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## Grades, Scores, and Honors: A Numbers Game?

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LARRY ANDREWS

# Grades, Scores, and Honors: A Numbers Game?

LARRY ANDREWS

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The surest indicator of college success in honors is a proven high-school record as revealed in grade point average and class rank. No, no, we need to balance those numbers against the ACT/SAT performance. No, no, motivation is the “it” factor; we need to ascertain the prospective student’s *attitude* through an essay and interview. No, no, all of our prospective students are capable and ambitious; we need to know about how well-rounded they are by looking at activities and letters of recommendation. No, no, we have a freshman class of 400; who has time to read all that stuff, which all sounds the same anyway?

These are some of the positions honors programs and colleges take toward qualifications for admission. But the question of how important numbers are haunts other decisions as well, such as retention requirements, grading standards in honors courses, graduation requirements, and graduation rates. As we wrestle with this issue in our own programs, we are often pressured by our students, our faculty, administrators, families, and state legislators. As I consider each of several areas in which numbers can be a factor in our standards and expectations for students, I argue that we should be guided by two major values: (1) the *specific culture* of our honors programs and our institutions, and (2) the noble honors pedagogical and advising tradition of *investing in the individual student*.

## ADMISSIONS

How do we get the students we want? Students who we think are best suited to honors work and for whom honors work will do the most good? And are those two sometimes separate purposes? Honors deans, directors, and staff must continually re-examine their program’s mission and values in light of these questions and make decisions about recruitment and admission that determine the character of their student body. The importance of grades, scores, and rank in the admissions process varies significantly among honors programs. At one end of the spectrum a program might exercise a strict requirement of a 3.7 high-school GPA, 29 ACT/1300 SAT score, and top 5%

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in class rank, while at the other end a program welcomes anyone by self-selection, first come, first served within a given capacity. A large number of programs, however, coalesce around a 3.5 GPA and an ACT score in the 26–29 range (1180–1330 SAT). Where one draws the line may depend not only on the population of available prospects and their likelihood of matriculation, but also on institutional resources, which affect selectivity by limiting or encouraging a target enrollment number.

Larger programs tend, usually with some regret, to rely increasingly on numbers while smaller programs still prefer to interview candidates and/or examine documents such as essays, letters of recommendation, and lists of activities. Thus the size of the program and its resources of staff time (also numbers) influence the decision. But published research and experience with students over time play a role as well. If we take the time to correlate our students' college performance with their original qualifications, we can determine what information about incoming students best predicts their future success in our own programs. For example, my colleague Deborah Sell Craig's dissertation showed a significant correlation between the ACT English score and application essay of our incoming students on the one hand and their subsequent grades in our first-year Colloquium on the other (*Predicting Success in an Honors Program: A Comparison of Multiple and Ridge Regression*, 1987, Kent State University, 112).

High-school GPA may seem the most reliable predictor of academic success based on some research studies, and even on anecdotal evidence, but grading standards vary, and good grades in some cases may indicate that the student has simply learned how to be a good student, that is, how to perform in a way that matches the reward system. We may value such virtues as good study habits, time management, punctuality, disciplined response to assignments, good memories for tests, ambition, and even good writing, but are they the most important habits of mind that we seek?

What do numbers tell us about creativity, curiosity, or integrative thinking, for example? How do we accommodate not just the "good student" but the original character, such as the under-achiever with high potential? How do we assess the potential masked by less-than-impressive numbers? We all know and have perhaps admitted students who do not fit our numbers profile but who blossom superbly. They may have performed well on standardized tests but have a mediocre GPA and class rank because they were bored by classes even as they pursued a fascination with historical reenactment, mathematics puzzles, or Chinese language on their own. How do we determine how many of these students to accept at risk? Some will surely come to life in college and achieve soaring GPAs while others will not rise to our expectations.

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But then, some of our prospects with a 4.0 GPA and 29 ACT may flop as well!

How do we resolve these dilemmas? First, we pay attention to our own program and institutional context. If using a 3.3 GPA and 24 ACT seems below perceived national standards but matches the kinds of students we are likely to be able to attract in the numbers we desire, let us not be embarrassed. If we have grown so large that we go by the numbers without further evidence of motivation or unusual intelligence, let us work within the limitations of our resources but also pay attention to the interesting exceptions who bang on our door to get in. We can invite such students to submit other documentation, and we can be flexible enough to take a gamble. If part of our expectation of current students is leadership or service, we will look for these qualities among our prospects in lists of activities and service, giving them considerable weight alongside the numbers. If we are receiving too many qualified applicants, we must consult the admissions or enrollment management leaders and our academic superior about whether cutting off admissions and wait-listing will be best for the institution or whether additional resources for class sections or scholarships will be forthcoming to support this success. Second, we should recognize the limitations of the numbers and make every effort to get to know prospective students *as individuals* through invitations to visit, discussions at recruiting events, open houses, follow-up email exchanges, perhaps even a brief paragraph on an application essay explaining their motivation for joining honors. We can also offer membership to students after their first semester or year of proven college success—again usually according to some minimum GPA threshold but aided by an interview and application essay—on an individual basis.

