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What Honors Students Want (And Expect): The Views of Top Michigan High School and College Students

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ABSTRACT

Often missing in an overall assessment of honors is a broad, comparative analysis of what top academic students want and expect from college and more particularly from an honors experience. Limited case studies or theoretical research articles analyzing how honors students think or perform may overlook or undervalue this important voice in the honors discourse. This article, although in some respects also just a larger-scale case study, has a broader perspective than many similar studies of honors students. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the expectations of prospective and current college honors students. This study also compares the views of Central Michigan University (CMU) Honors students with honors-eligible CMU students who chose not to join the CMU Honors Programs. While many practical applications can be derived from this information, it seems clear that the aspirations of honors and of its student constituency are mutually reinforcing, making it imperative that the voices of these top students be clearly heard in the honors discourse.

INTRODUCTION

Every year, somewhere on a campus in America, the role or impact of an honors program or course of study is being examined or re-examined. The cause may be budget concerns that trigger administrative scrutiny of smaller-sized honors classes; or it may be student and/or faculty concerns about inequality or elitism, questions about lack of diversity and seeming segregation, or focus on measurably distinctive or positive learning outcomes resulting directly from an honors program. More recently, the discourse has been expanded to include the issue of movement from an honors program to an honors college.

Regardless of the underlying rationale for this regular evaluation of honors, the same questions seem regularly to reappear, albeit in different venues or perhaps

masked in different terms. Certainly, periodic assessment of honors is an important function. However, in this information age where quantification is valued, one reason for this constant probing may be the need for more comparative, "hard" data studies on issues of honors recruitment, retention and graduation (e.g. Cosgrove, 2005) to justify what every honors administrator knows in his or her heart - that honors is an inherently positive student educational experience that benefits not only the students but the institution as a whole.

Sometimes, for a variety of reasons, honors programs do not fully explore the views and expectations of honors by a key constituency—the students. We examine how they learn and how they differ from non-honors students, but often we do not invite them to participate directly in the discourse about honors expectations (and delivery).

So what do current and incoming honors students think about and expect from honors programs? To approach honors assessment from a student perspective and enhance the quantitative aspects of honors discourse, the CMU Honors Program explored the views of some of the top high school and college students in the state of Michigan. These data were gathered as part of our 2005 program review process. The goal of our program review, from a student learning assessment perspective, was to determine whether the CMU Honors Program was delivering the qualitatively different and challenging academic environment that it promises in its mission statement and whether CMU Honors students perceive this distinctive value.

There also was a timely enrollment management incentive for collecting this survey/study information identifying Honors students' expectations. The 2005 CMU Honors freshman class of 450 admitted students is nearly twice the size of the class of 2004, creating a temporary resource strain on the Honors Program. If more resources were to be sought from the administration at a time of tight academic budgets, a demonstration of the value of Honors by current Honors students as well as top student recruits themselves would be a sound basis for seeking additional university support.

Accordingly, four large data gathering efforts were undertaken during the 2004-2005 academic year at Central Michigan University. The first two efforts involved 783 and 735 completed essays from top high school students throughout Michigan and from a few border states who competed in an essay competition for the university's most competitive and lucrative scholarship, the Centralis Scholarship Program.

We first were interested in knowing what top students felt should be the most important factors to be considered for their admission to college. This information would have relevance for honors program admission as well, especially for honors programs that would like to broaden honors admission criteria beyond traditional GPA and standardized test scores.

We also were interested in knowing the added recruitment value of a university offering an honors course of study (beyond the obvious scholarship value). Accordingly, top high school students were asked to assess their perceptions of the value of high school advanced placement and college honors classes.

Over 1400 students were asked either to indicate how they thought colleges should admit students or to identify the merits and demerits of special high school

advanced placement and college honors classes. Their essay responses were categorized and tabulated by CMU Honors staff and students.

The second data collection effort—web-based surveys—was conducted in early 2005 by an Honors faculty member and five Centralis students. It involved surveying 303 students in the CMU Honors Program as well as 233 CMU freshmen who were academically qualified and eligible but chose not to join the CMU Honors Program. The CMU Honors students were asked to assess the value of Honors, and the non-honors CMU students were asked why they did not choose to join the Honors Program.

