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Spring 2003

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Longo, Peter and Falconer, John, "Diversity Opportunities for Higher Education and Honors Programs: A View from Nebraska" (2003). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive*. 128.  
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# Diversity Opportunities for Higher Education and Honors Programs: A View from Nebraska

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## INTRODUCTION

While honors programs were developed in part to actively engage top students in undergraduate education, they also have demonstrated a capacity for leading innovation in post-secondary institutions. Innovations come in the form of curricular development, service learning programs, and independent scholarship. As institutions strive to find effective approaches to improving access to and diversity in higher education, honors programs, in a most general sense, offer a link between diversity and improved access. This paper explores the role of honors programs in expanding access and diversity—an area traditionally focused on broader student populations. Demographic changes in Nebraska, marked by increased ethnic diversity, offer an intriguing example of how honors programs might better embrace diversity.

The importance of higher education in society centers on the notion of equitable opportunity for all. Inclusionary participation provides an essential element in the mythical hope that America offers to people here and abroad. Since the presidency of Andrew Jackson, American society has embraced the belief that people with skills and ambition can rise from the most humble beginnings to the pinnacle of success. This fundamental principle underlies our public education system, which was founded to provide the basic educational foundation necessary for participation in society and the economy. Trow (1989) observed that "...the expansion and democratization of higher education may also work to legitimate the political and social order by rewarding talent and effort rather than serving merely as a cultural apparatus of the ruling classes by ensuring the passage of power and privilege across generations" (p. 19). Half a century ago, a series of presidential commissions considered this issue:

American society is a democracy: that is, its folkways and institutions, its arts and sciences and religions are based on the principle of equal freedom and equal rights for all its members, regardless of race, faith, sex, occupation, or economic status. The law of the land, providing equal justice for the poor as well as the rich, for the weak as well as the strong, is one instrument by which a democratic society establishes, maintains, and protects this equality among different persons and

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groups. The other instrument is education, which, as all the leaders in the making of democracy have pointed out again and again, is necessary to give effect to the equality prescribed by law. (Report of the President's Commission on Higher Education, 1947, p. 759)

The message of 1947 still retains its importance at the beginning of the twenty-first century even as the nation absorbs people from other lands. The legal and political systems are challenged to develop and apply just laws to a changing cultural landscape, and colleges and universities continue the decades-long struggle to expand access to post-secondary education. In the latter case, most attention has been focused on recruiting students from various social and ethnic backgrounds into college through affirmative action programs and flexible admissions criteria. While such methods have had some success at drawing students into colleges, they have not been an effective measure for so-called performance-driven honors programs. In other words, honors programs typically rely on the quantitative evaluative indicators of class rank, grade point average, and ACT or SAT scores. Moving beyond traditional indicators, however, expands the potential for diversity and better fulfills the social contract.

Further, it should not be assumed that honors programs are separate from the social contract equation. James Hearn (1991) underscored the importance of looking beyond simple access to higher education:

...because attending a more selective, resource-rich institution has been associated with measurable positive impacts on educational attainment, income attainment, status attainment, and socially valued aspects of citizenship, the issues of who attends such institutions and how attendance patterns at such institutions change over time are of both policy and theoretical importance. (Hearn, 1991, p. 159)

Public regional universities and state colleges are often the most accessible institutions for minority students. Accessibility does not always match with the construct of a selective honors program. Honors programs can provide the challenges and opportunities for high-potential students and at the same time better reflect the changing demographics. First-generation and minority students are often not well suited to thrive in the environments at large public universities or private colleges, but regional institutions can serve them with accessible campuses, familiar surroundings, and challenging honors programs (Selingo, 2002).

Honors programs could dramatically enrich their academic environments by better reflecting the diverse nature of society, which provides valuable challenges to students. "The nontraditional student's lack of access to information and exchange results in a lack of exchange for traditional students as well. It has long been argued that part of the reason students are required to learn other languages and about other cultures is that it broadens the student's understanding of society and how he or she is shaped by and in turn shapes the culture in which we live. The same reasoning applies to all aspects of diversity in an educational community" (Smith, 1989). As such, diversity fortifies the nature of honors programs. To best embrace diversity, numerous political variables must be addressed.

