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This chapter examines relationships between the presence of honors programs at community colleges and institutional, curricular, and student body characteristics. Furthermore, the author relates his findings to what is already known about the presence and effect of these programs.

The Importance of Community College Honors Programs

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Although community college honors programs serve an essential function by providing educational challenges for an often overlooked student population—the educationally well-prepared—they have received scant attention in the research literature (Bulakowski and Townsend, 1995). This chapter addresses at least a portion of this gap by investigating the presence of honors programs within a national sample of 163 community colleges. In particular, the chapter examines the relationships between the presence of honors programs and institutional characteristics (such as size), curricular characteristics relevant to transfer (such as institutional emphasis on transfer and remedial courses), and student body characteristics (such as the proportion of minority groups). These research findings are compared to previous research about the presence and effect of these programs.

Previous Studies of Honors Programs

Honors programs in the context of this study are either individual courses or more complex courses of study that feature enriched, expanded, or more rigorous academic content. The educational literature contains several useful case studies of the effectiveness of these programs in preparing students for transfer to senior institutions (such as Lucas, Hull, and Brantley, 1995; Laanan, 1996). In addition, a few larger-scale studies of these programs are available. Byrne (1998) conducted a comprehensive review of the literature on honors programs in community colleges, examined thirty-eight honors programs in nineteen states, and discussed a wide range of issues relevant to such programs, including their origins, goals, structure, and course offerings.

However, there have been few comprehensive assessments of the presence and effectiveness of honors programs, and most studies, such as those just mentioned, have tended to focus on specific institutions or subsets of community colleges. Cohen and Brawer (1996) note that about 10 percent of North Central community colleges in a 1975 study offered honors programs, with this number growing to approximately 25 percent by 1995 (according to Cohen and Brawer's review of *Peterson's Guide to Two-Year Colleges*). However, the 1975 study was confined to a particular region, and data from the *Peterson's Guide* do not contain readily accessible information on the relationship of the incidence of honors programs to other community college characteristics.

In short, despite the availability of a few indications of the overall presence of honors programs in community colleges, conclusions on both the incidence and effectiveness of such programs must remain tentative, because as Bulakowski and Townsend (1995) state, the majority of honors program research tend to be single-institution studies demonstrating elements of the success of individual programs, often focusing on either student satisfaction with the program, the characteristics (especially demographic) of student participants, or anecdotal evidence of program effectiveness.

Tension Between Honors Programs and Community College Access Policies

Despite the lack of strong empirical evidence regarding their availability and effectiveness, honors programs have been criticized for seeming to introduce a note of elitism into the egalitarian goals of community colleges (Olivas, 1975). These charges have been exacerbated by limited studies showing that honors program participants are more likely than non-honors students to be white and female (Lucas, Hull, and Brantley, 1995). However, the relationship between honors courses and minority student success need not be antagonistic. Some institutions, such as Mississippi's Itawamba Community College, have used supplemental instructional materials and methods, including guest speakers and videos, in honors courses to focus on the experience of cultural and ethnic minorities (Itawamba Community College, 1997). Students in the Itawamba course reported very high degrees of satisfaction with the form and content of the class and stated that their appreciation for pluralism had been enhanced by their experience with the course. In addition, research investigating the role of honors programs in student transfer (Outcalt, 1999) has shown that these programs can have a positive effect on the transfer of underrepresented students to four-year institutions.

In conclusion, the educational literature would be strengthened by a large-scale investigation of the incidence of honors programs than is possible within the current study. Findings from such a study could form a baseline of knowledge regarding the availability of these programs, which could

in turn serve as a context for further large-scale research. In addition, this research could be useful in countering or validating the charges of critics who hold that honors programs are inherently elitist and antithetical to the longstanding community college principle of open access for all.

Design of the Study

The present study examines three primary research questions:

1. What proportion of community colleges offer honors programs?
2. How can community college students gain access to honors programs?
3. Are there any systematic relationships between the availability of honors programs and institutional, curricular, and student characteristics?

A National Sample of Community College Curricula

Data in this study were gathered from college catalogues and class schedules solicited from a random sample of community colleges, stratified by size (as described in Chapter One of this issue). Staff from the Center for the Study of Community Colleges examined catalogues and class schedules for spring 1998 and created a database that included the following variables:

- Institutional characteristics, such as size, location, and type of control
- Curriculum characteristics, such as the presence and proportion of various types of courses
- Student characteristics, such as the presence and proportion of students in various ethnic groups

Both institutional and student characteristics were drawn from 1996 National Center for Education Statistics data.

For the current study, each of the 164 catalogues that were used for the Curriculum Project were examined. Data for one institution represented in the Curriculum Project was not available at the time of this study so a total of 163 ($n = 163$) is used, unless otherwise noted. In reviewing the catalogues, indications of the presence of honors programs within the institution's curriculum were identified, as was information regarding honors program admissions criteria.