Together, these data represent the responses of nearly 2000 high-achieving high school and college students. Summarizing the student responses to the Centralis essay questions and survey instruments, this article paints a picture of honors programs through the eyes of high-achieving students and provides some quantitative data which should be useful the next time an administrator or trustee asks, "Do we really need an honors program?" or "Why can't we shuffle more students into honors classes?" It also shows the close relationship between the expectations of honors proponents and those of the top students they seek to recruit and educate.

ADMISSION AND ENGAGEMENT EXPECTATIONS OF PROSPECTIVE HONORS STUDENTS

Since 1990, Central Michigan University has sponsored a Centralis Scholarship Program to attract the top high school students. Currently, at least forty (40) such scholarships are awarded annually, with twenty ("Scholars") being full-ride four-year scholarships—paying tuition, fees, room and board, and a book allowance—and twenty ("Golds") being four-year, full-tuition scholarships.

The Centralis competition is intense, with approximately 1600 high school students (who must have a minimum 3.5 GPA to compete although most have significantly higher academic credentials) competing for only 40 scholarships. The candidates not only must possess high academic credentials but also must complete an extensive application process detailing their special talents and skills/service outside the classroom; they also must attend one of three essay competition days where they are given one hour to respond to an Honors-created essay question. The eighty semi-finalists must then attend a separate interview day where they make several individual presentations to panels of faculty, staff, alumni, and current Centralis students. The average Centralis scholarship recipient has a GPA of 3.98 and an ACT score exceeding 31.

In the fall of 2004, it was determined that the topic of the essay for the Centralis competition would be one that probed potential Honors students' expectations of college life. How did they want to be evaluated by their college/university of choice in terms of admission? Furthermore, what kind of higher education experience would they seek upon arrival on campus: seamless integration into the student body or selective engagement in a challenging Honors atmosphere with their academic peers?

Accordingly, two different questions were posed during the essay component of the Centralis competition: one question for the October competition and one for the

November competition. A make-up December session for those who could not attend one of the first two sessions randomly used one of these two essays questions. The college admission question, posed in November and December, 2004, was as follows:

> Standardized tests like the ACT and SAT are widely used as a primary basis for admitting students to colleges.
>
> a. Do you think a score on one of these tests is the best college admission evaluation for selecting incoming freshman, or do you think there is another measure or other measures which would be equally accurate in selecting qualified freshmen, such as grade point average, high school leadership and extracurricular activities, a formal essay, a personal interview, or some other measure or measures? Explain your answer.
>
> b. Devise what you think is the appropriate mix of admission standards or measures that a college should use when reviewing college applications, indicating the weight in percentages which should be attributed to each measure you select.

Not surprisingly, very few of the 783 essay respondents to this question indicated that the score on one of the two standardized tests was the best college admission selection basis for incoming freshmen (4% or 33 respondents). Most of the Centralis competitors were very well-rounded and had records of significant participation in a variety of non-classroom activities, making a single factor admission standard advantageous only for less well-rounded students.

However, what was interesting was the admission factors these students chose to supplement their standardized test scores. The table below summarizes the top six measures that at least one in three students chose in response to the first part of the question:

Table 1 Admission Factors Favored by High School Centralis Competitors

Measures		
GPA	81%	(634)
Student High School Activities	71%	(557)
ACT/SAT	66%	(519)
Entrance Essay	47%	(368)
Personal Interview	42%	(330)
Leadership	35%	(273)

The fact that over 7 in 10 high school students preferred to be judged in part by their high school activities belies the stereotype that many honors students do not consider themselves well-rounded individuals. The statistic that fewer than half of the

students wanted to be judged by an essay or that only about 4 in 10 wanted a personal interview can be described two ways: either almost half of these students were very confident in their writing and speaking skills or more than half were not so. In any event, a desire among many high academic achievers for more individualized student admission evaluations is a boon for smaller colleges and a problem for large institutions, where a large number of personal student interviews are typically not feasible for mid-range honors students.