As will be demonstrated by the Nebraska example, the political and educational systems together deliver the opportunities for new peoples to access the promise of America. While education empowers, empowerment must navigate through political realities to reach all citizens.

## **THE POLITICAL SYSTEM: THE CASE OF NEBRASKA**

New migrants to Nebraska can find some comfort in the judicial protections afforded to all Nebraskans, but the formal workings of Nebraska democracy are not always welcoming to new people. This section will illustrate the political and legal protections and pitfalls awaiting Nebraska's newest inhabitants. Nebraskans have not always been willing to quickly embrace diversity. During the World War I era, Nebraska laws and courts supported discrimination against Germans. As Miewald and Longo (1993) noted:

...by 1918, the political stew in Nebraska had become even spicier. World War I left some ugly scars in the state, as the large German population felt they had been abused by the nativist hysteria caused by the war effort. So strong was the anti-German sentiment that the legislature passed a law prohibiting the teaching of foreign languages, an action that the U.S. Supreme Court was to find in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment in the leading case of *Meyer v. Nebraska*.

In 1923, The United States Supreme Court overturned the anti-foreign-born position of the Nebraska Supreme Court. Despite the lingering reminder of *Meyer*, the Nebraska judiciary reflected the popular sentiment of the day.

Nebraska jurisprudence did evolve to embrace added protections, such as those afforded by the equal protection clause. Since the 1998 formal adoption of the Nebraska equal protection clause, the Nebraska Supreme Court has utilized it to assure fair and just treatment of citizens. In the case *Schindler v. Department of Motor Vehicles* (1999), the Nebraska Supreme Court provided the basic equal protection framework:

In any equal protection challenge to a statute, the degree of judicial scrutiny to which the statute is to be subjected may be dispositive.... If a legislative classification involves either a suspect classification or a fundamental right, courts will analyze the statute with strict scrutiny. Under this test, strict congruence must exist between the classification and the statute's purpose. The end the legislature seeks to effectuate must be a compelling state interest, and the means employed by the statute must be such that no less restrictive alternative exists. On the other hand, if a statute involves economic or social legislation not implicating a fundamental right or suspect class, courts will ask only whether a rational relationship exists between a legitimate state interest and the statutory means selected by the legislature to accomplish that end.... Upon showing that such a rational relationship exists, courts will uphold the legislation.

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The Court's language clearly provides an equal protection framework that would resolve discriminatory actions. The framework, however, does not assure sound political results in that electoral politics often play out against the weakest political forces.

The hostilities embodied in the infamous *Meyer v. Nebraska* were recently manifested in 2000 and 2002 referenda proposing the elimination of the English language requirement for private, denominational, and parochial schools. On both occasions, the voters rejected the pleas. The Nebraska Constitution (Article I section 27), obsolete as it may seem, still reads: "The English language is hereby declared to be the official language of this state, and all official proceedings, records and publications shall be in such language, and the common school branches shall be taught in said language, in public, private, denominational and parochial schools." In the words of Yogi Berra, it is "*deja vu* all over again" for the state's newest inhabitants. That immigrants might have a language other than English was of little concern to the voters, who soundly defeated both proposals.

This is not to suggest that the Nebraska political process ignores diversity. Nebraska Revised Statute 79-719 requires multicultural education in the State of Nebraska. Multicultural education "includes, but is not limited to studies relative to the culture, history, and contributions of African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans. Special emphasis shall be placed on human relations and sensitivity to all races." Multicultural education is commonplace from kindergarten through college years.

As previous waves of immigrants entered Nebraska, they were prepared for economic participation through the public K-12 school system. But in the twenty-first century a college education is typically necessary for middle-class lifestyle. For example:

Recent shifts in America's economy have made higher education more significant than ever. The industrial jobs that once formed the backbone of the economy are dwindling and will provide employment for only 10 percent of the workforce by the year 2000. The service-related jobs that are taking their place require a level of knowledge and skill that, for the most part, can be gained only through programs offered at colleges and universities. (Dionne and Keane, 1994)

Statewide, the Hispanic population grew 155% during the 1990s (Parker, 2001). The critical question, then, is how well Nebraska is responding to the changing population. Some data indicate that Nebraska's educational system is not serving Hispanics at the same levels as it serves the broader population.

