CHAPTER TWELVE

Honors Colleges as Levers of Educational Equity

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While higher education is widely imagined as facilitating social mobility, the realities of enrollment, retention, and professional trajectories betray the conservative mechanisms through which higher education reproduces the status quo of inequality. In fact, universities all too often serve more as sorting mechanisms than as ladders to success, keeping socioeconomic structures largely intact. Honors colleges can and should strive to act as levers of equity in this scenario of entrenchment, but the nature of this project looks very different depending on the institution's own class position vis-à-vis its students. Elite, highly selective institutions may

advocate for enrollment strategies that target student populations that do not typically attend those institutions, especially those that fall below the socioeconomic norm of their student body. Other institutions, however, already enroll such students in large numbers. These less selective "lower tier" institutions, such as two-year colleges and regional universities, are "institutions of access" for their regions. As the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) has argued since its 2002 executive report of the same name, these regional institutions have a responsibility to act as "stewards of place" through their "clear and ongoing commitments to the local K–12 school systems where they reside," as well as ongoing efforts to provide "access to regional students via bridge programs, admissions and financial aid," especially to "local first generation and underrepresented students" (Saltmarsh et al.).

Such institutions have the capacity to make a significant impact on students' personal and professional trajectories, and honors colleges can play an essential role in that process. Regional universities, especially those that enroll large numbers of students from underrepresented groups, must develop and invest in their honors colleges in order to provide the type of support to students that brings a full spectrum of opportunities into view. The institution must support its honors college with access to high-quality facilities, direct reporting lines, and funding for student development and scholarships. Additionally, honors colleges themselves must take full advantage of their institutional autonomy and privilege by enacting inclusive enrollment strategies and developing a robust and diverse curriculum infused with high-impact practices that will prepare and encourage students to take a big next step. In this way, honors colleges in less selective, regional institutions are uniquely positioned to serve as levers of educational equity.

Some evidence does support higher education's positive association with social mobility. According to an analysis of millions of anonymous IRS documents by economist Raj Chetty and his team of researchers, people who attend ultra-selective institutions are much more likely to become wealthy than other adults, regardless of their original socioeconomic status. This means, according to Paul Tough's reporting in *The Inequality Machine*, "If you're a

poor kid, . . . attending an Ivy Plus college rather than no college is truly life-changing. It increases your odds of making it into the top income quintile by a factor of *fourteen*" (18). So, a dramatic change in socioeconomic status can indeed be fueled by a college education; however, this trajectory is not, in fact, realized on a significant scale because enrollment in ultra-selective colleges overwhelmingly consists of already wealthy students and the number of institutions that fall into this category is relatively small. According to Chetty et al., "children whose parents are in the top 1% of the income distribution are 77 times more likely to attend an Ivy League college than those whose parents are in the bottom income quintile." Tough concludes: "The American system of higher education has the potential to be a powerful engine of mobility, able to reliably lift young people from poverty to the middle class, and from the middle class to affluence. But in reality . . . it functions as something closer to the opposite" (19). Therefore, the most prestigious and selective institutions are often the least capable of effecting the social mobility that accorded them prestige in the first place.

This dynamic plays out on a smaller, regional scale as well. In the state of North Carolina, one of the more selective institutions is Wake Forest University. According to Chetty et al.'s "Mobility Report Cards," only 2.3% of Wake Forest's students come from a low-income background (bottom 20% income level), making Wake Forest's enrollment of low-income students among the lowest in the state. Not surprisingly, the median family income at Wake Forest is one of the highest in North Carolina: $221,500. In contrast, at one of the state's least selective universities, Elizabeth City State College, the median family income is $33,000, and 18% of students are low-income (bottom 20%). Elizabeth City's enrollment of low-income students is among the highest in the state. Our university, the University of North Carolina at Pembroke (UNCP), falls somewhere between these two extremes, with a median family income of $52,000 and 13% of students designated as low income. Although there are exceptions and complicating factors at each institution, in general, students tend to enroll in universities that match their socioeconomic status.