More specific information about the weight of these factors was provided in Part b of the question, where students assigned their own percentage weights to each factor they selected. Using the same factors presented in Table 1, students assigned the following average percentage weights:

Table 2 Average Percentage Weights Assigned to Each Admission Factor

Measures	
GPA	32.87% (489)
ACT/SAT	25.74% (505)
Entrance Essay	20.45% (344)
Student High School Activities	19.65% (289)
Personal Interview	21.98% (205)
Leadership	16.75% (64)

Note: There were 161 respondents who did not assign percentages to their choices and percentages exceed 100% since these are average weights given by those who identified the specific admission factor. The number in parentheses is the number of students who felt that factor should be included in some way in the admissions process.

It would appear that in this group of almost 800 students, although most agree that GPA and standardized scores are important considerations, the average weight of these two factors combined constitute less than 60% of what students feel is relevant for admission purposes. While small colleges and highly selective institutions may not find this weighting particularly significant, large public universities that rely more heavily upon these two major criteria may find it of interest, particularly the significant weight students believe should be given to the more labor-intensive essay evaluation and interview factors. Those honors programs wishing to broaden honors admission criteria to include less traditional criteria should take heart that broadening the number of selection factors may be welcomed rather than resisted by many potential honors students.

Also of interest was how few top high school students wanted letters of recommendation to be a factor in the admission to college. Only 58 of the 783 students surveyed listed letters of recommendation as a desirable admission factor; subsequently, when asked to give a percentage weight to these recommendations, only 37 responded with an average percentage weight of about 17%. Even though it is likely

such letters would be easy to obtain for top students, these same students do not seem to feel the letters should be important admission factors.

The second essay question, posed to Centralis competitors in October and December, 2004, was as follows:

> What are the merits and demerits of the following classroom scenarios:
>
> a. offering a small number of advanced placement classes in high school or special honors classes in college, both of which would be available only to outstanding academic students, or
>
> b. not offering any special classes for outstanding students in high school or college, but rather integrating these outstanding academic students throughout high school or college classes?

A persistent philosophical/political question that emerges is whether honors-only courses or programs are elitist and/or contrary to a central mission of public education to provide all students with equal educational opportunities. This question often is raised by professors or university administrators. However, what do academically high-achieving college-bound students think about the value of honors/AP courses?

In terms of student support for offering advanced placement classes and special honors classes, the students surveyed had a relatively easy time identifying eight distinct merits associated with such classes. (See Table 3).

Table 3 Merits of High School Advanced Placement and College Honors Classes According to Centralis Competitors

Merits (responses>100)	**Number of Students Responding (735)**
Challenging students to meet higher expectations	469
Working with students with the same level and speed of learning	249
Learn in a different way and in more depth	171
Receive positive peer pressure due to similar goals	152
Prepare for college (AP only)	142
More interaction with teachers/professors	122
Smaller class sizes	125
Enhanced career success	113

For those honors programs facing pressures to increase honors class sizes, it should be noted that a considerable number of incoming high school students (125 students) expected small class sizes and more student/professor interaction (122 students) in honors courses.

Fewer students were able to identify the demerits of offering these special classes, with concerns about segregation and inferiority being the chief demerits. Table 4 identifies the five key concerns with AP/honors classes.

Table 4 Demerits of Offering AP and College Honors Courses According to Centralis Competitors

Demerits	Number of Students Responding (735)
Segregates students based on academic history	170
Loss of insight and diversity	83
Promotes feelings of inferiority for non-Honors students	56
Puts more pressure on AP/Honors students	48
More time/money to offer these special classes	33
Puts less advanced students at a disadvantage	25

Clearly, while there is some concern about the equality issue, the merits of the separate classes for top academic students significantly outweigh the demerits in the eyes of these 735 students.

When asked to identify the merits of not offering special classes and of integrating outstanding students with the rest of their classmates, only four merits were identified by more than 20 students in their essays. These four are identified in Table 5.

Table 5 Merits of Integrating all Students into Classes with no Separate Classes for Top Academic Students

Merits	Number of Students Responding (735)
Honors students could aid other students' learning	99
Students all have equal educational opportunities	60
Learning to work with diversity	59
Less successful academic students could become more successful	34

On the other hand, students were much better able to identify the demerits of integrating all students together in class. See Table 6 for a list of the key demerits listed.