- The composite ACT scores of Hispanic/Latino students were consistently lower than those for all students taking the assessment in the state [Nebraska] from 1990 to 1995. (Bureau of Business Research)
- The ratio of Hispanic dropouts to total dropouts in elementary and secondary schools increased from 5.5% in 1991 to 9% in 1995. (Bureau of Business Research)

While Nebraska has consistently ranked in the top 5 states in percentage of 9<sup>th</sup> graders who enter college by age 19 (Coordinating Commission for Post-secondary Education), the factors that cause this strength are not reaching the Hispanic population. The University of Nebraska at Kearney (hereinafter UNK)—a regional public university and part of a four campus system—is located in south central Nebraska. Despite the rapid growth of the Hispanic population in the area, UNK's undergraduate enrollment of Hispanic students has ranged from one to two percent for the past 10 years (*UNK Factbook*). This indicates a problem on the horizon as a growing subculture is increasingly isolated from the education that is essential to economic and cultural participation. According to Jim Ketelsen, head of a Houston project to expand access to education, "If we continue to under-educate a large percentage of our students, then we are going to continue to have a large underprivileged class" (Hodge, 2001).

## RESPONSES

It is evident that education of immigrant populations is necessary to offer the promise of opportunity in America. The net must be cast in a way that includes greater diversity. Inherently, offering educational opportunities to all is a civic mandate. The ultimate delivery of education requires a combination of community and political responses. Higher education, for example, must be preceded by secondary education.

Rapid infusion of students with limited English proficiency into previously homogenous school districts poses an immediate problem at the local level. Many communities have responded by increasing the number of teachers with English as a Second Language (ESL) endorsements. The University of Nebraska at Kearney, seeking to address community needs, has launched two projects totaling over \$1.6 million to support area schools in their response to changing demographics. These projects are intended to enhance personnel capacities in schools while delivering direct educational support to Hispanic and other minority students. Improving educational achievement in the K-12 system is not sufficient, because the financial barriers to higher education remain.

The Nebraska Unicameral considered the financial barriers when it enacted the Minority Scholarship Program Act (2000) (Nebraska Statute 85-9,178). The language of this act states:

The Legislature finds that the State of Nebraska has a compelling interest to provide access to the University of Nebraska, state colleges, and the community colleges for Black, American Indians, and Hispanic minority students and that the financial requirements of postsecondary education represent major obstacles to such students because of the lack of financial resources available to them.

Undoubtedly, this act will have important positive impacts for some new citizens. The act further encourages a large sector of the electoral population to embrace diversity, especially in higher education. Innovation, however, is not always supported.

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The battles for better education for new citizens are on-going and not always successful. For instance, Legislative Bill 955 (2002) was designed to provide in-state tuition for undocumented aliens who graduate from in-state high schools. *Michael O'Connor* (01/31/2002) provides the following account of the proposal:

State Sen. DiAnna Schimek of Lincoln said the legislation is needed because of the state's growing Hispanic population. 'We want an educated work force,' she said. 'In the long-run it benefits everyone in the state.' Jerry Heinauer, director of the Omaha district office of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, said the bill ignores the fact that undocumented immigrants are violating federal law. 'What you are doing is legitimizing the fact that they are here illegally,' Heinauer said. 'You send a signal that we are not serious about enforcing our laws.'

The legislature agreed with the INS and killed the bill on February 7, 2002. The politics of LB 955 indicate a willingness of some state senators to take up the cause for new citizens, but the death of LB 955 reminds innovative legislators as well as new residents that laws and the political process are not always concerned about the problems facing people new to our communities. The voice from institutions of higher education needs to be heard among the many other political pleas.

### **HONORS PROGRAMS: BEYOND TRADITIONAL INDICATORS**

While the benefits of education flow through individuals, a powerful collective interest in accessible education abides. Broad education of a community supports the political system, fosters tolerance and inclusion, aids in the assimilation process, and enriches the culture. Economically, educated people are needed by businesses, and individuals repay public investment in their education through higher lifelong income tax payments (Fenton, Gardner, and Singh, 2001). The Commission on National Investment in Higher Education discusses at length the importance of higher education to social stability and broad economic prosperity. Education provides access to economic well being, thus sustaining the social contract. If the social contract means that everyone can prosper through hard work and enhanced skills, then an educational system that does not serve specific groups would undermine the contract and create disenfranchised peoples. Honors programs cannot be excluded from that contract.