## RETENTION

So now that we have our new class, what do we require them to do to stay in our good graces? Must they maintain some good numbers again, such as a 3.5 GPA and a certain number of credit hours in honors? Perhaps, as in some programs, an escalating GPA year by year? As if our students are not grade-conscious enough already, do we hold over their heads this constant pressure? Do we give them a second chance if they are close to the mark, by putting them on probation for a semester? Do we welcome them back when their GPA again meets our standards?

Setting the GPA number for retention would seemingly depend on the admission criteria. If we are highly selective in admissions, presumably our retention requirement would be high. But the case is often made that a lower college GPA, especially for the first year, acknowledges the daunting impact of this new experience on even the best students. Raising the bar later

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encourages the laggards to rise to our expectations. In some cases, the program errs on the side of generosity, wishing to hold to its heart the students it already has rather than trying to “weed out” the stragglers. Such a program may expect a high-school GPA of 3.5 coming in but a college GPA of only 3.0 for retention.

The choices we make depend on our values as a program and institution. Do we wish to support and encourage our students as well as challenge them? Does our tradition tend toward stringent rules and rigid requirements or forgiving options and flexible opportunities? We all want to be humane to our students, but the image we project through our numbers game can be nurturing or threatening, depending on the character of the honors staff and faculty and the atmosphere of the institution. Our institution may pressure us to retain students in honors by means of a modest membership standard, or it may care only about retaining the students at the institution. It may, on the other hand, urge us to base our prestige on the number of students we dismiss. Further, because each individual student is precious to us—nowhere is this clearer than here at Kent State, where one of our honors students was a victim of the shootings of May 4, 1970—we will work closely through advising to help diminish obstacles impeding a student’s success, “success” defined by a GPA number but also by clarity of goals and comfortable fit with the chosen major. Let us also consider that loss of honors membership may have a positive result: a student might focus better on other priorities, and even a transfer to another institution may be in a student’s best interests despite all the desperate pressures on us for retention.

### COURSE GRADING

Here they are, our wonderful smart students, responding to the challenges of their rigorous course work and individual projects with noble persistence. Is one of their special challenges being graded on a higher scale than the instructor would use in a non-honors course? Honors faculty members may exercise fairly well-defined grading rubrics in all of their classes, applying them equally to honors students. Still, grading can be relative, depending on the nature of the class. It is tempting to reward the student who stands out in a non-honors class with an *A by comparison* whereas that student might not appear so special in an honors class of peers. Is it then more difficult to earn an *A* in an honors class? Is it more difficult simply because the work is more challenging and the responsibility for active learning more taxing? Or does greater challenge match the greater capacities of the students? Some of us have found that honors students often earn better grades in their honors courses because they work harder in them and care more about them. An honors faculty member, however, might tend to award higher grades as a self-fulfilling

prophecy. I suggest that honors students should not be penalized by being in honors because of a shift upward in grading standards. It is acceptable to have, without embarrassment, a set of final grades that are all or mostly all As if the professor has fully challenged the students and they have challenged each other.

Adding to this complexity is the often excessive concern over grades among honors students. This worry is real; they know how competitive graduate and professional schools are, especially the more prestigious ones. Numbers count, not only the GRE, MCAT, and LSAT scores but also the GPA. A 3.5 may signal solid achievement, but how does it look among medical school candidates with 3.8 and higher GPAs or among candidates for a Truman or Rhodes Scholarship? To what extent does grade anxiety undermine the genuine learning experience in honors courses? Would it help to use more portfolio evaluations, to issue extensive written evaluations that might be more useful to the student, even in an institution that still requires the assignment of a traditional grade?

Again, the local culture bears on our thinking about these issues. Only a handful of institutions have tried to replace grades with written evaluations, and some of these have given up. If we are stuck with the necessity of assigning grades and keeping GPAs in the foreground of the student's vision, we can still respond creatively. In some honors programs, faculty in some disciplines invite students to contribute to the grading rubric during the first week, giving them a say in the nature of grade assignment. Some invite students to contribute self-evaluation as part of the assigned grade. In another discipline the instructor might take improvement into account or use a portfolio approach to allay the haunting threat of numbers. But our conscientious students will often rebel if they do not receive clear, ongoing, quantitative signals of how they are performing (or at least they complain on course evaluation forms). In still other disciplines the instructor may use a point system that allows him or her to rank precisely the students in a class and across years of the same class. This can work in the student's favor on a letter of recommendation when the professor can aver with quantitative certainty that the student ranks in the top 3% of all 450 honors students who have taken the chemistry class over twenty-two years! Yet this same professor can alleviate the stress over grades by providing endless support in office conferences, even on weekends, and access to old exams to study in preparation for a major test.