Analysis of the Data

The catalogues were coded to reflect the presence or absence of honors programs, strictly academic entrance criteria, nonacademic entrance criteria (such as portfolios, interviews, letters of recommendation, and so on), and where data were available, entrance criteria to these programs, including minimum high school or community college grade point averages and minimum

Table 6.1. Presence of Honors Programs and Descriptive Information Regarding Entrance Criteria

	Presence of Honors Programs	Entrance Criteria for Honors Programs				
		Standardized Test (SAT or ACT) Score	College GPA	High School GPA	Nonnumeric Criteria*	Nonacademic Criteria**
Number and Percentage of Schools	59 (35.8 percent)	17 (10.3 percent)	28 (17.2 percent)	10 (6.1 percent)	21 (12.9 percent)	3 (1.8 percent)
Mean Score and Standard Deviation	N/A	SAT: 1089.69 (97.70)	ACT: 24.29 (1.68)	3.35 (0.22)	3.29 (0.25)	N/A

n = 163. * Includes letters of recommendation, essays, and interviews. ** Includes special appeals, demonstrations of life experience, and so on.

scores on standardized tests, including the SAT, the ACT, and region-specific tests.

While data from the Curriculum Project form a unique and invaluable source of information on community college honors programs, several limitations must be borne in mind when attempting to generalize the findings, including the small number of community colleges falling into specific categorizations; the inability to sort them by potentially relevant geographic characteristics, such as rural or urban location; and difficulties in sorting courses into discrete, mutually exclusive categories based on subject area, transferability, and so on. Finally, because all of the information has been taken from community college catalogues rather than from measures of student participation in or the effect of these programs, it is possible to describe only the incidence of honors programs. Investigation of other program characteristics, such as overall enrollment patterns, student success in honors courses, and the outcomes of participation in these programs, is not possible within the limitations of the data at hand.

Findings

Presence of Honors Programs and Honors Course Admissions Requirements. As Table 6.1 shows, of the 163 institutions studied, 59, or 35.8 percent, offered honors programs to their students. Of those 59 institutions, just over 10 percent used scores from the SAT, the ACT, or both as entrance criteria. Almost one-fifth depended on college grades for program admission, while only slightly more than 6 percent used high school grades. Most institutions that used grades from one segment of a student's education tended to look at grades from the other segment as well. All programs requiring a particular college GPA had minimum standards for high school grades as well. An additional 13 percent employed nonnumerical criteria (interviews, letters, or essays), while a small minority allowed students to gain access to honors programs through nonacademic means, such as special petitions based on life experience. Many institutions required more than one item to demonstrate admissibility.

Relationship Between Honors Courses and Institutional, Curricular, and Student Body Characteristics. Table 6.2 presents the statistically significant correlations between the presence of honors programs and institutional, curricular, and student body characteristics. Schools with larger enrollments are more likely to offer honors programs, as are those with a higher proportion of transfer courses. These findings must be interpreted with some caution, however, because the definition of *transfer course* is somewhat open to interpretation. Schools with a higher proportion of remedial courses are less likely to offer honors programs, although this correlation is not statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level. Institutions with more African American students are less likely to offer honors programs, while those with Latina and Latino students are more likely to offer these programs. As noted

Table 6.2. Correlations Between Presence of Honors Programs and Institutional, Curricular, and Student Body Characteristics

<i>Correlations</i>	<i>Presence of Honors Programs</i>
Size of institution	22**
Proportion of transfer courses	24**
Proportion of remedial courses	-11
Proportion of African American students	-16*
Proportion of Native American students	-01
Proportion of Asian American students	14*
Proportion of Latino students	23*

n = 163; * indicates correlations statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level; ** indicates significance at the $p < .01$ level. Decimal points have been omitted.

Source: Center for the Study of Community Colleges' 1998 Curriculum Project data and catalogues.

later, however, these correlations do not imply any causal effect between the racial and ethnic composition of an institution's student body and its curriculum. The correlations described in Table 6.2 will later be investigated further using linear regression.

Table 6.3 allows further investigation into student body characteristics and the presence of honors programs by presenting information on the relationship between the proportion of minority students within an institution's student body and the likelihood that the institution will offer honors programs. As shown in the table, there is a negative relationship between the proportion of some minority groups and the availability of an honors program. For example, 43 percent of the institutions with fewer than 3 percent African American enrollment had honors programs, but only two of the twelve schools (or 16.7 percent) with greater than 40 percent African American enrollment had honors programs. There appears to be a slight negative relationship between the proportion of Native American students and the presence of honors programs, although the absolute number of students in this group renders such a conclusion tentative. Interestingly, the likelihood of honors programs increased as the proportion of Latina and Latino and Asian American students rose.

However, as noted earlier, the small number of institutions falling into each cell (especially those cells representing institutions with higher proportions of minority students) renders these findings informative but far from authoritative. In addition, it should be noted that correlations between student body characteristics and the presence of honors programs do not imply causality. For example, they do not provide evidence that the proportion of students in any particular racial or ethnic group has a direct causal effect on the availability of honors programs. However, attention to these correlations can have important implications for issues of racial and ethnic equity, particularly for those concerned with the educational resources available to underrepresented students.

