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## Honors Selection Processes: A Typology And Some Reflections

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RICHARD STOLLER

# HONORS SELECTION PROCESSES: A TYPOLOGY AND SOME REFLECTIONS

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Many honors programs advertise that honors education is what all undergraduate education would be in a world without resource constraints, so it is not surprising that honors programs have more interested prospects than available spaces. The question of how to select first-year honors students is therefore of interest both practically (in terms of finding the optimal student body) and philosophically (conformity to an ideal of justice, for instance). This article provides a general overview of current honors selection processes for incoming first-year students and discusses the ingredients of an optimal process.

The two “ideal types” of honors selection processes, in the sense that many actual processes borrow elements from each type, may be characterized as “skimming” versus “free-standing.” In the skimming selection model, usually called “by invitation” or something similar, the overall flow of applications to the institution is scrutinized according to some numerical threshold—generally some combination of SAT/ACT and GPA/rank. Intake may be limited by fixed program capacity (starting downward from the “top student” until offer capacity is reached) or by fixed entry criteria (all applicants with the specified criteria are offered honors admission). In the free-standing model, only those applicants who complete a separate honors application, supplemental to the institution’s general application, are considered. Because the general application almost certainly has SAT/GPA data, the presumption is that a free-standing honors application contains elements (essays, letters, activity listings, etc.) that go beyond “the numbers.”

Almost all U.S. honors programs, as well as similar programs in Australia and Singapore, may be situated along this axis. A few (including those foreign examples) are firmly at the skimming pole, with no recourse for students whose numbers don’t measure up; but most U.S. programs close to this pole offer applicants under the threshold a chance to make a case for themselves. While the skimming model with the qualifications noted earlier is still the majority choice among U.S. public honors programs, there is a slow migration toward requiring supplemental honors applications. The Schreyer Honors College (formerly the University Scholars Program) at Penn State University made the jump in 1988, and others have done the same in the last few years. To my knowledge, no program has moved substantially in the opposite direction in recent years.

## HONORS SELECTION PROCESSES

The pros and cons of each method are numerous and complex. Perhaps the most obvious benefit of the skimming model is that it requires little or no additional program-level expense, staffing, or paperwork—except to the extent that exceptions are invited, of course. There are also benefits to the applicant, who now more than ever is faced with a barrage of forms, essays, fees, and form letters to be passed along to high school teachers and counselors. Perhaps the most important benefit is to the overall institution: applicants are rejected for honors *only implicitly*, by not receiving an invitation. While the savviest applicants understand their non-invitation to be a rejection, nobody ends up with the dreaded “thin envelope” that can easily sour high-achieving applicants (just under the honors threshold) on the overall institution. Since these students would be an asset to the institution, in statistical terms and in what they bring to the classroom and campus, any honors selection method that minimizes their alienation, thereby maximizing yield (propensity to attend), has its attractions.

Operating a free-standing application takes resources, including staff, time, and money; it imposes upon prospective students who may not be in the mood for additional impositions; and assuming the honors program has more applicants than places, it requires that one part of the institution reject candidates who are still highly desirable prospects for the institution generally. (Of course, the rejection letter can and should praise the non-honors education at the institution, but that risks “begging the question” of why honors is so attractive.) So why do many programs decide to endure these (and other) challenges?

At Penn State’s Schreyer Honors College, we believe there is a net recruiting benefit to the free-standing model that outweighs the dissuasive aspects. While many high-achieving students certainly would (and do) consider Penn State in the absence of an honors program, and while many would be drawn to our honors program in the absence of a specific application process, we find that the application is a good “hook” to get students familiar with us. When the prospective applicant’s usual questions about quality of program, campus environment, and so forth are supplemented with questions of how to apply and “what we’re looking for,” there seems to be a higher level of interest. The application is, in a sense, our rationale for having brochures and other informational materials.

