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DIVERSITY ISSUES & HONORS EDUCATION¹

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ABSTRACT

Are honors programs across the country obligated to increase the percentages of minority students enrolled in their programs? Is it necessary that honors programs prepare their members to work in a global economy with its many facets and features? The answers to both of these questions may seem obvious. However, very little research has been done to examine why there is such a disparity between whites and students of color enrolled and actively participating in honors programs at majority institutions across the United States. Consequently, many college and university honors programs fail to experience the benefits and advantages that may be found within a culturally diverse honors student population. This paper chronicles the results of a study that was piloted at the University of Connecticut by a first-year doctoral student. In order to fulfill the requirements for an Introduction to Multicultural Education Research course, the student investigated why students of color at the University of Connecticut may be reluctant to enroll in the university's honors program. The study included a small sample (n=6) of a population of 831 students. Participants in the study were interviewed and asked questions about their honors experiences and whether or not they believed their honors program maintained a vested interest in diversity issues. Students were also asked to identify perceived barriers that might prevent more students of color from participating in honors, though they may be eligible. The results of the study were divided along racial lines and may have broader implications for other majority campuses as well. Though relevant literature that addresses honors and diversity issues is limited, two pertinent resources are included in this paper. Honors program administrators may find these documents to be particularly instructive, if indeed increasing representation among students of color within their honors programs is a priority.

In the late 20th century, colleges and universities across the country took up the mantle of providing advanced instruction in the form of honors education. For example, Frank Aydelotte, in a book entitled *Breaking the Academic Lock Step*, contends that

The academic system as ordinarily administered is for these better and more ambitious students a kind of lock step: it holds them back, wastes their time, and blunts their interest by subjecting them to a slow-moving routine which they do not need. It causes, furthermore, the atrophy of the qualities of independence and initiative in more gifted individuals by furnishing too little opportunity for their exercise (14).

In an attempt to reconceptualize the perception that American colleges and universities were providing their students a mediocre education, Aydelotte, in his role as president of Swarthmore College, introduced a system of honors that was predicated upon the honors school at Oxford University, commonly referred to as Greats. His new development was "...to separate those students who are really interested in the intellectual life from those who are not, and to demand of the former in the course of their four years' work, a standard of attainment for the A.B. degree distinctly higher than we require of them at present and comparable perhaps with that which is now reached for the A.M." (31).

Over the course of time, honors has undergone a series of permutations. Many of these changes have been positive; however, there are some that have not been particularly advantageous to students of color. The idea of separating students according to intellectual keenness was a noble idea at first. However, this notion of separation has extended beyond intellectualism and affected other subject

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categories such as gender, class, and race and ethnicity. For instance, out of 831 members, the University of Connecticut Honors Program contains a total minority population of 18.5%. Further examples of this epidemic can be found by examining the low percentages of students of color in honors programs at majority institutions across the country.

A recent pilot study was conducted among honors students at the University of Connecticut. It was qualitative in its design and reflected a series of structured interviews of a diverse sample of honors students. Some of the major questions students were asked were these:

- (1) Do you feel that there are any barriers in place in your honors program that may prevent the full participation of persons of color in your honors program? Please explain.
- (2) In your opinion, are there any reasons why persons of color might feel uncomfortable participating in your honors program? Please explain.
- (3) Do you feel that your honors program is preparing you to interact with persons whose race(s) may be different from your own? Please explain.

The major findings of this study were clearly divided along racial lines. For instance, nonwhite students in the honors program at the University of Connecticut perceived that the barriers that may prevent other students of color from participating in honors were lack of diversity, misperceptions of honors as an elitist organization, and misperceptions of honors as an unnecessary addition to their course loads. One student of color stated:

The only barrier I can think of is the lack of diversity in the program. Some students of color may be disheartened because they don't find as many people who they think will have anything in common with them in the honors program. They may feel that it is a program 'for white people.'

Another student of color claimed that the only perceived barrier she felt prevented more minorities' participation in honors was the belief among students of color that the honors program is an elitist organization. "It's not intended to be elitist, but that's the view among some UCONN students," she said.

Conversely, according to white students, the perceived barriers were poor performance on standardized tests and lackluster recruiting efforts. For instance, one student believes:

SES may prevent persons of color from performing as well as whites on tests. But I do not think standards should be lowered for admissions of persons of color. It's not necessary. I want people to be admitted [into the honors program] because they are high achievers and not because of the color of their skin.

Another white member of the honors program at the University of Connecticut was very critical of the program's recruiting strategies. She asserted:

They don't make a special effort to grab certain people. They don't promote themselves as much as they should. If persons of color come, they're thrilled, but they don't go out of their way to get them to join.

