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Best Practices in Two-Year to Four-Year Honors Transfers

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INTRODUCTION

James Madison University (JMU) and Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) teamed up in April 2014 to build a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between their respective four-year and two-year honors programs. This MOU is the basis for the continued work between these two institutions to collaborate and find research to assist other interested honors deans, directors, and coordinators in creating similar MOUs and demonstrating the importance of such agreements in higher education.

The information we want to share with others is a framework for the basic features of successful honors transfer agreements or memoranda of understanding. We enumerate a number of specific advantages to two-year and four-year institutions, and it explores a number of discursive patterns and

institutional challenges that appear across the spectrum in the formation of honors transfer agreements. This movement toward honors transfer partnerships is essential to the education of the nation's top students.

Two-year to four-year honors transfer agreements are enshrined in the National Collegiate Honors Council's (NCHC) Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program: "When appropriate, two-year and four-year programs [should] have *articulation agreements* by which honors graduates from two-year programs who meet previously agreed-upon requirements are accepted into four-year honors programs" (National Collegiate Honors Council, Basic). In both the NCHC 2014 Survey of Two-Year Institutions and the NCHC 2014–2015 Admissions, Retention, and Completion (ARC) Survey almost identical proportions of reporting two-year institutions said they already had "honors-to-honors" agreements (58.1% for the survey of two-year institutions and 60.0% in the ARC survey). In the ARC survey, institutional respondents at four-year institutions also received a question regarding articulation agreements: 30.7% of the NCHC four-year, degree-granting institutions had honors-to-honors agreements with at least one two-year institution (Cognard-Black).

Nevertheless, few students currently transfer between NCHC-member honors programs. The top three reasons students fail to transfer from two-year to four-year honors programs are (1) *pro forma* transfer agreements and transient professional relationships between program directors, (2) insufficient or opaque marketing and publicity, and (3) nonalignment between programs and/or difficulty in transferring community college honors credits, especially from state to state. We conclude that many community college students are unable to complete a four-year honors program upon transferring because the four-year transfer colleges have not yet taken the necessary steps to establish transfer agreements—functional documents and ancillary materials and activities that effectively facilitate transfers of honors students—and not because of inferior academic preparation on the part of the honors students.

HONORS IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

The problem of high-achieving honors transfer students demands the immediate attention of both two-year and four-year institutions, especially as there has been a considerable boom in the number and variety of two-year programs in recent years (Moltz). This boom has created a current demand for more networking, communication, and coalition-forming among high schools, community colleges, and four-year institutions.

Mandates among our bedrock public educational institutions are changing and in many ways expanding. Increasing numbers of high school students are taking Advanced Placement (AP), dual enrollment (DE), International Baccalaureate (IB), and Cambridge (CIE) courses in order to improve their chances of gaining admission to the nation's prestigious and selective post-secondary institutions and also to reduce the tuition burden of higher education.

Several state community college systems are on the cusp of offering four-year degrees in high-demand fields like nursing, health information management, respiratory therapy, dental hygiene, and aerospace manufacturing. Many four-year institutions, in turn, have been asked to standardize their general education course offerings and establish common state transfer general education course numbers for the first two years of post-secondary education.

The tiered or compartmentalized missions of these institutions have become disorganized, increasing the importance of acknowledging the value and rigor of college coursework at all levels, including honors coursework. This acknowledgment must include the ways that two-year institutions respond to the challenge of students who expect enhanced educational experiences and a community of excellence as well as the ways that universities are prepared to mainstream the best and brightest who apply to their programs with significant prior academic preparation in honors.

ADVANTAGES TO TWO-YEAR AND FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS

The advantages of such agreements to two-year and four-year institutions may vary but are clear and considerable. As noted in the NCHC monograph *Handbook for Honors Programs at Two-Year Colleges*, both types of institutions benefit from formally constructed transfer allegiances that encompass retention strategies for degree completion, support honors education readiness, build a foundation for student success, inspire honors institutional programs and partnerships, promote faculty collaboration, and encourage socioeconomic diversity and participation by underrepresented transfer populations (James 58–60). The transfer mission can be successful by maintaining high academic standards, communicating the nuts and bolts of transfer openly, setting aside time for honors-specific transfer recruiting and counseling, setting enrollment targets, and creating a culture of “transfer-going” (Handel 40–44).