Having a separate honors application is doubly important to us because the general Penn State application requests very little: like many large public institutions, Penn State’s undergraduate admission decisions are made “on the numbers” except for marginal cases and special programs. Such a process, however necessary from a logistical standpoint, may not convey the sort of regard for the individual that high-achieving prospects expect and generally receive from selective private institutions. In short, if our application process doesn’t look like an Ivy League school’s, prospective applicants will wonder if we really offer a comparable experience.<sup>1</sup> This is not just youthful petulance: prospects are right to wonder whether an honors program

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<sup>1</sup> This should not be taken too literally, because Harvard and other top-tier schools accept the Common Application, thereby forfeiting an important opportunity to communicate a distinctive message to prospects, and to evaluate them according to distinctive criteria; this point is not lost on some students. See Yglesias, 1999: 66.

that doesn't need to see their writing, or hear from their teachers, will provide them with a nurturing environment once they enroll.

The specific content of a free-standing application can give an honors program that is so inclined—and that has institutional backing to do it—the opportunity to “filter for mission,” establishing over time a specific identity in a competitive market, in a way that skimming does not permit. When our University Scholars Program became the Schreyer Honors College in 1997, we adopted a three-fold mission statement in which the expected (and pre-existing) commitment to academic excellence was supplemented with internationalization, leadership, and civic/social responsibility. Without being too blatant about it, which would only encourage applicants to “speak to the mission” in a mercenary and tiresome way, our essay questions try to tease out an applicant’s “fit” with the new mission. Some applicants with otherwise competitive credentials fail the test, while some students with less than stellar numbers (although still far above the Penn State averages) do very well. A few might look at the application and decide against applying—not because of laziness or the overwork noted above, but because they determine that what we offer “just isn’t for them.” That is a desirable outcome for both parties, although it is always frustrating to see a nominally qualified Penn State applicant who has not applied to honors when we have no way of knowing whether their reasons for not applying are good ones or foolish ones.

From this cursory discussion, it is clear that an honors program’s choice of selection model (assuming full freedom of choice) should be tied to its characteristics, goals, and mandates. For instance, a program whose stated mission is solely “academic excellence” along traditional lines, or which is not under pressure to bring in a different and better sort of applicant (as opposed to increasing the yield for the top tier of those who have traditionally applied, a big accomplishment in itself), is perhaps best-suited to a skimming model, with its obvious efficiencies. Programs at institutions already recognized as relatively selective may have little need to adopt a model that further advertises their selectivity. On the other hand, some programs might be taking a risk with any free-standing application process, in that they might lose more applicants through added time/effort than they would gain through the “program promotion” aspect, especially if there is an additional application fee associated with it.

In an ideal situation devoid of political, marketing, or resource/logistical constraints, we might develop a selection process with only one factor in mind: what are the predictors of success in an honors program? Those are the traits, then, that we would want to see in our applicants, and the selection method would follow from that. Several recent books and articles have gone in search of these predictors, usually precipitated by ongoing debates about diversity and the apparent negative role of standardized tests in achieving diversity.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps because it is exasperating to deal with correlation questions when both sides of the sought-after correlation are moving

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<sup>2</sup> The literature on this issue is, of course, enormous. For a scholarly approach, see the Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, 1999: 23-35; an interesting general article is Tony Schwartz, 1999.

## HONORS SELECTION PROCESSES

targets, these recent studies take a simplified view of what constitutes success in college, reducing it to grade-point average (especially first-year GPA). In other words, a student who ends up with a 3.8 is more successful than one with a 2.8, and it's the determinants of such differential performance that recent studies have looked for.

The logic of this approach is hard to question, in broad-brush terms: it's better to have students who do well than not-so-well, especially if the latter don't meet the usual GPA thresholds for retention in honors.<sup>3</sup> But many honors programs (and, of course, many highly selective colleges and universities) have a more complex view of success, one that includes degree of difficulty, dedication to active learning, participation in research, and service to the campus and wider communities (see Steinberg 2002, about Wesleyan's selection process in this regard). In the Schreyer Honors College, we have some students who have 3.9 GPAs but who keep a relatively low profile; we celebrate their academic success, but we would be uncomfortable with an institutional research agenda or resulting selection process that considered them "more successful" than our students with 3.5s and a litany of contributions to Penn State life, or publications in refereed journals, or multiple education-abroad experiences. The recent push for comprehensive "outcomes assessment" in higher education (including honors education) is a response precisely to this understanding that the transcript is not a sole and sufficient record of incremental degrees of student success.

