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## What is an Honors Student?

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CHERYL ACHTERBERG

# What is an Honors Student?

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*“There still persists an uneasy feeling that the young intellectual is standoffish, unrealistic, noisy, nonconformist...There also exists the opposite view...intelligent, talented, creative, self-confident, poised, articulate, brilliant.”*

—Robertson, 1966

Honors programs and colleges are commonplace in U.S. higher education today with programs in 60% of all four-year institutions and over 40% of all two-year institutions (Baker, Reardon, and Riordan, 2000). The research literature about honors education and/or honors students, however, is sparse (Achterberg, 2004; Long and Lange, 2002; Reihman, Varhus and Whipple, 1995; Roemer, 1984). Hypothetically, experience of nearly a century should generate recognizable patterns (Cohen, 1966a). The purpose of this paper is to review what literature exists to describe honors students, and it ends with a normative definition of an honors student. It necessarily focuses on traditionally-aged students due to lack of information about adult learners as honors students.

## REVIEW AND DISCUSSION

It is important to point out that, while the NCHC has described the desired characteristics of honors programs (Cummings, 1994), there is no such definition for honors students. Rather, the term *honors student* is generic and relative or relational to other students within a single institution (Stoller, 2004). There are few characteristics of honors students that can be standardized, measured, or uniformly compared across institutions. There is, however, a certain ideology associated with honors and honors students, namely that honors students are in some way “superior” to other students in their home institution (Cohen 1966b; Robertson, 1966); “high ability” and “best and brightest” are also commonly used descriptors (Austin, 1986; Geiger, 2002; Shushok, 2002). This ideology forms the rationale for creating separate organizational structures based on academic or personal merit within higher education (Berger, Berger, and Kellner, 1973). Galinova (2005) described this ideology or belief system as a “rational mythology” of honors educators because it is a “theoretically articulated proposition of social reality,” unquestionably accepted as a truth even in the absence of evidence. These beliefs might also be called a paradigm (Kuhn, 1970) as they are widely shared and they have gained an “indisputable authority” that has permeated higher education in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## WHAT IS AN HONORS STUDENT?

There are literally tens of thousands of honors students in the U.S. (an estimated 35-36,000 honors students attend Big 10 institutions alone). Who are they? Or more specifically, what characterizes honors students? Honors students are obviously selected. That said, they can be defined by selection criteria (Geiger, 2000; 2002), if nothing else. Yet, selection criteria vary widely across institutions, so honors students are also variable from one institution to another. The most common kinds of selection criteria used are grade point averages and standardized test scores (SAT or ACT). Hence, Tacha (1986) summarily concluded that honors students are excellent test-takers with high psychometrics, but what do the numbers signify? There are no “bright lines” above which a student is formally recognized as an honors student nor below which he or she is not. The numerical cut-offs vary by hundreds of points depending on institution (Geiger, 2000; 2004; see Digby, 2002 for numerous examples).

The rationale behind GPA and test score criteria is that the numbers reflect academic aptitude both in a single day (in the case of the exam) and across time, usually 3-4 high school years (in the case of GPA) (Stoller, 2004). Either way, that leaves us with honors students as mere numbers on a page, an irony given that honors education is designed specifically to *not* treat the honors student as a number (Cohen, 1966a; Austin, 1986). Adding insult to injury, Schwartz (2005) asserts that students in the upper academic strand at highly selective institutions (and, presumably, highly selective programs within institutions) differ so little from each other that the numbers are, in effect, meaningless. For example, he suggests that any random fifth of the applicants for the first-year class at Harvard would be indistinguishable from those actually selected into it.