Despite her assertion, the student said that the persons of color who are current honors students at the university "Shouldn't feel too much uncomfortable because our honors has a pretty good atmosphere where students have the option to voice their opinions to the Honors Council whether it be about race or other issues."

The study also revealed that students of color felt that the University of Connecticut Honors Program was not preparing its members to interact with persons whose races may be different from their own. The major reason identified included a lack of diversity in terms of the University of Connecticut Honors Program curriculum. However, each white survey participant praised the efforts of the honors program for preparing its members to interact with different races. "I'm getting a worldly education, and I'm becoming more curious and more intrigued about other peoples and other countries," remarked one student. Other whites felt that the honors program's implementation of International Night, an

annual event held at UCONN that celebrates various students' nationalities and ethnicities, facilitates their preparation for relating well with persons of color.

Honors program administrators at the University of Connecticut were concerned about the issues that emerged from this pilot study and began a series of initiatives to address issues of diversity within the program. The implementation of Day of Pride Scholarships and colloquia about race and diversity, as well as the exploration of alternative means for selecting students for participation in honors (e.g., Renzulli's Schoolwide Enrichment Model), are among UCONN's Honors Program efforts to increase its minority student population.

Although little research has been done to determine why students of color are reluctant to participate in honors, though they may be eligible, honors program administrators may find Donna Ford's Multicultural Gifted Education and Renea-Harrison Cook's recent doctoral dissertation entitled *An Examination of Issues Affecting African American Students' Decisions to Enroll in Honors Programs or Honors Colleges at Predominately White Postsecondary Institutions* to be particularly instructive.

Ford's text, although targeting an audience of educators of the gifted, contains practical suggestions about the various strategies that teachers and honors program directors can employ to maximize "cultural pluralism," as identified by Ford (27). Four other overarching goals in Ford's book are: an increase in multicultural knowledge, educational equity, empowerment, and improved social relations.

Cook's dissertation is predicated upon the theoretical framework of William Cross' notion of Nigrescence, which "explains the processes African Americans experience when establishing an ethnic and racial identity" (8). Honors program directors and/or administrators may find the study particularly useful because of its recommendations for increasing diversity. The following are some of the key suggestions from the dissertation:

1) Establish stronger support systems specifically targeting their African American students to emphasize to these students that they are important to their programs and to address their beliefs that honors education appeals mostly to Caucasian students and lacks students of color. Such support systems will also present a warmer, more welcoming campus climate and improve recruitment of black students, 2) investigate the feasibility of offering scholarships, grants and paid internships to African American students who enroll in their programs, 3) disseminate information about their programs more effectively among African American students to ensure that these students are contacted and informed about honors education. Diverse methods should be used, including direct contact from black students, invitations to recruitment events hosted by black honors students, distribution of recruitment literature, and announcements in various media. Such prevalent information will help African American students understand what honors education involves, what honors education requires of them, and how honors education can benefit them (94-95).

Although Cook's study investigates issues related specifically to African Americans and honors, honors program administrators may find her suggestions purposeful for the recruitment of other minority groups as well.

Almost every segment of society is engaging in discussions about the most effective and the most efficient manner in which their universities, companies, and the like may become more ethnically and culturally diverse in their membership compositions. Ostensibly, there appears to be genuine concern about issues of diversity and ensuring that people in general come to understand, to accept, and to celebrate the cultures of persons who are different from mainstream majority culture. However, more work beneath the surface level needs to be done. Honors programs across the United States should not consider themselves exempt from these pursuits and in fact should be more disturbed since programs of this kind severely lack representation of nonwhite members.

Notwithstanding the limitations of this study, namely its small sample size, the generalizability of these results should not be ignored. Similar reasons as those identified may influence nonwhite students' avoidance of honors programs on other majority campuses across the United States. It is

hoped that this article will compel all of those associated with honors education to make concentrated efforts to diversify the composition of their honors programs. After all, in this era of multiculturalism and time of celebration of diversity as our strength, the percentages of students of color actively participating in honors programs should not remain weak.

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Anthony A. Pittman is a former high school English teacher with the South Carolina Public Schools System. He also taught English and African American Literature in the English department at Claflin University in Orangeburg, SC. It was during his tenure at Claflin that his interest in Honors education developed, having taught Honors English 101 and Honors Leadership courses within the Alice Carson Tisdale Honors College.

Pittman is currently pursuing the Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Connecticut, Storrs. His areas of focus are English Education, Gifted and Talented Education, and Multicultural Education. He is involved actively in research efforts to increase diversity in the University of Connecticut Honors Program.