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Does Broad-Based Merit Aid Affect Socioeconomic Diversity in Honors?

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The honors college at West Virginia University (WVU) has seen an influx of high-achieving West Virginia students since 2001, when the PROMISE Scholarship was implemented. The PROMISE Scholarship is a merit-based financial aid award for West Virginia residents. If a student qualifies by achieving a certain GPA and ACT/SAT score, he or she receives a scholarship that covers the full cost of tuition at any state college or university in West Virginia. West Virginia University has benefited greatly from the PROMISE Scholarship. About half of all PROMISE Scholars attend West Virginia University (Higher Education Policy Commission, 2007), and many are part of the honors college. Honors college administrators at WVU were interested in evaluating how the PROMISE Scholarship might have changed the college's demographics, specifically with regard to socioeconomic diversity.

Statewide merit-based scholarship programs have proliferated since the 1990s. Though researchers have hotly contested them, the development of these programs has been steady, and existing programs continue to grow (Henry, 1998 and Heller, 2002). Some claim that the broad-based merit-aid programs have been contrary to the original goals of the 1965 Higher Education Act, which sought to expand access to college through need-based financial aid (Dynarski, 2002; Heller, 2002; Lumina, 2006). Similarly, critics have suggested the inherently disparate impact of broad-based merit-aid programs: students from middle- and upper-income families who are naturally predisposed to college participation are far more likely to benefit from scholarships like the PROMISE.

Originally the PROMISE program enabled high school students with a 3.0 GPA and a score of 21 on the ACT the opportunity to receive a full-tuition scholarship to any state college or university in West Virginia. Subsequently, ACT/SAT eligibility criteria have gradually been raised. In order to attain the scholarship in 2008, students must have at least a 22 ACT score, with no one subtest score of less than 20. These new criteria have exacerbated the lack of diversity in PROMISE Scholarship recipients even further, as supported by

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data from the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission suggesting that low-income students would be disproportionately affected by higher standards.

Though the PROMISE Scholarship is based on merit and not financial need, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is a required part of the application. FAFSA gauges students' and families' ability to pay for higher education and allows the federal government to determine a student's Expected Family Contribution (EFC). The EFC determines how much need-based aid a student receives from the federal and/or state governments. Tracking the EFC of PROMISE recipients enables researchers to determine families' financial need.

The researchers in this study tracked the EFC of honors college students at WVU before and after the PROMISE Scholarship. The data collection included three years prior to the implementation of PROMISE up through 2007, the most recent data available (West Virginia University IDEAS database, 2008). Using information garnered from these documents, this study assessed changes over time in honors college demographics. The implications of this preliminary research were surprising and informative.

First, there is a correlation between the PROMISE Scholarship and the number of students enrolled in WVU's honors college. Enrollment has sharply increased since the implementation of PROMISE and would continue to grow without institutional caps on the number of students admitted to the college.

Secondly, the time it takes for honors college students to graduate has decreased; the researchers see this as a positive development. The PROMISE Scholarship may provide honors college students an incentive to fit all their coursework into four years or less since PROMISE covers only eight semesters of tuition.

The last finding is less favorable: a lower percentage of low-income students have enrolled in the honors college since PROMISE was implemented. We conclude that there is a direct relationship between fewer low-income students getting PROMISE and fewer low-income students being in the honors college.

The most significant negative impact relates to socioeconomic status (SES). When tracking students pre- and post-PROMISE, researchers found fewer low-income students enrolled in the honors college now—determined by the EFC—than before the scholarship was implemented. Because PROMISE uses ACT/SAT scores as a determining factor to receive the scholarship, fewer low-income students have attained it as the requirements have increased. Heller stated in 2006 that merit-aid recipients tend to come from upper-income families (Heller, 2006). Our research confirms this statement;

as PROMISE has increased requirements, fewer low-income students receive it, and fewer low-income students enroll in the honors college at WVU.

Even though honors college criteria and PROMISE eligibility criteria are very different, honors-capable, low-income students may be affected by the sub-score requirement. Also, low-income students who may fall just short of PROMISE eligibility but who would be capable of performing well academically once they are on WVU's campus are probably not enrolling. Our study is consistent with research showing that merit-based programs redirect eligible students toward residential four-year universities while pushing capable students who receive grant aid toward community college (Binder and Ganderton, 2002). Therefore, the honors college may not have access to students who would qualify after their first or second semester because these capable low-income students are not attending WVU.

While the absolute number of low-income students in honors has increased, the percentage of low-income students has *significantly* decreased as ACT requirements for the PROMISE scholarship have gone up, confirming Heller's finding that broad-based merit scholarship programs disproportionately help middle- and upper-class students.

Nearly 5% of WVU's students are African American compared to only 3% in the state of West Virginia; the university is more diverse in its makeup than West Virginia. In the honors college, the number of African American students pre- or post-implementation of the PROMISE Scholarship has remained constant. The absence of any differential impact on minority and non-minority percentages in the college makes the effect on socioeconomic diversity even more significant.

Future research should focus on identifying effective strategies for encouraging and embracing socioeconomic diversity in honors colleges in spite of institutional challenges like the PROMISE Scholarship. Also, it would be useful for researchers to examine the experiences and challenges that high-performing students from low-income backgrounds face when they join honors as well as ways to mitigate their challenges and harness their potential as diversifying agents.

For administrators of honors colleges and programs, where the mission is to attract academically high-quality students, our research has a clear message: honors environments should strongly support *both* merit and need-based financial aid in order to maintain a desirable social diversity. Honors administrators need to share information about their experiences with different kinds of scholarships. Have other honors colleges or programs attracted a more diverse student body as the result of a scholarship program with different parameters? Has merit-based aid produced similar outcomes at other institutions? We hope to contextualize West Virginia University's experience

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with the PROMISE scholarship and diversity by comparing it to other institutions.

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