Table 6 Demerits of Integrating all Students into Classes with no Separate Classes for Top Academic Students

Demerits	Number of Students Responding (735)
Not as challenging for outstanding students, get bored	229
Learning of high achievers hindered	171
Will not realize their potential, hinders future success	66
Lack of motivation and poor work ethic result	53
Disruptive/poor learning environment	48

Note: Not all students answered the questions in tables 5 and 6.

Thus, it would appear that a significant majority of top high school students in this sample have bought into the specialized class concept in high school and are likely to continue to seek such classes in college honors programs. The concern about diversity and segregation, although acknowledged by about two in five students responding, was overwhelmed by those finding merit in offering special classes. Indeed, the final portion of the essay questions asked the students:

> Which of these two scenarios in your opinion offers a better overall educational experience for the outstanding academic student?

As indicated in Table 7, an overwhelming majority of students favored the special AP and honors classes over the integration approach.

Table 7 Students Favoring AP and Honors Classes (Option A) Versus Those Preferring Integrating all Students Regardless of Ability (Option B)

	Number of Responses
Option A; Special AP and Honors classes	670
Option B: Integrate students	28
Did not choose an option	37

Thus, in the discourse about the value of honors, it would appear from the perspective of top high school recruits that honors courses are indeed a positive recruiting tool for universities to attract top students. The elitist arguments of honors skeptics are not as strongly felt by top students.

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EXPECTATIONS OF HONORS AND HONORS-ELIGIBLE COLLEGE STUDENTS AT CMU

As we turn from high school student admission expectations to college student expectations of honors programs, the question becomes how to develop a protocol that attracts qualified students into an honors program, challenges them to do their best, and retains them through graduation.

Those planning a new honors program/college, as well as many of those periodically reassessing their program/college protocols, often are faced with individual student requests for modifying honors requirements. Responding to student requests while maintaining the quality of the honors protocol can be a delicate balancing act. It can also lead to significant re-evaluation of the requirements.

At Central Michigan University, the Honors Protocol has four basic requirements: enrollment in a minimum number of Honors courses per year; one year of a foreign language at the college level; 120 hours of community service; and completion of a senior research project. During the spring semester of 2005, a representative sample of 303 CMU Honors students and 233 CMU Honors-eligible students (hereinafter referred to as QNE - qualified but not enrolled) were surveyed regarding their perceptions of the CMU Honors Program and its protocol requirements.

The survey results were used to determine not only the value CMU Honors students perceive that they derive from membership in the Honors Program but also the reasons that other Honors eligible (QNE) CMU students did not join the Honors Program. For enrollment management purposes, the survey was useful in devising alternative methods for controlling Honors Program size and increasing admission standards (a strategy already employed for the CMU Honors class of 2006). In addition, this information is useful for honors programs and colleges with declining honors enrollments as it provides insights into how to motivate and retain current students in honors colleges and programs.

Table 8 identifies nine Honors components which each student was asked to rate in terms of its value as a benefit of the Honors Program. One of these nine components, priority registration, is an advantage of many honors programs, and the survey showed that CMU students found it the most valuable benefit.

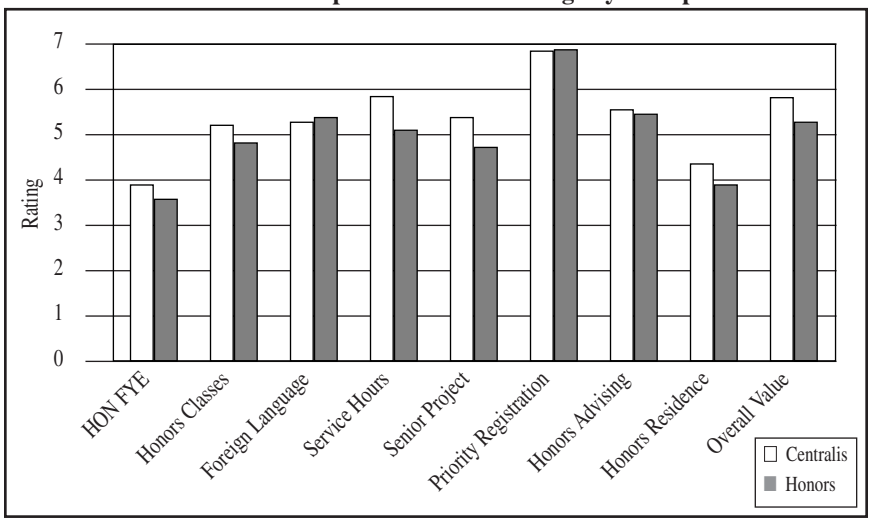
However, while CMU Honors and CMU QNE students both cite priority registration as a visible and valuable component of joining Honors, the responses to a subsequent survey question (see Table 9) as to the overall value of priority registration paint a different picture.