From an admissions perspective, one way to address this disparity is to encourage high-achieving students from low-income backgrounds to apply to more selective colleges. And as an admissions strategy, this approach is, of course, a worthwhile project. But even with necessary information at their fingertips, personalized encouragement, generous financial aid offers, and other campus enticements, high-achieving high school students do not always aspire to attend the most prestigious or selective institutions available to them. Often, they are drawn to regional universities that offer lower costs, a local reputation, and the convenience and comfort of being close to home. The push, common among upper-class families, for children to aspire to the most selective college they qualify for and to submit applications widely and aggressively is not relevant to all; rather, "the issue of whether and where to go to college can feel much more complicated: emotionally charged and financially perilous, weighed down by tangled questions of family and identity and history and home" (Tough 51).

At the University of North Carolina at Pembroke (UNCP), we see this phenomenon play out every year. As we review and select each year's honors college cohort, we encounter students who would be competitive to enroll in our state's flagship university, UNC-Chapel Hill, or even more competitive institutions out of state; however, they choose our university: a smaller, less selective regional campus located geographically and institutionally at the margins of the UNC system, in other words, a university of access. On the surface, it might seem that students make this decision out of ignorance or fear of the unknown. After all, many of our applicants are first-generation college students who have little or no guidance from family and social networks in navigating the college admissions process. But rather than assuming students are ignorantly settling for universities below their reach, we reject this assumption and trust that their choice is both evidence-based and grounded in their lived realities.

And given the enrollment patterns that currently exist, our students are indeed making a solid bet on their future. Compared to more selective institutions in the state, UNC Pembroke offers

a higher chance of social mobility for its graduates. According to Chetty et al.'s analysis of IRS records, the likelihood that UNC Pembroke students will "move up one or two income quintiles" is 22%. While that figure might seem low, it is one of the highest in the state, coming in at 21 out of 101 institutions. UNC-Chapel Hill, the flagship in the UNC system, ranks 88th out of 101, with a 12% likelihood of modest income mobility. Thus, while it is unlikely that graduates of a small regional university like UNCP will become members of America's elite classes, it is quite likely they will see a modest gain in income compared to their parents.

UNC Pembroke was founded in 1887 by and for American Indians and is located in the historical home of the Lumbee tribe in Robeson County, North Carolina. The university's official "leadership profile" describes it as an "anchor economic institution for southeastern North Carolina" and names nine closely arrayed counties, including our home county of Robeson, that constitute our "service region." These counties composing the southeastern corner, known colloquially as the "Sandhills," are some of the most economically challenged in the state and are overwhelmingly rural, racially and ethnically diverse, and lower income. Of the approximately 8,319 students enrolled at UNCP for fall 2021, 2% identify as Asian/Pacific Islander, 9% as Hispanic/Latino, 12% as American Indian, 30% as Black/African American, and 40% as White/Caucasian (University of North Carolina, Pembroke). Additionally, 47% of students are classified as low income (Pell-eligible students), and 21% identified as first-generation students. In fall 2021, the Maynor Honors College had a total of 286 students enrolled, of whom less than 1% identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, less than 1% as Hispanic/Latino, 15% as American Indian, 17% as Black/African American, and 61% as White/Caucasian. Of the honors college's student body, 43% are low income (Pell-eligible students), and 15.6% identify as first generation.

UNC Pembroke's honors college was founded in 2001; it had existed as a small program since 1979. Sometime after its founding, the college began implementing the National Collegiate Honors Council's (NCHC) "Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed

Honors College," as discussed in Sederberg's *The Honors College Phenomenon*. The college now reflects those characteristics. It is headed by a dean and has significant control over curriculum, admissions, and selection of faculty. As David M. Jones notes, in his chapter in *Occupy Honors Education*, "Honors programs at public universities have often served as a cost-effective way for underserved first-generation students to gain the benefits of high-impact pedagogies such as undergraduate research, smaller class sizes, and the like" (35). In this way, we see our honors college, and honors colleges like ours, as levers of educational equity.

The demographic information above reflects a complicated mix of factors. Many students do not wish to identify their race or ethnicity or to identify themselves as first-generation college students. Of course, many of these identities and categories overlap in rich and complex ways, rendering the percentages and charts in institutional fact books incomplete. For those advocating for educational equity, terms such as "underrepresented students" become necessary because they attempt to capture a large swath of identifiers, but this language obscures rather than reveals. For purposes of this chapter, we focus on class, rurality, and the challenges of first-generation students. These identifiers are always imbricated in race, culture, and ethnicity, though, and it is not possible, or perhaps advisable, to attempt to cleanly separate them in an analysis such as this one. As sociologist Jessica Sherwood has argued, the various hierarchies that constitute American institutional life overlap and intermingle with one another, meaning that "ideologies justifying economic stratification and racial stratification are related, since class is raced and race is classed" (149). Our intersectional approach attempts to lean into rather than fight against the slippages within family, race, income, education, and social position.

