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What is an Honors Student? A Noel-Levitz Survey

Donald P. Kaczvinsky
Louisiana Tech University

. . . for Rodney K. Delasanta, *il miglior educatore*

In an impressive article published in the 2005 summer issue of *JNCHC*, Cheryl Achterberg laments the lack of empirical data available to provide a workable definition for honors students. While she duly notes that there is an "ideology" that honors students are "superior" to other students in an institution or of "high ability" or "the best and brightest," she laments that "[t]here are few characteristics of honors students that can be standardized, measured, or uniformly compared across institutions" (Achterberg 75). She concludes her article with these considerations: honors students are "not a homogeneous group with a set of absolute or fixed characteristics"; they "have much in common with other non-honors students of their own age group"; they "are (or should be) academically superior to their non-honors counterparts *within* any given institution"; and they "are probably little different today than the honors students of yesteryear." Achterberg calls for more research to understand "how honors students develop academically, intellectually, socially, emotionally, and as leaders relative to their non-honors peers" (79).

In the same issue of the *JNCHC*, Rosalie C. Otero finds honors students "ask probing questions that tend to differ from non-honors students'" in their depth of "understanding and frequency" (52). They "all have interests in many areas" (52), and they "either can't settle on a major until their sophomore or junior year or they come to the university already focused on their goal" (52). Unlike Achterberg, however, she suggests that today's honors students are different from those of the past. While honors students in the late 80s and 90s were "superachievers," they now "seem to be more cheerful and deal with things with humor" (52). Furthermore, they are "less influenced by hype and status," "more optimistic and inclusive," "enjoy collaborative learning and working in groups," and "selfless"; they are "e-learners," often "into extreme sports," and they "value speed" (52). But these characteristics might just as easily be attributed to their whole generation, as applicable to non-honors as honors students.

Most honors directors or deans would probably agree that honors students are academically superior to their non-honors students, but beyond that, few—if any—could pinpoint what defines an honors student. After teaching both honors and regular courses for over fifteen years and having been Honors Director for six, I know that not all the best and brightest, or even the most enjoyable, students I have taught were honors students. However, I have also found honors students somehow different from non-honors students: they are quirkier and more engaged, unconventional but also subject to the same problems, frustrations, and anxieties as their non-honors counterparts.

Trying to define an honors student with some precision is not simply of academic interest but addresses the very basis of honors education. Murray Sperber famously lambasted higher education and large public universities in general for abdicating their responsibilities and reserving a quality education for a few that should be available to all. But Sperber is ignoring the practical, economic, and demographic realities of higher education today. Most honors programs have not been created and promoted (at least at the administrative level) to address high-achieving students' special needs or characters but rather to convince heavily recruited students (and their parents) to attend a particular public institution as an inexpensive alternative to a private liberal arts college or university. Given that honors programs will continue to be part of higher education, Achterberg makes an important point:

> The key question each institution must answer in practice, within it own context, is whether the honors students within the institution are sufficiently different from other students to necessitate and justify differences in the pedagogical, curricular, and personal advising experiences offered them. (80)

While there is no absolute way to determine the differences between honors students and other students within an institution, I would like to contribute some empirical data that may help to characterize those at my own institution, Louisiana Tech University.

LOUISIANA TECH UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM

Louisiana Tech University is a selective-admissions comprehensive public university. In 2005–06, the university reached "Tier 3" status in the *U.S. News & World Report* for National Research Universities. In 2004–05, the year in which my study was conducted, the total enrollment was 11,710 with a freshman class of 1,914. The Honors Program had over 230 students, including 87 freshmen. While the university has excellent students in all five academic colleges, honors students, as might be expected, tend to enroll in

