
- Asking instructors and college counselors via flyer, memo, email, or in person to recommend students who may benefit from the honors experience typically generates a significant list of students to contact. Part-time instructors should, of course, be asked as well.
- Orientation meetings at the beginning of each term, at least one in the day and one in the evening, will provide access to the broadest audience of those interested in the program. Large or small, featuring a guest speaker or only the honors director, these meetings provide the opportunity for the even-slightly curious students to gather information and to expand their options for consideration.
- If the college has orientation sessions for all new students, the honors director should speak at these sessions. If these sessions are frequent or numerous, honors advisory committee members or properly trained and rehearsed honors students may speak on behalf of the honors program.
- Adult re-entry students or non-traditional students are capable and motivated students who belong in an honors program. They may be found in almost any area of the college including special programs for seniors, for women, or for disadvantaged students. For this reason, recruitment efforts should include the broadest audience possible. All who meet the participation criteria of the program and all those with potential who show an interest may be encouraged to try honors.

Creating a schedule of classes and catalog information that contain accurate and attractive information or display ads about the honors program is always a good idea. Flyers and other publicity about the honors program should be placed in strategic points on the campus: the cafeteria, the library, the counseling offices, and near registration lines.

If the sole target audience for recruitment consists of students already at the college, the program may be vulnerable to the objection that it is siphoning off the best and brightest students. In fact, many of the best and brightest students at the college will choose for their own reasons, such as lack of time, schedule conflicts, or fear of jeopardizing a high grade point average, not to participate in an honors program. So this concern is not one based upon the reality of the situation but rather on a misapprehension and a needless worry. Nevertheless, being

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aware of misapprehensions and addressing them as directly as possible would be prudent, for they can undermine the program if they are not quickly dispelled.

Reaching Students in High School

Indeed, if the high school recruitment activities are successful, the exact opposite of a brain drain will occur. Many academically able students who would not otherwise have come to the campus will matriculate. These students will not just take honors classes; they will take other classes at the two-year institution. Thus they will enrich the other classes at the college and enrich the general academic environment of the entire college.

So the other major group that may need recruitment is students entering directly from high school. Here, too, it is important to remember the recruitment mantra: **do anything to get the word out in a timely, accurate, and reliable manner. Then do it again and again and again.**

◦ Scholarships

Offering scholarships to students who enter the program can be an attractive incentive to participate in the honors program. The two-year college foundation or its equivalent can be helpful in this regard. In one case, a donor wanted to award money to highly capable students at the local two-year college. Such a concern led to his funding scholarships for every student from area high schools with a GPA of 3.50 who attended that particular community college. Some programs are only able to offer reimbursement scholarships for success in honors classes or for lab fees. These awards are extremely helpful to high-achieving students and provide further motivation for them to succeed in their courses. In addition, these awards may provide unencumbered money if other scholarships have already paid tuition.

◦ High School Academic Challenges

Academically challenging activities, such as a brain bowl or college bowl, provide a good opportunity for the honors program to be involved in the community. If these are a high-school-only activity, the two-year college students in the honors program can assist in producing the competitions and perhaps even in playing visible roles as coaches or mentors. If the activity involves other colleges, this is a fine opportunity for the honors program students to demonstrate their intellectual and academic acumen. In either case, the publicity is always useful.

- Dual/Joint Enrollment

The honors program will have to decide if high school students enrolled in joint enrollment programs or dual enrollment courses will receive college honors credit as well as high school honors credit. Many successful honors programs recruit dual enrollment students into separate college honors courses. If this population is large enough, the honors program may wish to offer honors courses at the off-campus dual enrollment locations. Many programs allow the regular dual enrollment classes to be high school honors courses only and require that students who want college honors credit be registered in college honors courses. If this stipulation means that students must travel to the two-year college campus, programs can overcome the perception that the requirement is a hindrance to some students' participation by using it as another recruitment tool to entice students to campus. They may gain access to other services or special programs located on the campus.

- Summer Institutes

Hosting a summer honors institute for high school students provides these students with an orientation to the honors program. If ninth through twelfth graders are on campus for other academic programs, they should participate in an orientation about the honors program and receive literature about it. If students have questions, keeping records of these inquiries and following up periodically, especially at key registration dates, will facilitate recruiting these prospective candidates.