Like-minded institutions view honors-to-honors agreements favorably because they encourage access, inclusion, and diversity for all high-achieving students, despite where a student's educational journey begins or ends. In her undergraduate honors thesis, Melissa Gordon, a Stanford University graduate student, confirms a growing body of research asserting that not only are these community college students diverse and underrepresented in our universities, but they are "just as capable as four year students that matriculate from high school" (11).

BEST PRACTICES IN CREATING MEMORANDA OF UNDERSTANDING

One suggestion for such arrangements is that they should be called *memoranda of understanding* (MOUs) rather than articulation agreements in order to reflect the ever-changing, dynamic nature of honors curricula and institutions. In most states, "articulation" implies direct supervision and policy action by boards of higher education. Also, MOUs will have unique features that depend on the missions and visions of the collaborating honors programs. As Handel notes, "The quest for perfect articulation is a fool's game" (43).

Well-constructed honors MOUs are typically divided into three parts: eligibility, implementation, and benefits. The eligibility part of the agreement should specify the number of credits that will be completed at the sending (two-year) institution. Also present should be the minimum cumulative grade point average for application to the receiving (four-year) institution. This statement will include a separate clause about minimum GPA in honors coursework. In this section, any policies about approved honors coursework (credits applied to the receiving institution's program) completed by the student at any previous institution should be noted, including eligibility standards from the receiving institution before transfer is complete. Application requirements, including the sharing of transcripts, should also be provided here. A stepwise explanation of the general process of admissions committee review by the receiving institution should fall at the end of the section, which may include acceptance of the student by the university, including early admission, an individual interview or essay, or a waiver of various application forms.

In the implementation section, the institutions agree on the contractual obligations of the MOU, which include how many honors credits completed at the sending institution will be accepted and applied to the honors program

at the receiving institution and the number of additional honors credits that must be completed upon admission. In our experience with MOUs that we have secured between two-year and four-year institutions, the receiving institution commonly accepts no more than half of its program's required honors credits from the sending institution, i.e., a 24-credit program would accept 12 credits from a sending institution, depending on the sending institution's core curriculum. A statement of binding agreement is included in this section, holding the student and the receiving institution to the specific requirements in effect at the time of acceptance by both parties. A letter of intent signed by the student is advisable. Any language noting that the honors student may apply for individual transfer beyond the boundaries of the agreement—particularly if the student does not complete the sending institution's honors program—is included in the implementation section. Transferability of degree coursework between institutions must be articulated in advance, especially between different states, to ensure students have credit appropriate to both the honors program and the transfer institution.

The benefits section of an honors MOU typically includes information about graduation distinctions that will accrue to transfer students who complete the receiving program's requirements. The section also invites and encourages participation in all honors activities, events, and organizations after or even before the transfer takes place, including possible summer study abroad trips, conferences, or internships. This section should include honors opportunities and membership benefits offered to transfer students, including honors housing, printing and computer lab access, internships, and special gathering spaces. Priority registration, extended library checkout periods, and so forth are also enumerated here.

MOUs typically include language encouraging reviews at regular intervals, such as every two years, as programs and honors liaisons are ever-changing. MOUs must be living documents like the programs from which they originate.

MOUs should always be written down, reviewed, edited, and approved. Those who review, approve, and sign the document should include the honors director, dean, or coordinator, and the administrator(s) who oversee the honors program or college, such as the institutions' provost, vice president of academic affairs, or president. Formal written agreements should never impede transfer but should instead invite a seamless transition between honors programs.