the College of Engineering and Science. Of the 87 honors students accepted in the 2004–05-freshman year, 53, or 61%, initially enrolled in the College of Engineering and Science as well. The Honors Program does not select students from a pool of applicants; instead, any student who applies with a composite score of 26 or better on the ACT or who graduates in the top 10% of his or her graduating class is accepted. Students with a composite score below 28 must also write an essay on a designated topic. Incoming freshmen must maintain a 3.3 GPA overall to remain in the program. By the end of the 2004–05 year, when the freshman transcripts were reviewed, 59 of the original students had a GPA of 3.3 or above. Of those students, 30 were in Engineering and Science for a retention rate of 57% while 29 students (85%) were retained from the other four colleges. That is to say, while honors students tended to be engineers in the freshman year, the engineering honors students had a much higher rate of attrition, so by the sophomore year the percentages of engineers and non-engineers in the Honors Program were about even. This high rate of attrition among engineering majors may well be a result of more stringent grading standards in that field—a discrepancy in grading patterns that has been widely discussed in honors journals and conferences.

THE NOEL-LEVITZ SURVEY

At Louisiana Tech University, incoming freshman students take UNIV 100: University Seminar, a one-credit course that orients freshmen to the university by teaching practical study techniques and attitudes associated with college, identifying goals for incoming freshmen, and developing skills in time management and scheduling. In this university-wide required course, the Honors Program has three sections: one section for its non-engineering students and two sections for its engineers. Each of the sections has approximately twenty students each. As one required activity in the course, students must take the *College Student Inventory* (CSI), part of the Noel-Levitz Retention Management System. The CSI is a 194-item questionnaire meant to help the student "discover the learning path that best suits [the student's] unique personality" (CSI 1) and to identify dropout proneness in freshmen. The CSI has nineteen independent motivational scales, and the survey creates two reports, one for the student and one for the advisor/counselor. The scores are organized into five main sections: Academic Motivation; Social Motivation; General Coping Skills; Receptivity to Support Services; and Two Supplementary Scales. The survey provides a percentile rank and bar graph as part of what the *Advisor's Guide* calls a "visual profile" (AG 16) of the student. The national norm for all the scales is the 50th percentile. High scores (80th percentile or above) indicate high levels of the characteristic described

in the scale name while 20th percentile indicates low levels. The report is also tested for internal validity and designed to help the advisor "begin fruitful conversation with a student—perhaps through an appeal to his or her openness, intellectual interests, sociability, background or yet another area" (AG 2). Furthermore, the survey provides action statements like "Discuss family problems with counselor" or "Get help with exam skills."