The UNK honors program has found hope in the early results of diversification efforts. In partnership with the recruiting efforts of the Admissions Office, special attention has been focused on recruiting in nearby Lexington, Nebraska, which has a public school system that is two-thirds Hispanic (Thiessen, 2001). UNK's enrollment of Hispanic students from Lexington grew from four in 2001 to fourteen in 2002, including two new honors students. While the total numbers are small, they demonstrate the positive potential of the partnership with the Admissions Office.

Another potential diversity mechanism is a "walk-on" program analogous to the one made famous by University of Nebraska-Lincoln football coach Tom Osborne.



Students who compile strong records at the freshman level can apply for admission to the honors program. This approach opens the door to those students who did not perform well-enough on traditional indicators—ACT or class rank—to demonstrate their ability for honors program work in the college environment. It also creates an opportunity for honors programs to partner with “first-year success” programs, which are increasingly popular in higher education.

Another possible mechanism for opening the honors program door to a more diverse population has been offered by the “strivers” model developed by the Educational Testing Service, which uses 14 socioeconomic indicators to provide a “statistical basis for identifying and accepting motivated applicants whose test scores and grade point averages have been depressed because of their difficult family backgrounds and poor high schools” (Cooper, p. 34, 1999).

Honors program directors must be receptive to such indicators. Brubacher (1977) best captures the unique challenges presented to honors programs: “But there are other instances in which unequals should be treated unequally because the differences are relevant. Honors programs are a case in point.” They are a case in point, but the claim does not resolve the problem. Educational programs, including—if not especially—honors programs, benefit from diversity. It is imperative for honors programs to be part of the collective effort to recruit an ethnically diverse body of students. In Nebraska, new citizens represent a distinct possibility to diversify institutions and honors programs in particular.

After all, society’s long-term interest is best served by engagement of new citizens, providing cultural enrichment and economic development. The promise of America—the social contract—rests on the notion that everyone is treated fairly and that all individuals have a truly equal opportunity to prosper. Together, these notions hold our richly diverse society together and in turn attract new people to our shores. Additionally, honors programs can work to improve access and diversity by expanding the range of indicators used to admit students. Because honors programs are often highly visible components of a campus, they can send important signals to minority communities that the institution welcomes and supports people from all backgrounds. Indeed, campus climate is key to recruiting and retention (Morrow, Burris-Kitchen, and Der-Karabetian, 2000). Samuel Schuman, chancellor of the University of Minnesota, Morris, wrote in the Spring/Summer 2002 issue of the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* that we cannot afford to lose the undergraduate neighborhood that “provides enough shelter to be safe and enough space to be free.” In fact, honors programs cannot afford to miss the opportunity to make the neighborhoods reflect the diversity of society.

Most campuses engage a range of secondary students through academic, artistic, and athletic programs as well as visitations to secondary schools. Honors programs can capture the obvious by connecting with these efforts to identify and recruit students who can best demonstrate their potential in these arenas. These summer offerings provide a chance to establish indicators other than standardized test scores and class rank. Honors programs can assist in the delivery of camps and in turn “grade” participants. For example, if a 10th grader is participating in a theatre workshop, the honors director can reasonably request the supervising faculty to evaluate the particular participant.



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This evaluation can be added to the traditional indicators. A familiar challenge arises: underrepresented students must be actively recruited for these camps. The expansion of the process will bode well for honors recruitment.

### CONCLUSION

It is likely that, for a variety of reasons, Nebraska as well as many other states will remain open for immigrants. This reality ought to propel interested onlookers to carefully scrutinize their respective welcome mats. Laws should encourage rather than discourage new citizens to engage in empowering activities. Education is one of the most important empowering activities.

The political process ought to embrace the benefits of diversity. Despite competing political forces, such competition should not deter new plans. Clearly diversity presents a marvelous opportunity for institutions of higher education and programs such as honors programs to better serve all people. Education serves not only new citizens but all citizens in the continual search for empowerment and community well-being. Nebraska is not unique, and the messages from Nebraska have relevance for numerous colleges and universities.

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