- Direct Mail

Many successful honors programs mail printed information to anyone who may be interested in the honors program. This strategy includes responding to all phone inquiries but also includes utilizing any other lists of prospective students. If the institution or honors program is part of an alliance with a four-year school, the names or mailing labels of all students from feeder high schools who are not taking advantage of an opportunity to matriculate there may be available. Also useful are lists of students at the high schools who are members of honorary societies, such as the National Honor Society and Quill and Scroll. If members of the faculty annually award prizes such as the Harvard Book Award to high school students or confer certificates from Phi Beta Kappa to high-achieving high school students, these names are useful additions to the program's mailing

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lists. Even if home addresses are not available, information can still be sent to these students in care of their high schools.

As is the case with mailings to students already on campus, mailing out not just the main promotional brochure but also supplementary materials such as descriptions of current courses, a current copy of the honors program newsletter, or details about upcoming events will underscore the advantages that honors offers.

- Director Involvement with High School Personnel

Advisors at the college who have regular contact with the high schools can be extremely valuable in spreading the word about honors. Having the honors director personally involved in this effort, however, is advantageous, for a myriad of questions about the honors program may be asked that only the honors director may have the insight or experience to answer.

One benefit of establishing a solid relationship with scholarship counselors at feeder high schools is that they can recommend bright students who, for financial or other reasons, might be considering the two-year college. Here is a perfect opportunity to transform necessity into a virtue. Once known, these likely recruits can be wooed with scholarship funds, literature about the program, an orientation visit or tea (or other special event), or put in contact with a student from that high school who is currently enjoying the honors program experience at the two-year college.

Finally, a supply of informational materials and applications should be sent to high school counselors and guidance directors on a timely annual schedule. Honors directors, members of the advisory committee, and honors students from particular high schools can be of service in delivering materials wherever they may be useful. Also helpful in recruitment are high school faculty members who graduated from two-year colleges.

- College Night

If feeder high schools sponsor a college night where representatives of other colleges and universities are present, the director or other program representative should be there to invite high school students to consider the high-quality, low-cost option available through the honors program at the two-year college. Discussing articulation agreements and alliance relationships with four-year schools may prove advantageous for promoting the two-year college honors experience as an option because of the close personal

attention a student is likely to receive. Through the alliance with a four-year university, a student can still be assured of graduating from a prestigious university but without suffering through the large classes and impersonal treatment that freshmen and sophomores at large state universities often face. In addition, two years at the local community college often cost significantly less than those same two years at the four-year institution. While honors program directors may not wish to begin their promotions by mentioning the cost of higher education, certainly it may come up in the course of a presentation.

On occasions like this, the audience to whom the director is selling the honors program is as much the parents of students as the students themselves. Unless parents are exceedingly wealthy, the combination of high educational quality, personalized attention, and low cost will merit serious attention for the honors program. Even if some students do decide to go elsewhere, they may nonetheless spread the word about the program, which is a significant accomplishment. Moreover, the foundation has been laid for some reverse transfers by students who have been less than successful at the four-year schools or had some change of circumstance requiring their return home. Resurrecting the academic careers of students whose four-year experience was lacking is an important goal of many two-year honors programs.

- College Day and Speakers Bureau

In addition, scheduling a number of independent lectures or activities during a college day for honors students from feeder high schools is useful. These students should receive handouts in advance that establish a context and prepare them for the lectures or experiences on campus. Such occasions can be difficult to organize in metropolitan districts because they may require buses, hot dog lunches, and other amenities for perhaps thousands of students. Aside from the complex logistics of such an effort, some of the students may not be likely prospects. The effort, nevertheless, is helpful in generally broadcasting information about the honors program.

A prelude or follow-up to College Day is offering the services of faculty as guest speakers in high school honors and Advanced Placement (AP) classes. If sufficient interest exists, this effort itself may evolve into a speakers' bureau independent of College Day.

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- Articulation Council and Articulation Projects

Since the honors program will very naturally be involved in issues of articulation with four-year schools and with high schools, participating in institutional articulation efforts with feeder high schools is useful for the honors director.

An honors presence in this arena can make key high school personnel aware of the substance of the honors program and even foster 2+2+2 programs hinging on honors academics. These initiatives use the last two years of high school, two years at the community college, and the last two years at the four-year institution to enable students to efficiently and economically progress to the baccalaureate degree.

- A Final Word

Experimenting with and trying different strategies will reveal what works best in the local environment for developing and maintaining the program. Although not every attempt will be successful, much can be learned even from failures. What emerges as critical, however, is becoming comfortable with persistence.

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