Here are the conclusions drawn by the author of the April, 2005, CMU report:

> Although priority registration is an easily identifiable benefit of the program, correlations between ratings of overall value (of the Honors Program) and value of each of the program components reveals a very different pattern. In these results, priority registration and foreign language have the lowest correlations with overall value while the other core components of the program have stronger positive associations with students' perceptions of overall value. This suggests that while all students appreciate priority

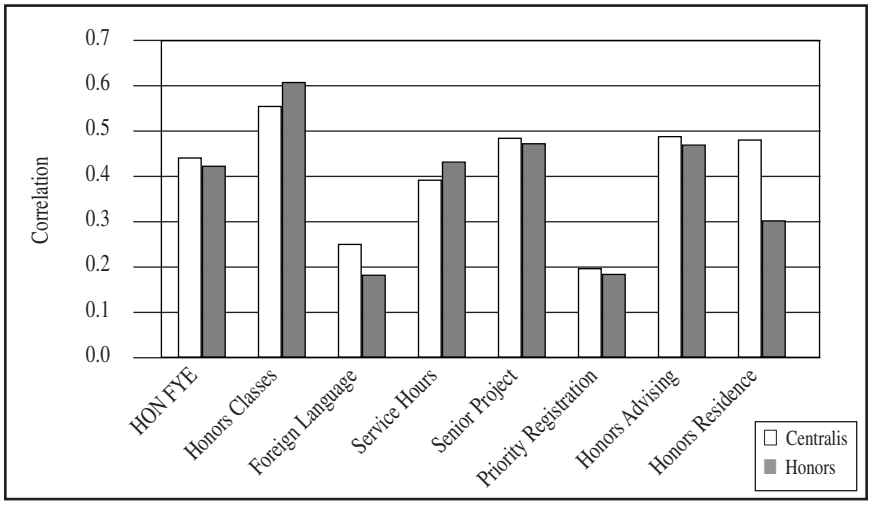
registration, they recognize that the major requirements of the Honors and Centralis protocols, especially required courses, are really what make the Honors Program valuable.

Table 8 Value of Honors Components: Mean Ratings by Group



FYE=first year experience Honors class

Table 9 The Significance of Honors Components: Correlations of Component Value with Overall Value



Thus, the CMU surveys suggest that, for honors retention purposes, attention to the honors course quality is more important than merely offering priority registration privileges for current honors students, contrary to the allegations of some critics that a primary motivation for joining an honors program is priority registration. The

dominant interest in the educational versus privilege value of AP courses by top high school students in the previous Centralis portion of this paper confirms this primary student academic motivation and reinforces the value of honors.

As for hindrances that the CMU Honors Program creates for its students, the issues of Honors class conflicts and limitations on the variety of Honors classes available, as well as the stress of meeting specific protocol requirements (foreign language, research project, and timely graduation concerns), represented the only concerns identified by students. The student desire for flexibility in selecting Honors classes and meeting protocol issues indicates that manipulating protocol requirements may be an important tool for managing Honors enrollment without adjusting admission standards.

How do Honors students' perspectives differ from those of the QNE students at CMU? The 2005 survey indicated seven reasons students identified for their choice not to enroll in the CMU Honors Program; these are identified in Table 10.