The integrity of agreements requires transformative experiences and rigorous academic programs of study. Programs should be strengthened through collaboration between both institutions. Communication, mutual respect, and flexibility are integral to such relationships; this means that while each institution has expectations regarding what courses should be completed/included in its honors program, understanding the unique expectations and requirements of both honors programs is equally important to the integrity of honors.

Agreements should also provide maximum opportunity for exercises in two-year to four-year faculty and student engagement, collegiality, and social interaction. MOUs should include occasions for inter-institutional resource sharing and an open invitation to shared events, programming, services, and resources. “[S]ocial and academic interactions” between programs “contribute to a student’s sense of belonging to the institution. With sufficient academic and social integration into the educational community, students will likely persist, unless external commitments or changing intentions and goals work against their persistence in a particular institution or even in higher education itself” (Townsend and Wilson 440). Also, honors transfer fairs and visits should be encouraged between the two-year and four-year schools.

Honors student leadership opportunities should be open to transfer students, providing them with occasions to learn the nuances of the institution, such as honors transfer courses, internships, and membership in honors councils and clubs.

HONORS TRANSFER SCHOLARSHIPS AND ADVISING

Reserving honors scholarship funding for transfer students would be beneficial, especially for recruitment, and waiving out-of-state tuition requirements for honors students could also be considered. So-called reverse transfers and stackable credentials should be available when warranted. Four-year institutions are encouraged to meet with students who do not complete a two-year degree or an honors core curriculum at the sending institution but who could still be considered for honors scholarships and inclusion into the four-year honors program, when applicable (see Treat & Barnard 705–06).

Advising relationships are also integral. Transfer advisors must be apprised of possible financial aid ineligibility within the federal academic progress policy as well as special arrangements between institutions regarding credit appropriate to both the honors programs and transfer institutions, especially when students have not acquired a degree at the sending institution.

Any honors credits transferred beyond the allowable transfer credit requirements of the receiving institution will be reviewed and accepted at the discretion of that institution's director or dean.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Challenges to honors programs that are collaborating often involve the substitution of lower-tiered (100–200 level) courses or general education electives. Substitutions should be considered for all tracks and courses so that incoming transfer students (with AS/AA degrees) begin at the junior level; therefore, a third to a half of the collective honors curriculum should be completed upon transfer whenever this is possible without infringing on the integrity of the honors program at either institution.

Components of a collective honors program—in addition to a minimum qualification for maintaining “good standing” in the respective programs, progression and completion standards, and scholarship stipulations/opportunities—might include research/capstone/thesis requirements; interdisciplinary instruction; seminar-style learning; community, service, or campus engagement expectations; study abroad and global studies; enrichment and creative innovation; internships, mentoring, and conferencing opportunities; undergraduate research; and leadership and membership obligations/requirements.

The greatest challenge of all is inertia. Every honors program in the nation has unique qualities, including specialized sequence tracks and specific “honors in the major” courses. These unique components are often the basis of an argument against honors transfer students but should not be a reason to prohibit such transfers or agreements. Honors is not reliant on elaborate plausibility structures for education or strict social arrangements between faculty and students; it is learner-centered and learner-directed, which should be a focus for such agreements.

Ensuring a seamless transition for transfer students requires that these students be prepared for research and find suitable mentors at the four-year institutions. Such relationships often emerge early, so it is important that both institutions attempt to begin this process early or, when possible, hold spots for transfer students who need such mentors.

A possible danger in the transfer process is the potential emphasis on accelerated learning without sufficient opportunities for cultural and social development. According to the NCHC, preparing students for lives of self-reflection, analysis, and creativity is an important aim. Hurrying honors

students through curricular pathways is not recommended because this impedes innovation, collaboration, and creativity. The collaborating honors programs should remain focused on intensive, high-impact learning for all students.

NCHC'S FUTURE ROLE

As Gary Bell points out in a recent *JNCHC* article, private suppliers and for-profits are now competing for the interstices left by the current (and sometimes informal) transfer agreements: “For-profit companies promise that they can provide courses, services, and national ties with prestigious universities that community colleges cannot equal” (22). We believe it is in the best interest of all public honors programs to establish MOUs that will create a bridge for our undergraduate population. Our shared goal is to encourage institutions of higher education to establish these MOUs for students showing impressive academic promise and commitment to public service and civic engagement.