Test scores represent only a single dimension of academic superiority (Geiger, 2000). Nonetheless, students with high grades and test scores tend to have a variety of other associated characteristics evidenced by their high school and college transcripts. Namely, they are *able*, *accelerated* and *advanced*. Honors students are *able* in that they are intellectually capable of college-level work and beyond. Honors students are *accelerated* in that they have moved through the high school curriculum more quickly than traditional students and may even have ‘skipped’ grades prior to college (Austin, 1986). They are *advanced* in terms of more in-depth courses and reading and they often start with advanced academic standing in college. For example, honors students in my own institution typically start their first semester with 12-40 college course credits completed by either Advanced Placement (AP) credits or direct college enrollment.

In college, Pflaum, Pascarella, and Duby (1985) noted that honors participation had a positive effect on students’ academic achievement and success. However, the most scientific study of honors achievement to date was conducted by Shushok (2002). He compared two groups of students (n=86 in each group), one of honors students (average SAT of 1339 and average high school GPA of 3.96) and one of matched honors-caliber students (average SAT of 1339 and average high school GPA of 3.95) in one institution. All students received full merit scholarships. After one year of collegiate study, the groups were no different in gains in critical thinking skills, but honors students had significantly more experiences with faculty and greater gains in general education; liberal arts; science and technology; persistence to

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second year; and college GPA. Astin (1993) also noted that the honors students in his survey of 25,000 college students in 217 four-year colleges were more likely to persist to graduation, interact with faculty, enroll in graduate school, and have a stronger desire to make a theoretical contribution to science.

In sum, the characteristics of high ability, acceleration, and advanced work or standing should be evident both prior to collegiate study and throughout their collegiate years where, ideally, the accent is placed on advanced study. Advanced standing provides honors students with choices of 1) finishing their college degree program more quickly than other students, 2) using the time more creatively to take a broader array of courses, 3) completing multiple majors, minors, and/or study abroad, or 4) taking a lighter course load each semester. These options fuel, in turn, the next observable set of characteristics described below.

Honors students tend to be more *eager*, *exploratory*, and *experienced* than their non-honors counterparts. Honors students are expected to be highly motivated, self-directed learners (Aydelotte, 1925; Austin, 1986; Cohen, 1966b). Long and Lange (2002) use the term “strong academic focus” to describe them; Younger (2004) calls them “exceptional.” This eagerness may also be expressed through high expectations of themselves and their collegiate experience. Long and Lange’s (2002) study of 360 undergraduate students (142 honors and 214 non-honors) is one of the most comprehensive studies to date on this subject. They note that the honors students in their study were more likely than non-honors students to prepare for class, ask questions in class, rewrite a paper, or discuss academic ideas with a professor outside of class. Shushok’s (2002) study supports these results as well, more for males than females and for minority students than non-minority students enrolled in honors.

Honors students also tend to be more experienced than their non-honors counterparts. This is largely a function of their more extensive extra-curricular or co-curricular activities. Long and Lange (2002) reported that the honors students in their study were significantly more likely to work for pay on campus, participate in co-curricular activities, and complete volunteer committee service, and they were less likely to watch television, attend social parties, or exercise than non-honors students. Many honors students start their collegiate studies with a well developed international perspective, commitment to any number of causes, leadership aspirations, and/or a strong public service orientation. These values have long been a part of honors education (Cohen, 1966a) and are amply demonstrated in examples by Digby (2002). In terms of exploration, and referring again to Long and Lange (2002), their honors students were more likely to attend a guest lecture or participate in an art activity than non-honors students. Astin (1993) also noted a greater disposition toward artistic interests. Another important indicator may be study abroad experience. In my institution, over 40% of honors students go abroad vs. only 11% in the general Penn State-University Park student population.

There is also some evidence to suggest that honors students may be more inexperienced than their peers in some realms. For example, Long and Lange (2002) found that honors students consumed fewer alcoholic beverages, drank alcohol on fewer nights per week, and spent less money on alcohol than non-honors students.