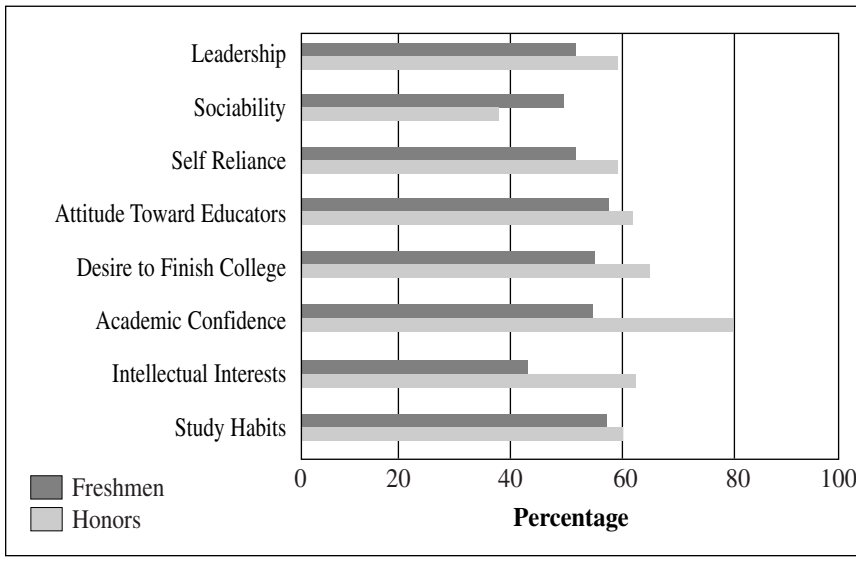
COMPARISON BETWEEN HONORS STUDENTS AND THE FRESHMAN CLASS, 2004–05

The following study compares the averages of 58 honors students (in one non-engineering and two engineering honors sections) with students in the entire freshman class, or the 1,496 students who took the survey in September 2004. The internal validity for the honors students' surveys was "excellent." As expected (and appreciated by this Honors Director), the incoming freshman honors students indeed showed themselves, in general, to be more highly motivated than their non-honors counterparts. This is not to say that every honors student was more highly motivated. There was, as Achterberg suggested, a great variety within each category. Indeed the maximum and minimum range spanned from the single digits to the 90s in each of the categories. The honors students scored higher in their intellectual interests (though sadly still not very high), their desire to finish college, and their attitude toward educators. They were slightly more self-reliant (defined as a student's capacity to make his or her own decisions and carry through with them) and had a somewhat greater sense of their own leadership skills. Figure 1 below shows a percentile comparison of the honors students to the entire freshman class.

Where the honors students far outscored the freshman students overall was in their academic confidence: the students' perception of their ability to perform well in school, especially in testing situations. This scale measures the "student's willingness to make the sacrifices needed to achieve academic success" (AG 16) and focuses on "effort." A sample question, for example, is "I study hard for all my courses, even those I don't like." Significantly, the *Advisor's Guide* points out that the scale "is intended as an indicator of academic self-esteem and should not be used as a substitute for academic assessment" (AG 17). In fact, the honors students' academic confidence far exceeded (22.7 percent higher) the non-honors students' even though the honors students' study habits were only slightly better (4.3 percent higher). Importantly, the distinction between confidence and study habits became even more pronounced between those students who made the required 3.3 GPA to stay in the Honors Program and those who fell below the mark after their freshman

year (see Appendix). These data suggest that, while most honors students are confident in their academic abilities (after all, they are "honors students"), they may not have developed sufficient study habits to make them excel in college. These students may have done well in high school because they were "smarter" than their fellow students or took courses that did not challenge them, or they may simply have been good at taking standardized tests. In my Honors UNIV 100 seminar, students often told me they did not have to work very hard in high school to do well. The survey seems to confirm this perception. Where the honors students fell far short of the entire freshman class, however, was in "Sociability": "the student's general inclination to join in social activities" (AG 18); here honors students scored 37.3 while the rest of the student body scored 50.5. The survey thus indicated that the students in the Louisiana Tech Honors Program were highly intelligent, confident in their abilities, and driven to complete college, but they were less socially inclined than their classmates and lacking in some of the essential habits needed for success in college.

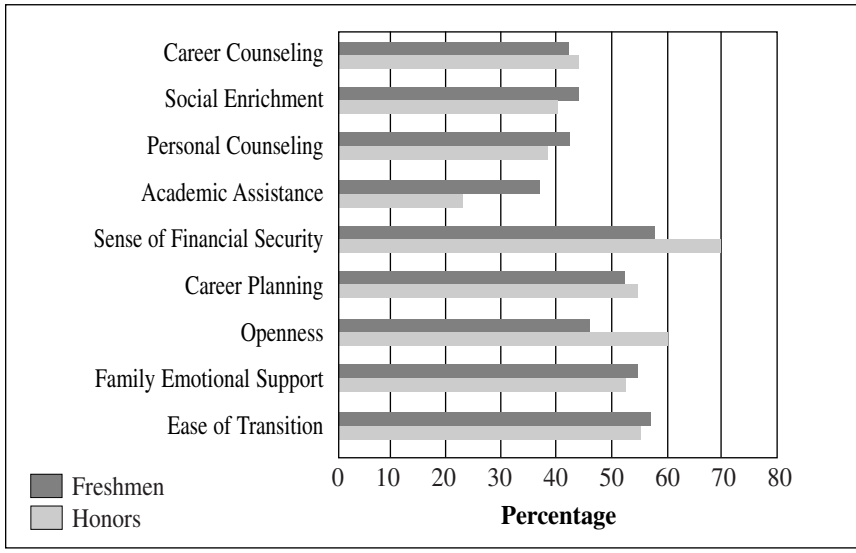
Figure 1: Academic and Social Motivations



