

Today's 'Neglected Majority'

BY ROD A. RISLEY

In 1985, then AACC President Dale Parnell wrote of the “neglected majority,” a phrase he coined for the astounding 70 percent of high school graduates who did not plan or aspire to attain baccalaureate degrees. Shocked by his findings, the author and former community college president called for technology-prep programs in high schools and community colleges. His hope: that the programs would result in a more highly skilled U.S. workforce.

Twenty-two years later, community college and public policy leaders still face the challenge of developing a competitive workforce, but the playing field has changed dramatically. The workforce skill level necessary to compete in a global economy and earn a livable wage will require, at minimum, an associate degree; higher-paying jobs will require a baccalaureate degree.

New strategies are urgently needed to address today’s “neglected majority.” Like their predecessors, this vast population of Americans likely will not earn baccalaureate degrees. Although the National Center for Education Statistics projects that a higher percentage of high school graduates will enroll in postsecondary institutions than ever before, little progress will be made in increasing the number who earn baccalaureate degrees unless significant intervention occurs. AACC’s Achieving the Dream initiative is developing and promoting many strategies for improving access to the baccalaureate degree, but more programs like it are needed.

As part of a comprehensive plan to prepare students for success, more community colleges should explore establishing or expanding honors programs. Such programs have been shown to improve student retention, boost graduation rates, and increase the number of students pursuing baccalaureate degrees. Honors offerings also address the concerns of corporate leaders who call for workers with critical-thinking, communications, and problem-solving skills. What’s more, a strong honors program is a vehicle for student recruitment and improves the institution’s image in the eyes of the community and the education arena at large.

Obvious advantages aside, there are critics who argue that honors programs are antithetical to the mission of community colleges. It is true that these programs serve a relatively small segment of the student population compared with the number of underprepared students who enroll in other, more general two-year institutions—and, yes, the two compete for funding. But another argument can be made that community colleges fulfill their missions more effectively by providing a balance of educational offerings, such as development programs for the underprepared and rigorous academic courses for the underserved. After all, don’t community colleges have an ethical responsibility to provide programs for all students?

Just ask Miami Dade College graduate Susana Montes. Montes, who recently received a \$50,000 scholarship to attend California’s prestigious Stanford University, says she never would have dreamed of attaining an elite higher education were it not for her experience at Miami Dade.

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**—Susana Montes,
Miami Dade College graduate**

“The Honors College was my visa to Stanford,” Montes, a native of Colombia, said. “I’m not sure that I would have even considered Stanford if it weren’t for the support, encouragement, and preparation I received in the Honors College. When so many individuals believe in you and challenge you, you start to believe in yourself.”

“That’s the philosophy at Miami Dade’s Honors College,” said Dr. E. Carter Burrus, who has specialized in honors education at the Florida campus for 18 years.

“We are empowering these students—making them feel confident,” said Burrus, now director of the Honors College at Miami Dade’s North Campus.

Miami Dade North Campus Honors

College students are primarily young, first-generation students. Many are Hispanic or black and are from economically disadvantaged backgrounds; many never considered pursuing a baccalaureate degree. Yet, officials at Miami Dade report, more than 85 percent of its Honors College students complete its rigorous academic program and head for the nation's most prestigious colleges. Among the Class of 2007, 12 graduates have been accepted at Tulane and seven are transferring to Cornell. Other graduates will attend Emory, Columbia, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Honors programs at community colleges follow the same basic guidelines as their four-year counterparts. Classes are designed with student demographics, college culture, and locale in mind. Community colleges use the cohort structure, designing specific, interdisciplinary classes for honors-program members; many students also sign honors contracts, which require honors students enrolled in non-honors classes to meet a higher academic standard.

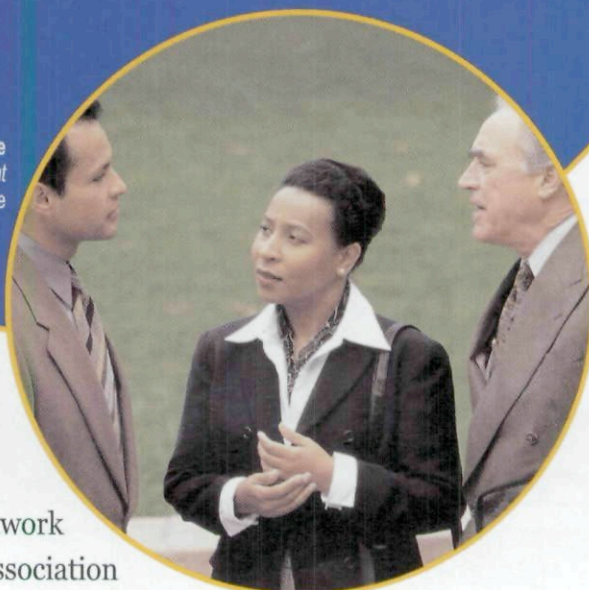
There is, perhaps, a misperception of the breadth of student interest in community college honors programs. Many assume honors programs attract only a small cohort of full-time, non-traditional-aged students. But many honors directors report that their programs are popular with students from a wide range of ages, backgrounds, and interests.

At Johnson County Community College (JCCC) in Overland Park, Kan., Honors Director Ruth Randall said the honors program attracts more nontraditional-aged students. Randall sees this as partly due to college demographics and partly due to the strong commitment that older students tend to exhibit. "Our average age is 27-plus, and the average age for an honors-program student is older, 29 to 30," she said. "I think the reason lies in the fact that the older students are often the more serious students."

But the programs attract younger learners as well. "A rigorous honors program is the best way to reach out to

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high school high achievers," said Roger Ekins, former dean and director of the honors program at Butte College in Oroville, Calif. "We need to offer not only an affordable education but a rich

education—so that high school students don't come to community college as a last resort, but as an option."

"Many of our students don't come to this community college with the idea

of ever getting accepted into a competitive university. They come with their sights set low. An honors program can change that," said Ekins, who has seen Butte's honors students be accepted by Berkeley, Stanford, and other leading universities.

Like Burrus in Florida, Ekins in California can attest to the value of an honors program from a recruiter's perspective. "A Berkeley recruiter told me that students in honors programs have a better chance of acceptance," he said. Statistical evidence supports the premise that four-year universities are eager to recruit honors students. The challenge is that community colleges often do a poor job of identifying honors students to four-year colleges.

In a recent survey of 600 four-year colleges, 70 percent indicated they were aware of two-year colleges in their recruitment area that sponsor honors programs. What's more, 99 percent of universities said they would actively recruit honors students if community colleges did a better job of identifying them.

One caveat for community colleges establishing honors programs is that they must be willing to commit necessary resources to ensure student success. Community college honors programs will face scrutiny from the public and from senior college and education leaders. It is an unusual and timely opportunity to promote the quality of instruction, but the effort could backfire for lack of support and affirm the lingering suspicion that community-college programs lack rigor.

Dr. Diana Van Der Ploeg, president of Butte College, believes community colleges have a responsibility to provide opportunities for all students. For the best and brightest, these opportunities come from honors programs. "The honors program students bond with each other and have a special connection to the faculty. They are engaged and highly motivated—we are preparing them for success."

ROD A. RISLEY is executive director of Phi Theta Kappa, the international honor society, in Jackson, Miss.

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