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The Role of Community College Honors Programs in Reducing Transfer Shock

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INTRODUCTION

Community colleges have historically addressed the needs of a diverse population (Walker, 2001). A key goal for community colleges is to be a resource for all segments of the community (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2000). Walker (2001) reinforced this directive by stating that the community college purpose was “to bring higher education in its various forms into the community” (p. 9).

Community colleges have concentrated much of their attention on several sub-populations within the community, such as students in vocational training or certificate programs and academically under-prepared students (Outcalt, 1999). As the numbers of students increase, community colleges are becoming aware of other sub-populations and their needs. A sub-population found at community colleges that is gaining more attention is academically well-prepared students (Skau, 1989). One way that community colleges have addressed the special requirements of this sub-population is by offering honors classes or an honors program to challenge these students and prepare them for transition to four-year institutions (Outcalt, 1999).

Outcalt (1999) maintains that a major function of community colleges is to prepare their students for transfer to four-year institutions. Even as community colleges prepare their students for transfer to four-year institutions, however, 79% of the students experience a phenomenon termed “transfer shock” (Diaz, 1992). This phenomenon was first described by Hills (1965) and was defined as an appreciable drop in grade point average (GPA) upon transfer to a four-year university.

Since Hills first coined the term “transfer shock,” numerous studies have examined the initial decline in the GPA of community college students as they transfer into four-year university settings (Baratta & Apodace, 1988; Britton, 1969; Diaz, 1992; Harrison, 1999; Keeley & House, 1993; Laanan, 2001; Nolan & Hall, 1978; Slark & Bateman, 1983; Sleight, 1990). While these studies and others have examined the phenomenon of transfer shock on community college students as a whole, this researcher found no studies that have investigated the sub-population of honors students at the community college in relation to transfer shock.

Laanan (2001) claimed that the “transfer function [of community colleges] is of paramount importance” (p. 5). If Laanan’s claim is valid, then one unrecognized yet potentially profound benefit of honors programs could be the effect participation has

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upon the phenomenon of transfer shock. The underlying hypothesis for this study is that students who participate in honors programs at community colleges experience reduced transfer shock as they transfer to four-year institutions, based on GPA.

METHODOLOGY

This study involved only those community college students who transferred to Sam Houston State University (SHSU) in Huntsville, Texas. This constraint is placed on the study for two reasons: (a) by focusing on one institution, the study removed the variation found between different universities, allowing the researcher to more accurately determine the effect of the community college programs on future academic success, and (b) by focusing on SHSU, the researcher was assured of having access to the data that are needed to answer the research questions.

The sample included 77 community college students who transferred 15 credit hours or more from a community college to SHSU, had an entering GPA of 3.3 or higher, and had been admitted within the past five years. McKeague (1984) stated that one of the entrance requirements of most honors programs is a GPA of 3.25 or higher. In this study a GPA of 3.3 was chosen to select those students who represented the majority of honors students as well as a comparison group of non-honors students that was equally academically successful. The above data set was separated into two groups: (1) those students who had taken honors classes at a community college, as determined by their transcripts and with the assistance of community college honors directors; and (2) those students who did not take honors classes while attending a community college.

The first group consisted of 37 students who had taken honors classes at the community college, and the second group was comprised of 40 students who had not taken community college honors classes. The mean entering GPA of the honors students was 3.60, which was coincidentally identical to the mean entering GPA of those students who had taken traditional classes at the community college.

The students in the sample population transferred to SHSU from fifteen different community colleges in Texas. The following colleges are represented in the sample population: Alvin Community College, Austin Community College, Blinn College, Brazosport College, College of the Mainland, Del Mar College, Houston Community College System, Kilgore College, Lee College, Navarro College, North Harris Montgomery Community College District, San Jacinto Community College, Trinity Valley Community College, Tyler Junior College, and Wharton County Junior College.

DATA COLLECTION

To access the information used in the study, I worked closely with the SHSU honors director and the honors directors at the various community colleges that had students who had been identified for inclusion in the study. The SHSU honors program office removed names, addresses, social security numbers, and other information that is protected under Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

To increase the pool of students, fifteen community college honors directors were contacted in order to obtain a list of their recent honors participants. Once these data had been obtained, they were submitted to the SHSU honors office with the request that they cross match the names of these community college honors students with those students who had been admitted to SHSU within the past five years.

FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

The data were analyzed using a *t* test, which compared the mean first-semester GPA at SHSU of community college transfer students who took honors classes to the mean GPA of students with a similar community college GPA who did not take honors classes. Additionally, a paired *t* test compared the mean GPAs of the two groups to their entering GPA.

The mean GPA of the honors students during their initial SHSU semester was 3.52, while the mean GPA of the non-honors students was 3.22 for the same time period. An independent sample *t* test determined that a significant difference exists between the two groups. The *t* test indicated that one could accept that the mean GPA of the honors students was significantly different from the students who only attended traditional classes at the community college. Table 1 summarizes the GPA during the initial semesters of the subjects at SHSU.

TABLE 1

RESULTS FROM A T TEST COMPARING MEAN GPA DURING THE INITIAL SHSU SEMESTER BETWEEN COMMUNITY COLLEGE HONORS AND NON-HONORS STUDENTS

GPA	Honors	Non-Honors
Mean Entering	3.60	3.60
Mean Initial SHSU Semester	3.52	3.22
$t(75) = 3.085, p = .003$		

In addition to the original *t* test, paired *t* tests compared the initial-semester GPAs of the honors and non-honors students with their entering GPAs. The analysis of those students who did not take honors classes at the community colleges revealed the presence of a statistically significant difference between their entering GPA and the GPA obtained during the first semester at SHSU. Of equal importance, the *t* test highlighted that no significant difference existed between the community college honors students' entering GPA and their initial SHSU semester GPA. Tables 2 and 3 summarize the findings from the paired *t* test.