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It is important to separate academic or intellectual prowess from the social and emotional aspects of the developing individual (Lerner et al., 2003). These three aspects of self do not grow at the same rate or even at the same time. Advanced standing in one arena does not guarantee advanced standing in any other area of development. Robertson (1966) noted that “bright young men and women experience the same self-questioning, the same anxieties, the same social triumphs and failures, the same problems of choice, the same difficulty meeting deadlines as do all other young men and women...” (p. 52). I might add they also experience the same romantic difficulties, distractions and yearnings and probably a larger number of competing demands or ambitions. Sometimes they get themselves in trouble as well, with the law or otherwise. Test scores, as O’Neill (2005) noted poignantly, do not predict happiness. As Digby laments in this issue (2005), they don’t necessarily predict creativity or risk-taking either. Finally, it is worth noting that honors students are afflicted at times with family crises, health crises, and, contrary to some assumptions, financial woes—just as our non-honors students are. In other words, honors students (typically) are young adults, and they must cope with all the challenges that other young adults deal with.

Shushok (2002) found that honors and honors-caliber students did not differ significantly on personal interaction with friends, interest in theater and the arts, participation in sports or clubs, or satisfaction with college. Yet, Astin (1993) found that honors students uniformly demonstrated higher gains in interpersonal and intellectual self-esteem with small positive effects in “virtually all areas of satisfaction and other areas of self-reported growth.” These apparent contradictions may be due to differences in selection criteria, student characteristics, honors programming, institutional variation, or a combination of factors.

Numerous personality traits are described in the literature. Palmer and Wohl (1972) asserted that honors students are more ambitious, motivated, and introverted, and they score higher on autonomy in personality tests than non-honors students. Grangaard (2003) asserted that honors students do not score any differently on achievement, deference, or orderliness scales (but his sample size was only nine students in a two-year community college). Jenkins-Grieman (1986) noted the often paradoxical nature of honors students in that as a group they tend to be highly able, enthusiastic, task-oriented, and inner- or self-directed students but simultaneously may also be shy, fearful, or risk-adverse. Honors students are also determined and persistent but impatient, especially with bureaucracy (Robertson, 1966). Long and Lange (2002) assessed the personality constructs of “Openness to Experience” and “Conscientiousness” and found that, on average, the honors students in their sample were more open to new experiences and scored slightly higher on the conscientiousness scales. Again, with no data about the selectivity of these students, it is difficult to generalize to all (or any) other honors populations, and the authors themselves noted that the results, while statistically significant, might not be substantially different in this case.

Honors students may well be affected by a Hawthorne effect as well. That is, the mere selection process may change them in some fashion, and, in that change process, they may become more like each other (Smith, 2005). Or alternatively,

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honors students may be affected by the “Pygmalion Effect,” where a faculty member’s beliefs about a student create the behaviors and abilities that the educator had anticipated from the student, i.e., a self-fulfilling prophecy (Shushok, 2002). Others (Geiger, 2002; 2004; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991; McKeachie, 1986) emphasize the importance of “peer effects,” i.e., membership in a high achieving group. Anecdotally, nearly all practitioners in honors education can share stories about the importance of an honors designation or recognition to various students. Indeed, for some students this recognition appears to be a primary motivator. Long and Lange (2002) also noted a great concern over grades in their study linking that concern to a “sense of identity and self-worth.” Schwartz (2005) had no data but went so far as to assert that many or most honors-caliber students are more interested in succeeding than in learning, in “satisfizing” than in “maximizing.”

In summary, honors students are not a homogenous group (Cummings, 1986) either within or across institutions, and it is misleading to presume otherwise. Honors students from similar institutions (with similar selection criteria) are more likely to be similar to one another than are honors students from very different institutions (or even similar institutions with different selection criteria for honors). However, honors students also share much in common with other, non-honors students.

## CONCLUSION

It is inappropriate and misleading to stereotype honors students. Firm conclusions about them should be held as suspect because empirical data about honors students are in extremely short supply. So, we circle back to the beginning. What is an honors student? We can draw five conclusions from the existent literature.