If we embrace this holistic approach—which doesn't devalue academic performance but acknowledges the importance of other factors in a context where most students' GPAs are clustered relatively tightly near the top of the scale—then the most attractive selection strategy would be one that enables an honors program to do what the most selective colleges and universities have long done, which is to look at what an applicant can bring to the institution on multiple fronts. The qualities that go with this notion of "being an asset to the institution" are not a great mystery: a non-exclusive list, in no particular order, would include creativity, intellectual curiosity, talent for self-expression, leadership, and engagement with others. These qualities, although certainly subjective at the margins, are no harder to predict from an applicant's prior trajectory than core academic ability. In fact, they may be easier to predict: the great range of high school academic environments makes it hard to extrapolate future academic performance, especially for students who come from under-resourced or otherwise deprived schools, while non-academic qualities may be more "portable."

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<sup>3</sup> See David Alan Grier, "A Note on Honors Admission and the SAT," *National Honors Report* (Summer 1997), 2-5. In the Schreyer Honors College, we have so few students who fail to meet the 3.33 (formerly 3.20) GPA level for retention after the first year that it would be inelegant and unjust to design a selection process that focused on further reducing that number if it ended up skewing the overall "offer pool." Our experience is that these students have no clear profile (in SAT, GPA, choice of major, type of high school, etc.) that would permit us to screen against them. For our fall 2002 entering Schreyer Scholars, the first-year GPA differential between the highest and lowest rating increments (of the ratings that produced an offer to the SHC) was only .17, and there is no statistically valid correlation along the way.

Leaving aside the inevitable question of how to value one bundle of non-academic qualities (in the form of an applicant, or more accurately an application) versus another, we are also faced with how to weigh the non-academic versus the academic—a point which I temporarily pushed aside under the guise of a “holistic approach.” We know instinctively that it is problematic to take Applicant A over Applicant B simply because A has a higher GPA by 1/100 of a point, if B has far more impressive non-academic qualities; only a very narrow and tendentious definition of merit could justify such an approach. But we also know that it is worse than problematic to take Applicant C over Applicant D because of more impressive non-academic qualities—and even tangible accomplishments, from class president to published poet—if D has a full GPA point over C. Distinctive missions aside, honors programs are academic units first, and a selection process that forgives serious academic shortcomings, or that selects far less accomplished students over far more accomplished ones, is inappropriate on its face. The question, then, is where to draw the line—at what point are a given pair of applicants (to continue the simplified two-player model) so academically similar that their differences are merely nominal or are more reflective of the high schools the applicants attended than of the applicants themselves, such that we are entitled to move to nonacademic criteria?

Much of the answer, insofar as there is one, is pragmatic—a simple function of supply and demand. If an honors program’s application pool (taking into account predicted yield) is relatively small and/or dispersed—not bunched at the top in academic quality—then a greater focus on academic credentials is the only way to fill the class with students who can make meaningful use of an honors education. Moreover, applicants in this scenario who lose out by a small GPA/SAT margin, even a statistically meaningless one, are low enough in absolute terms that they have no compelling claim on honors selection. But if the applicant pool is larger and stronger—mostly at the top of their respective high schools—then non-academic factors become a more relevant heuristic tool, both for the institution’s own needs and for pre-empting legitimate (or at least understandable) claims by rejected applicants. In plainer English, it’s easier to tell rejected honors applicants that the non-transcript part of their application was rated slightly below the threshold than to tell them that they missed out by a tiny fraction of a purely nominal grade-point.