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TABLE 2

SUMMARY OF PAIRED T TEST COMPARING THE INITIAL SEMESTER MEAN GPA OF NON-HONORS STUDENTS WITH THEIR ENTERING GPA FROM THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Non-Honors Community College Students	
Mean Entering GPA	Initial Semester GPA at SHSU
3.60	3.22
$t(39) = 5.944, p = .0001$	

TABLE 3

SUMMARY OF PAIRED T TEST COMPARING THE INITIAL SEMESTER MEAN GPA OF HONORS STUDENTS WITH THEIR ENTERING GPA FROM THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Community College Honor Students	
Mean Entering GPA	Initial Semester GPA at SHSU
3.60	3.52
$t(36) = 1.363, p = .181$	

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The focus of this study centered on determining if community college honors programs reduced the effects of transfer shock on those students who participated in them. Both the community college honors students and the community college students who had taken traditional classes had entering GPAs of 3.60; however, the data showed a statistically significant difference in the mean GPA between these two groups during their initial semester at SHSU. The community college honors students had a significantly higher mean GPA during their first semester at SHSU when compared to the students who had taken only traditional classes at the community college.

The data indicated that both the non-honors students and the honors students experienced a drop in their mean GPA during their initial semester compared to their mean entering GPA. While the community college honors students did experience a slight decline in their mean GPA (.08) during their initial semester, the difference from their entering GPA was not statistically significant. The drop, however, in mean GPA experienced by the students who only took traditional classes (.38) was significantly different from their entering GPA. One conclusion that can be drawn is that those students who participate in community college honors programs experience minimal transfer shock.

The significance of these findings has implications for community college honors programs. As stated earlier, a main goal of community colleges is to meet the needs of their diverse population (Piland & Azbell, 1984), and those students who excel academically have been identified as one of these groups (Crooks & Haag, 1994; McKeague, 1984; Skau, 1989). One of the requirements for acceptance into most honors programs, however, involves the student's GPA (Cohen & Brawer, 1996; Heck, 1986; McKeague, 1984; Parsons, 1984; Skau, 1989), which limits the access of community college students to the program.

The findings of this research study clearly indicate the ability of the community college honors programs to reduce transfer shock for those students who participate in honors. Community college honors programs are more effective at preparing the academically gifted community college student than traditional classes. In light of this evidence, it may be advisable for community college honors programs to lower their admission requirements; if done judiciously, this would allow a larger segment of the community college population to experience the benefits of honors programs without affecting the integrity of the programs.

In addition, relaxing the admission requirements would address the perennial criticism of elitism within honors programs (Byrne, 1998; Cohen, 1985). This elitist label evolved from having required criteria for admittance into most honors programs (Austin, 1991). These criteria led the opponents of honors programs to claim that, by having academic admission standards and requirements, the honors programs are not available to all students (Eric Clearinghouse for Community Colleges, 1984). By addressing the needs of a broader segment of the community college population, honors programs refute the claims of elitism.

Several important aspects of the community college honors program play key roles in the continued academic success of the honors students and can influence transfer shock. The honors classes provide the students with opportunities to delve into the subject matter in greater depth than is normally experienced in the traditional classes. The community college honors students are expected to carry out in-depth research and to write papers and reflections, along with keeping up with the notes and basic requirements of a class. The level of discussion and interaction within the honors classroom also provides enrichment from which the students can draw to enhance their success at the senior institution. In all of these ways, honors students have their academic skills fine-tuned and honed, enhancing their future academic success when they transfer to a senior institution.

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Honors students often have much more contact with their community college professors. The increased intellectual interaction of the classroom and mentoring nature of honors programs lead the students to engage their professors outside of class more frequently than their peers, thus giving the honors students an opportunity to enhance their communication skills and comfort level when dealing with faculty members. The ability to establish a rapport with professors ultimately serves them well when they transfer to a senior institution. Although non-honors students have access to their professors as well, they may not be expected to meet outside of class with their professor to the same extent as honors students. The difference in ability to seek help and guidance at the new institution can have an effect on a student's performance (Hoffman, 1998; Tinto, 1987).

In addition, honors classes cause community college honors students to enhance their time management and organizational skills. These two factors should not be overlooked when examining the success of students as they transfer to a senior institution. Upon transfer, students are expected to adapt to the new environment, orient themselves to the services at the new universities, establish new interpersonal contacts, and maintain their academic standards. The time management and organizational skills acquired by honors students at their community college provide them with an advantage over those students who did not have those skills refined.

Community college honors students are willing to push themselves academically; they are highly motivated and are willing to take on the extra responsibilities and challenges of honors classes. The personal attention and mentoring provided by highly qualified faculty, the small class size, and in-depth discussions distinguish honors classes from traditional classes and provide the additional benefit of reducing transfer shock for participants in honors programs.

This study highlights the potential of community college honors students to serve as a resource of academically well-prepared students for recruitment to four-year institutions. I would recommend that more four-year institutions look at accepting community college honors credit into their honors programs. Both the community college and the four-year institution would benefit from this practice; the community college honors program could use it as an additional benefit for participating in their program, and the four-year institution could use it a means of recruiting academically well-prepared students to their campuses and honors programs in greater numbers.

A possible criticism of the conclusion drawn from this study might be that honors students are more successful at the senior institution because they are intrinsically more motivated than those community college students who did not take honors classes. This study sought to minimize the effects of this variable, however, by comparing the honors students with other highly motivated and academically successful community college students. In the final analysis, the community college honors students in this study experienced minimal or reduced transfer shock after transferring to SHSU.

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