In the survey questions that concentrate on general coping skills and receptivity to support services, there was much more parity between the honors students and the entire student body: that is to say, honors students had the same emotional and transitional problems as their counterparts, an observation Achterberg made as well. However, another part of the survey (see Figure 2 below) suggests that honors students at Louisiana Tech University were much more open "to new ideas and to the sensitive and sometimes

threatening aspects of the world" (AG 19) and felt far more financially secure than their non-honors counterparts. The two are probably not unrelated. In his brief but insightful essay "Imitation, Economic Insecurity, and Risk Aversion," Jay Mandt has suggested that economic insecurity is one of the key motivating factors for today's students: "When one's parents are mired in a dead-end situation, 'opportunity' means . . . choosing the 'sure thing' instead of the dream, seeking an education for success, not for enlightenment, and above all, not making 'mistakes'" (44). A student may be more open to new ideas and "threatening" aspects of the world if he or she feels financially secure. Indeed, financial security may be one of the major factors behind a student's willingness to participate in an honors program. However, as the appendix suggests, those that succeeded in the program had a lower score (62.3) than those who fell below the necessary 3.3 GPA (72.8). Financial security may increase openness to new ideas and willingness to take chances, but at a certain point it may also lower a student's motivation to do the hard work necessary to succeed in a challenging educational program. Alternatively, some level of risk aversion may lead to playing it safe, making higher grades, and thus remaining in an honors program.

Figure 2: General Coping and Receptivity to Support Services



Once again the honors students seemed slightly less inclined toward social enrichment—"the desire to meet other students and to participate in group activities" (AG 20)—than the rest of the student body, and, surprisingly, they were even more unlikely than their non-honors classmates to seek academic assistance or "individual help with study habits" (AG 19). That honors students' study habits might not be appreciably better than the rest of

the student population's is an important possibility for honors administrators and teachers to take into account.

CONCLUSION

This study is not meant to give a full statistical analysis of the results of the Noel-Levitz survey but simply to provide a "visual profile" (AG 16) of incoming honors freshmen, based on a comparison of percentages with non-honors students, that is likely to be similar to other universities across the country. A further study might have the honors students take the Noel-Levitz survey at the end of their careers at Tech to see how their motivational patterns and attitudes have changed during their years in college. The survey itself has restrictions, too. Since it is meant to identify those students who are at risk of dropping out rather than succeeding, the Noel Levitz survey has limitations as an instrument for understanding the character of honors students. For instance, the survey does not measure why a student joined an honors program in the first place, whether the motivation was based on intrinsic rewards (for instance, valuing an undergraduate education for its own sake) or extrinsic rewards such as believing that honors classes look impressive on applications for medical school. Nor does this survey help us find out how honors students today might differ from honors students of the past.

Nonetheless, Tech's honors students are, in general, the proverbial "best and brightest." When compared to the rest of the student body, they are more academically confident, have greater intellectual interests, and are more willing to challenge their accepted values, beliefs, and ideas. They are more financially secure than the average student. They can benefit greatly from the demanding courses offered; however, they may have never developed the study habits needed to succeed in this more academically rigorous university environment. Furthermore, the honors students are far more likely to be loners, less likely to join groups or social organizations. The smaller class sizes and lower student-teacher ratio of honors classes are particularly important and may help support the honors students, especially those unlikely to seek the academic assistance provided by other services or programs at the university. The honors students, however, have the same anxieties and difficulties with coping that the rest of the student body has. Their very presence in the Honors Program may afford the best opportunity for the students to develop friendships and form social bonds while also satisfying the intellectual interests they cannot get in other courses or clubs at the university.

I would like to thank Norm Pumphrey, Director of Retention and Advising at Louisiana Tech University, for looking over a draft of this article and offering useful suggestions for revision.