Looking forward, the NCHC Board of Directors has pledged to create an online honors transfer agreement hub where students, faculty, administrators, and staff can share information about transfer partnerships, pre- and post-transfer benefits and privileges, guaranteed or priority acceptance agreements, rewards and scholarships, and requirements for remaining in good standing. The honors transfer hub should offer a visual guide in the form of a key or table with recognizable symbols and nomenclature to help students intuit at a glance the specific responsibilities and recompenses available under partner-school agreements. With the support of NCHC and its member institutions, the overall goal is to share common language for all stages of transfer agreements from beginning to completion. The rewards of such a model are evident in California, a state with a robust enrichment and “intersegmental” transfer alliance system supported by the Honors Transfer Council of California (HTCC) (Kane 37).

FINAL THOUGHTS

The goals of honors education are best accomplished across a developmental trajectory within the confines of a four-year educational experience. Barriers to seamless transition between two-year and four-year honors programs risk interrupting that developmental process. Honors programs and colleges are designed to prepare thoughtful and engaged students for lives of

leadership, service, and commitment in an ever-changing global community. Our mutual challenge as educators and guides is to instill in students comprehensive sets of life skills that will prepare them for lives of significance, substance, versatility, and fulfillment. Honors education is thus necessarily a holistic process that sharpens the minds, characters, and senses, a process that is not simple or risk-free: “[H]onors should overreach” in creating vigorous agreements and programs that favor academic achievement so that undergraduates may enjoy the many “positive economic, civic, and social outcomes associated with a baccalaureate degree” (Salas 23).

An honors education is typically accomplished through intensive reading, writing, research, and discussion grounded in a wonderful profusion of pedagogies, strategies, and literatures. This education happens in the classroom, in independent research experiences, and through leadership endeavors and study in the community or overseas. Honors is a serious academic project that provides a platform for students who want to pursue a higher and deeper level of academic challenges and insight, push themselves beyond the normal scope of academia, and commit themselves to a life of service and engagement in their communities through enrichment opportunities and collaborative research endeavors. The collective job of the community, government, and academic institutions is to create a variety of spaces where active and curious students can practice doing extraordinary things and reach outside what they thought was the realm of possibilities.

Aristotle said that a mark of a flourishing person is a welcoming attitude. To this end, most honors colleges and programs foster a culture where students can realize a series of intentionally connected transformative experiences as they engage in conversations and lively experiments that deepen and broaden their understanding of the world, its people, and human potential. We encourage collaborative, cross-disciplinary teams that wrestle with the intense complexity of the big problems facing humanity. We participate in our communities through civic engagement and research; we ensure that numerous people can experience what it is like to teach and learn in a mutually supportive environment; and we cleave to no formula, no template, but look to build shared visions—occasionally to challenge them—and attend to vital human relationships and fundamental priorities.

Though we know almost instinctively that flourishing lives are made possible by the efforts of others, structural impediments can grow and become self-inflicted barriers through accountability structures, enrollment management, progression standards, eligibility criteria, and deadlines. Misalignment

is common enough within institutions and can be considerable between institutions. In academia, one of the greatest obstacles is rigid honors course sequencing and unique, integrated honors courses that restrict access only to traditional students. In this context, the challenge is to counter the structural impediments.

We have NCHC and the support of numerous member institutions to pave the way for honors transfer students to flourish and succeed at both two-year and four-year institutions. Successful honors transfer and transition depend on meaningful partnerships between the sending and receiving institutions, and we therefore encourage new and significant efforts by all institutions to create pathways for our best and brightest undergraduates from high school to community college to university, thus cultivating a community of like-minded students who see the importance of research, academic rigor, enrichment, and leadership in their honors programs and through their commitment to service and civic engagement.

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