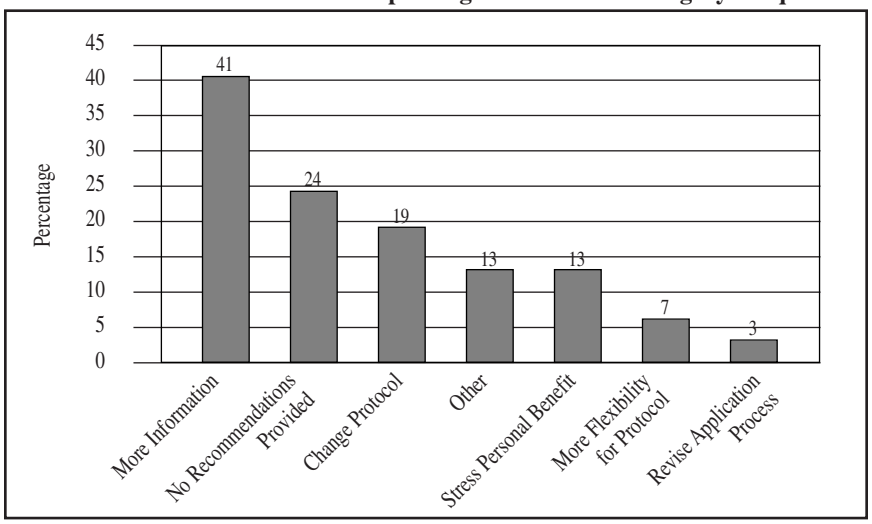
Table 10 CMU QNE Students' Reasons for not Enrolling in the Honors Program

Avoiding the extra work/stress	**31%**
Concerns about the Honors Protocol	**30%**
Received little or no information about the Honors Program	**15%**
Miscellaneous/extraneous	**15%**
Conflicting obligations	**15%**
Unaware of own eligibility	**8%**
Did not want to complete Honors application	**4%**

The primary concerns of CMU QNE students relate to the stress of extra work, tougher classes, and meeting Honors Protocol requirements. However, an important and common theme throughout the CMU QNE survey (See Table 11) is lack of information, indicating that an informational campaign to explain the value of the program and dispel Honors Program myths could considerably increase the on-campus enrollment in the Honors Programs without changing substantive CMU or Honors admission standards.

It also should be noted, from residence hall questions posed in the survey, that an honors residence hall was not seen as a relatively important reason for many non-honors students to join the honors program. Coupled with recent studies concerning the controversial social impact of self-segregation in honors only facilities (Rinn, 2005), these findings need further exploration in terms of the overall value of building or designating an honors-only residence hall.

Table 11 Recommendations for Improving Recruitment: Category Frequencies



CONCLUSIONS

What conclusions can we draw from these top student responses in order to clarify the role and value of honors, recognizing the regional limitations of the primarily Michigan student population sampled?

First and foremost is the overwhelming student recognition of the academic value of honors programs beyond the procedural privileges that arise from honors membership. Top high school and college students see the long range academic value of honors much as honors faculty and staff do, and this student support should be transmitted to the campus community to enhance the value-added image of honors.

Secondly, today's top students are very well-rounded academically and socially. Honors admissions standards should take this fact into account and not be limited to traditional GPA and standardized test measures.

Quality instructors and seminar-style classes are important student expectations of honors programs. These student expectations need to be communicated to the administration to counter arguments for increasing honors class sizes in the name of fiscal expediency.

There does not appear to be a strong anti-elitist feeling among top incoming high school students that would lead them not to join an honors program despite the selective and exclusive nature of the privileges available to honors students. Despite faculty arguments to the contrary, the elitist arguments against honors privileges do not resonate among these top students, even those who are not members of an honors program.

While the issue of lack of diversity was not addressed in the survey, honors programs simply are going to have to be more proactive to redress the racial and gender imbalance prevalent in honors. The fact that an overwhelming majority of students favor a wide range of admission standards in addition to GPA and standardized tests creates an additional incentive to expand honors admission criteria in order to address the absence of diversity.

While students have concerns about the additional requirements and challenges that honors programs present, their concerns seem to focus on graduation requirements rather than the value of the honors requirements alone. Hence, student criticisms of honors have more to do with tweaking honors requirements to meet individual needs than weakening or eliminating these standards. And for those concerned about honors enrollment issues, it should be noted that informational campaigns and protocol adjustment can be effective tools for meeting enrollment goals without tinkering with admission standards.

This student input into the honors discourse should provide strong affirmation for honors proponents and the value of an honors education. The supportive voices of top students make them valuable allies in the effort to strengthen the role of honors on the nation's campuses.

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