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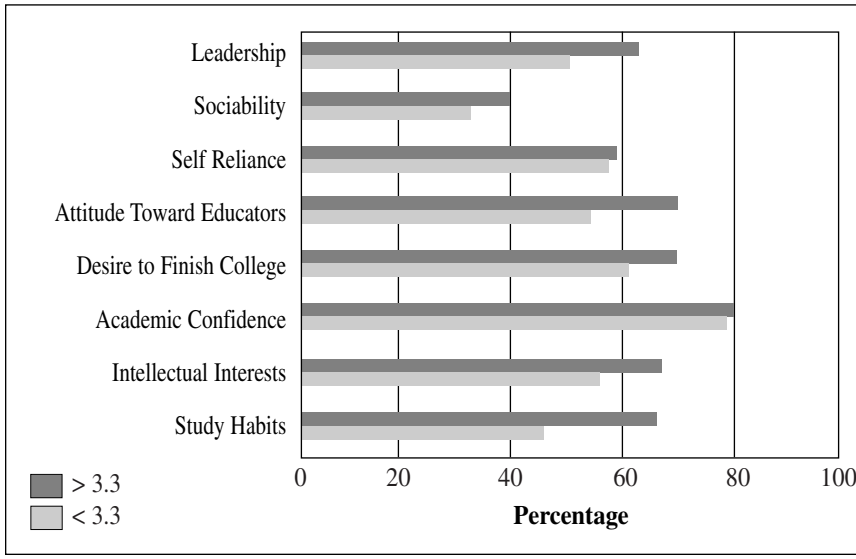
APPENDIX

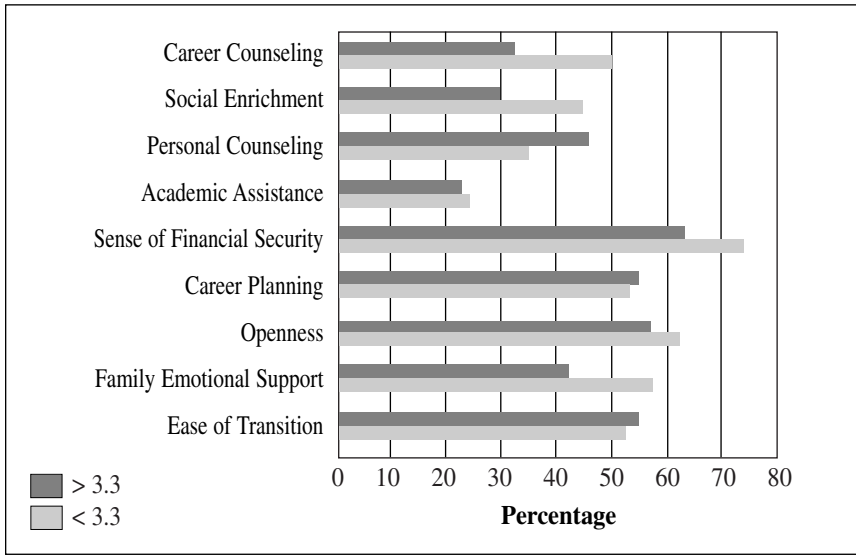
The following graphs provide a comparison, based on the same categories as those in the text, between the freshman honors students who retained a GPA greater than 3.3 and those who fell below that mark after their freshman year. In this case, the students who maintained a 3.3 and stayed in the Honors Program had a higher percentage in every motivational category with a significantly higher percentage in terms of their intellectual interests, (66.6 to 55.2 percent), study habits, (65.6 to 47.9 percent), and attitude toward educators, (68.5 to 54.2 percent).

Figure 3: Academic and Social Motivations



On the other hand, those students who succeeded were lower on the scale in categories that measured the student's desire to seek help or participate in group activities. An unexpected result is the low sense of family emotional support for those with a GPA over 3.3, especially since this factor "has emerged in the validity studies as a strong correlate of attrition, particularly in academically successful students" (AG 18). This result may be an aberration but is an area of concern and for further study.

Figure 4: General Coping and Receptivity to Support Services



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