Attention to the individual helps us notice nuances of performance and variations in learning styles that affect performance in a class. Much as we value class discussion, tolerance for the shy introverts—common enough among honors students—mitigates their fear that the “class participation” grade will do them in. Offering a creative project as an alternative assignment

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can elicit gratitude, relief, and superb work. Giving students voice, throughout a course, concerning which learning methods are working and which are not can empower them to feel a bit liberated from the authoritarian imposition of grades. Finally, we can assure students through advising that grades are not everything, that an A- is not tragic, that a B or even an occasional C will mean nothing ten years later. We can help them redefine their perfectionism, their high expectations of themselves, in terms other than just grades. We can help them develop their own measures of success, such as their excitement over learning, their passion for their field, their impulse to make learning matter in the world around them, their feeling of having achieved healthy balance and having learned how to deal with stress, including stress over numbers.

### GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS AND RATES

Congratulations to us! We have kept our beloved students happy and productive, and now we are poised to offer them a graduation recognition for having successfully completed their honors requirements. Have they met our numbers requirements—GPA, credit hours, courses? Have they completed a thesis, which most programs require? Have we kept them engaged with honors so that they do not withdraw in large numbers when they come face to face with that thesis? Do we pride ourselves on our high graduation rates as compared to those of the institution in general? Is the most important statistic graduation in honors or in the institution, and who cares—the enrollment management folks, the president, the state legislature?

Setting the GPA requirement for graduation is usually easy—it is the same as that for retention of membership, even if that requirement becomes more stringent after the first year. The amount of honors work required is a more variable matter. Many of us count credit hours and establish a minimum number consistent with the “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program,” that is, a number equal to at least 15% of a student’s total degree hours but preferably 20–25%. My college, however, counts the number of courses/experiences, giving equal weight to 3-hour honors courses, one-hour contracts and senior portfolios, 1–4-hour individual research projects, a community service contract, a senior portfolio, a combined bachelor’s/master’s program, and a semester of study abroad, but counting the 10-hour thesis as two of the required honors courses/experiences. This flexibility can be abused, and the complexity of such a counting system makes us watchful lest students not complete a significant number of actual 3-hour courses. Another decision is whether to reduce the graduation requirement for late-entering students or students with, say, 15–25 AP hours as entering freshmen. Such students often simply do not have as much opportunity to take



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general education honors courses. Finally, some of us grant different levels of graduation recognition depending on GPA; for our highest “University Honors” designation, for example, we require a 3.8 GPA, coinciding with *summa cum laude*, whereas for “General Honors” or “Departmental Honors” (the latter for late entrants focusing on the major), the GPA requirement is lower. If a large number of our students, even a majority (as in some large honors programs), do not graduate with an honors designation, something seems wrong; do we admit them and retain them only to sabotage them?

What principles should guide our decisions? Again, local culture suggests that there need not be an agreed-upon, precise national standard. We do what makes sense for our population and fits our traditions. We attune the graduation GPA standard to our retention standard, whatever that may be. If we believe that individualized research is critical to an honors education, we require a thesis or an alternative research experience. If we simply believe that the honors curriculum should be climaxed by an integrative learning experience, we might achieve that through a capstone seminar, a thesis, a creative project, an internship, study abroad, or even, as in the early days of honors, a comprehensive final examination. And again, what are the needs of the individual students? If we require a senior thesis, will we lose a large number of students in professional majors whose curricula are overcrowded and who may benefit more from an internship? If we require a thesis, we can prepare each student for that experience through a required research course or a faculty mentoring program in the sophomore and junior years that is attuned to the student’s particular interests. Flexibility of options works in favor of individual needs, but we can still apply lofty standards of excellence to whatever honors work qualifies the student for graduation recognition.

## CONCLUSION

In a national education system that seems bound by numbers more than ever before—witness proficiency testing in K–12 and the absolute reign of GPAs and standardized tests on the college level—we may still find creative ways to mitigate their deleterious effects on our honors students and programs. In this essay I have tried to explore the issues swirling around our decisions on how we use numbers. Now I would distill my personal views in the following list of principles:

- Unless you can emancipate your program, or part of it, from grades, scores, and credit hours, use the numbers, but balance them with other information as a reality check.
- Be realistic in attuning your numbers standards to the population you serve, your honors traditions, and your institutional culture, and don’t



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be apologetic about doing so, regardless of supposed national “benchmarks.”

- Honor and pay attention to the individual student.
- Err on the side of generosity—take a risk on admitting an interesting underachiever, and give students a second chance to meet your retention requirements.

Our use of numbers is a complex issue that deserves ongoing research and discussion as we devise and then continue to question our policies and procedures. We may depend on numbers, but they must not tyrannize us.

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