Table 6.3. Cross-Tabulations Between the Proportion of Minority Students and the Presence of Honors Programs

<i>Number and Percentage of Community Colleges Offering Honors Programs, by Proportion of Ethnic Group as Percentage of Total Student Body</i>			
	<i>Low (0 to 3 percent)*</i>	<i>Middle (>3 to 40 percent)</i>	<i>High (>40 percent)</i>
<i>Ethnic Group</i>			
African American	25 of 58 (43.1 percent)	31 of 88 (35.2 percent)	2 of 12 (16.7 percent)
Native American	56 of 152 (36.3 percent)	2 of 6 (33.3 percent)	N/A
Asian American	41 of 124 (38.1 percent)	16 of 32 (50 percent)	1 of 2 (50 percent)
Latino	24 of 88 (27.3 percent)	27 of 60 (45.0 percent)	7 of 10 (70.0 percent)

n = 158. * Proportions were divided at points designed to minimize disparity among the number of institutions in each category.

A stepwise linear regression was selected to investigate in greater detail the complex relationships between institutional, curricular, and student body characteristics and the availability of honors programs (Dey and Astin, 1993). In this regression equation, the presence of honors programs was set as the dependent variable, with independent variables entered in three blocks: institutional size, the proportion of the curriculum devoted to transfer and remedial courses, and the institutional proportion of students belonging to those racial and ethnic groups discussed earlier (African American, Native American, Latina and Latino, and Asian American).

The use of stepwise regression allows for a more nuanced understanding of the findings reported in earlier tables. By introducing institutional size as the first independent variable, we are able to control for the effect of this factor on those variables that enter the equation at subsequent steps. Similarly, the introduction of key curricular characteristics into the equation allows for the control of these factors on variables that enter late (in this case, the proportion of students in a college’s student body belonging to various ethnic and racial groups). In addition, the presentation of beta weights before and after the introduction of other entering variables allows us to assess the effect of these variables in relation to other factors.

As Table 6.4 shows, institutional size remains a positive predictor for the presence of honors programs throughout the equation. In the second step of the equation, in which relevant curricular characteristics were introduced, only one variable entered: the proportion of courses dedicated to the transfer function. Consistent with results reported in earlier tables, this variable

Table 6.4. Predicting the Presence of Honors Programs Using Institutional, Curricular, and Student Body Characteristics

Step	Variable	Beta After Step				
		R	Simple r	1	2	3
1	Institutional size	22	22**	13**	10	11*
2	Proportion of transfer courses	28	24**	17*	11*	10
3	Proportion of African Americans	33	-16*	-20**	-18*	-15*

n = 159. Note: Decimals before numbers have been omitted; * indicates figure significant at $p < .05$; ** indicates figure significant at $p < .01$.

Source: Center for the Study of Community Colleges' 1998 Curriculum Project data and catalogues.

remained a positive predictor for the presence of honors courses, even after controlling for the size of the institution. However, the drop in the beta weight for this variable after the introduction of institutional size shows that size and the proportion of transfer courses are positively correlated.

The final row in Table 6.4 presents the complex relationship between the proportion of African Americans within an institution's student body and the likelihood of honors courses being offered at that institution (variables indicating the proportion of Latino, Asian American, and Native American students did not enter the equation). The beta weights reported in the final row reveal that although the proportion of African American students within a community college's student body remains a negative predictor for the presence of honors programs at that institution, the strength of this effect decreases after we control for all variables. As noted earlier, those people who are committed to equity within the educational opportunities available to African Americans have reason to be concerned by these findings, because they indicate that, institutional size and key curricular characteristics being equal, African American students have less access to honors courses within community colleges.

The Relevance of Research Findings for Educational Equity

As these results show, there are strong correlations between the availability of community college honors programs and institutional, curricular, and student body characteristics. As might be expected, community colleges with more students and a transfer-oriented curriculum are most likely to offer honors programs. Disturbingly, the proportion of minority groups seems to affect the likelihood of honors programs as well. The incidence of honors programs falls as the proportion of African Americans rises, lending credence to those who charge that these programs seem to exclude at least some minority students.

The negative relationship between the presence of African Americans and the availability of honors programs persists even after controlling for institutional size and curricular characteristics relevant to transfer. Because honors programs can be important means of gaining access to senior institutions, especially for students who are underrepresented in four-year colleges (Outcalt, 1999), this finding indicates a potentially serious impediment for African American students hoping to use community colleges as stepping stones to the baccalaureate. However, these conclusions must remain tentative pending further investigation of actual enrollment and success in honors programs according to student characteristics, such as ethnicity, as well as in-depth research into relationships among institutional size, location (it is possible that geographic characteristics are related to both curricular and student body factors), and racial and ethnic composition.

Implications for Future Research

As serious as these limitations are, they point to promising avenues for future study. If more extensive data were available, one could examine the number of honors courses taken by students (especially as stratified by minority status), performance in these programs, and the predictive power of these programs for transfer to and success in senior institutions. This research could be used to investigate general community college academic climates and missions, particularly as they are related to transfer. In addition, one could examine relationships between these factors and other institutional characteristics, such as the proportion of minority students. Such studies would have a strong bearing on charges that honors programs contribute to elitism and enhanced transfer rates.

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