The rest of the answer, the part that isn’t determined by supply and demand, must come from overall institutional mission and culture, of the sort invoked above: in particular, whether the honors program is considered by the upper administration primarily as a device to bring in a measurably “better sort of student” than the institution usually gets, or whether the program is valued more for what it does (for lack of a better word) programmatically. In the former case, privileging nonacademic qualities would probably not produce the kind of measurable gains in admission credentials that are the program’s lease on life; in the latter case, getting students who “fit the program” is paramount, and depending on the program, particular nonacademic qualities might have particular value. For example, the Schreyer Honors College places great importance on the senior thesis, a major piece of original research or creative work. We consider a student with a 3.7 GPA and an excellent thesis a more exemplary Schreyer Scholar, all other things being equal, than a student with a 4.0

## HONORS SELECTION PROCESSES

GPA and a barely adequate thesis. Therefore, we do everything possible to “read the tea leaves” in our applications for evidence of research or creative potential. This part of our mission is sufficiently important, and is sufficiently embraced by the University administration, to enable us to reject applicants who have less research/creative promise even if they are stronger “on the numbers.” Our relatively healthy application pool (the input side) and high level of student achievement during and after college (the output side) underwrite our ability to follow this route. If the outcomes were to decline over time, we would certainly need to look at selection criteria with a new and critical eye.

There have been a number of books in the last several years that offer a privileged look at the selection process at highly selective colleges and universities, most famously the “insider’s accounts” based on the authors’ admissions-office experience at specific schools (e.g. Hernández 1997; Toor 2001; Steinberg 2002). These books depict a striking range of attitudes toward the selection process and in particular toward unsuccessful applicants—from routinized and unemotional to empathetic and agonized. Much of what these books say, with varying degrees of explicitness, can be summed up in two propositions: 1) despite process controls such as multiple readers and numerical scales, the selection process would never come close to Karl Popper’s (or anyone else’s) notion of “scientific”; and 2) selective institutions are looking “beyond the numbers” to see the applicant as a whole person, both retrospectively (as a member of a high school community) and prospectively (as a member first of a college community and then of society-in-general).

Both of these propositions highlight the reality that student selection is not so much a technical exercise as a subjective and moral one. In an admissions context, practical morality is perhaps best defined as congruence between institutional mission and selection decisions—any admissions process that picks the students who best fit the mission is hard to criticize in a disinterested way. (Of course, the mission itself can be susceptible to scrutiny and change.) This notion of congruence was discussed above in the narrow context of the honors program’s mission, but for programs at public colleges and universities there is a broader mission that must be considered and “operationalized” in the admissions process: these institutions have a democratic mission to offer the best and most developmentally appropriate education to the broadest possible range of students, and honors programs are an integral part of that mission (rather than a qualification or negation of it, as Murray Sperber (2000) has famously but naively argued).

At a large public university, congruence between institutional mission and selection decisions should mean special attention to applicants who by virtue of disadvantaged individual or community background tend to be overlooked by elite private institutions. While most of these schools aggressively recruit a select few prospects from such backgrounds and then trumpet that recruitment aggressively, the reality is that they usually do not cast a very wide net—hence the often-noted paradox that high-achieving students from disadvantaged backgrounds generally find it hard to get into elite private institutions even though they are bombarded with propaganda about how sought-after they are. It is our responsibility to step outside the parameters—the hegemonic norms, as theorists might put it—set by a handful of institutions in

defining who is deserving of the most enriched college education. If we believe that someone is a “diamond in the rough,” uniquely suited to our honors program and our university, then what better expression of “practical morality” could there be than to select such a candidate?

Living as we do in the real world, we are always subject to constraints: Are students so “in the rough,” especially in terms of high school quality, that they pose a substantial risk of not meeting the GPA criteria for retention in honors? (Ironically, this is a constraint that Ivy League schools don’t face: Harvard may be Harvard, but students only need a 2.0 GPA to continue from semester to semester. Few if any honors programs set the bar that low.) What legal and political exposure do we have by favoring a disadvantaged student with nominally inferior credentials—or more precisely, credentials seen by the hegemonic norm as inferior, but which we do not—over someone else? What will other constituencies within the institution think? As with all moral exercises, our decisions will inevitably be tempered with practical considerations of this sort. But if we are to solidify the status of public honors programs as a distinctive option within U.S. higher education rather than merely positioning ourselves “opposite” the private school of nominally comparable selectivity, we should always keep the big picture in mind, and take it to heart.

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