- 1) They are not a homogeneous group with a set of absolute or fixed characteristics. This is due in large part to the varying criteria used for selection *across* institutions.
- 2) They have much in common with other non-honors students of their own age group (for the traditionally aged and probably, also, for the adult learner although there are no data about honors students in the latter category).
- 3) They are (or should be) academically superior to their non-honors counterparts *within* any given institution.
- 4) Honors students are probably little different today than the honors students of yesteryear because the honors ideology and programming has changed little in the last forty years. However, this notion is untested.
- 5) More research is needed to understand how honors students develop academically, intellectually, socially, emotionally, and as leaders relative to their non-honors peers.

## WHAT IS AN HONORS STUDENT?

There are abundant anecdotes (Reihman, Varhus and Whipple, 1995) and a generous amount of rhetoric available about honors students, but there is a severe lack of descriptive evidence, comparisons, or empirical data based on respectably-sized samples. Broader use of Astin's (1993) input-environment-outcomes (I-E-O) model might be an important early step in this research where honors outcomes are documented controlling for the characteristics of students upon college entry and the types of programs and coursework that students experience in their honors study.

The key question each institution must answer in practice, within its 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 to them.

Sperber (2000) made his infamous (at least to honors administrators) assertion that all students deserve the same attention, class size, and pedagogies that honors students receive, concluding that if all students can't have such, then none should. Defying all understanding of learning styles and the obligation of public education to meet the needs of a heterogeneous population including remedial and special needs groups, Sperber missed the point about honors entirely. Honors students, regardless of how the general student population is or is not taught, need to be separated (at least part of the time) because they respond differently and learn better with other highly motivated, "like-minded" students (McKeachie, 1986; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991; Geiger, 2002; 2004), just as remedial or differently-abled students learn better in certain courses designed for their needs. By definition, there are fewer honors than traditional students within any general, public, higher education institution. If, however, the institution is populated by large groups of honors-caliber students, then they are taught like the general students in other colleges and universities. Harvard, for example, has courses of over 300 students, as less selective public universities do.

The most important ingredient of an honors education is serious intellectual work. A fundamental rationale for honors programs or colleges is that these students are both sufficiently the same as each other and different from the non-honors student to justify a separate learning track, based on their peculiar learning needs, aspirations, and background preparation. The honors learning track should be different in both pedagogy and content. From the very beginning of honors education, flexibility in meeting course work requirements was considered fundamental (Aydelotte, 1925). Cohen (1966a) further emphasized that honors education should be dynamic, more complex and more fluid than traditional education and ideally tailored to each student. McKeachie (1969) noted years ago that "bright students learn better than other students in a highly participative process." Most honors courses/curricula emphasize seminar-type coursework. Honors students should also be engaged in decision-making processes—they need to have a certain measure of autonomy (Cummings, 1986)—but they also need to learn to work effectively in teams, make oral presentations to large groups of people, initiate contact with people of different status, age, and cultures, and be comfortable in a variety of contexts.

One of the key elements in honors education should be to shift the first-year honors student from a focus that emphasizes primarily acceleration (moving faster through the same content) or enhancement (more of the same kind of content/material) to a

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focus on enrichment (different or more in-depth content). Acceleration may be part of enrichment, but it is not an end in itself nor should it be. Instead, honors course work should be “richer in theory and practice” (Cohen 1966a), more rigorous, and also more integrative, cross-disciplinary, critical, comprehensive and, above all, intellectually challenging.

Let me finish by saying what I believe an honors student should be based on my personal experience with over 3000 honors students in the last eight years. This perspective was developed at a large public research university, so it may not pertain to all students who are, at present, referred to as “honors students.” Nonetheless, an honors student should be: a highly motivated, academically talented, intrinsically-inspired, advanced, and curious student who has broad interests, a passion for learning, and excitement about ideas. The student should also be sufficiently different or unique from the institutional norm as to need, indeed require, a different, more challenging curriculum and other learning opportunities to satisfy his or her drive to learn, know, and do.

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