From our perspective, the lived reality of rural students who tend to be poor, working class, and first generation impacts the recruitment and retention of honors colleges (Ardoin xix, xxi). Rurality is an aspect of identity that is often excluded, and it shapes students' access to resources, the development of skills, and understanding of social and cultural capital well before they enroll in

college. Education researcher Sonja Ardoin has observed that "children in rural and working-class areas are taught information and behaviors that prepare them for blue-collar work," leading uncritical educational institutions to almost automatically "perpetuate geographical and social stratification" (11). The neutrality of the label first generation, too, as Sherry Linkon argues, further "erases the systemic and collective elements of class" and emphasizes the adoption of middle-class culture values to succeed. Too frequently, rural and working-class students are "overlooked in the college access and success literature" (Ardoin xxiii). Rurality, then, is an important aspect to consider in promoting student success and the completion of college degrees (Crain and Newlin 57). Test scores and other traditional indicators of success do not capture the emotional and intellectual growth of students who remain outside of the traditional systems of cultural and social capital accumulation. Thus, a reframing of recruitment initiatives to address other elements of lived experience will expand diversity and inclusion in honors colleges and programs.

As Ardoin points out, rural schools promote a unique identity that is supported by and supports the local community (xix). They offer historical continuity, economic development, and cultural connections that unite and celebrate students from the region (xviii). They also offer a more personalized, less isolating academic experience than larger state universities or private colleges that may be far from home. Many students who excel in regional public high schools are therefore attracted to honors colleges in regional universities, seeing them as appropriate venues to continue their educational trajectory. In this sense, rural institutions such as UNC Pembroke fit the bill as a college of choice.

In her 2017 dissertation about academic successes and barriers among Lumbee students in North Carolina, Leslie Locklear movingly relates the stories of more than a dozen first-generation college students and Lumbee tribal members. In each of these stories, the students express the sense of isolation they experienced as they began to apply to college. Although her mother was ultimately supportive of her education, Bazie, an exceptional student

and valedictorian of her high school class in nearby Cumberland County, remembered: "You don't know what you don't know. Like my mom didn't really talk to me much about the college experience . . . maybe if my family had had some of those experiences maybe they could have told me more and then by the time you got to applying for grad school they didn't know anything so once I got here I kinda really was on my own" (qtd. in Locklear 149). While the parents of the students Locklear engages are often unaware or even skeptical of the process of college application, they are substantially more familiar with UNCP because of its physical and institutional presence as a "steward of place" in Robeson County and its historical connections to their tribal community. UNCP hosts portions of the annual Lumbee Homecoming and Powwow events, invites Robeson County K–12 students to campus for regular STEM and arts events, and is one of the largest employers in the county. While applying to "college" might be an inscrutable abstraction, applying to UNCP is not.[1]

In her research on Lumbee students transitioning to college, Concetta Bullard found students in Robeson County and surrounding areas articulating the appeal of UNCP in ways that reinforce these notions of community value. For instance, Tara said, "I kinda felt like I needed to go to UNCP because I am Lumbee. Cause it is an Indian school. So I figured, like, my people would want me to go there because that's alotta Lumbee people go for college. But I'm happy I came here because I like how close it is to home especially before I go away for vet school" (qtd. in Bullard 75). Tara's articulation of her choice process shows that an institution like UNCP afforded a unique opportunity for her to invest in her Lumbee heritage and community while simultaneously creating a meaningful academic and career path that extended well outside it. She chose to attend UNCP as an undergraduate precisely because she already knew she would be leaving the community for graduate studies in veterinary medicine at a more selective, prestigious, and geographically distant institution. Especially as undergraduate enrollment continues to climb and a bachelor's degree becomes a more widely assumed next step after high school, regional colleges of choice

allow students to save money, invest in their communities, and still create a personal and professional trajectory of their choosing.

Our goal as an honors college of access is to recruit students exactly like Tara and Bazie, high-achieving students who may not be aware of the existence or value of honors colleges or may not imagine themselves as honors college material. At UNCP our enrollment strategies are a work in progress, and we continue to build more equitable practices into our system. In 2015, the honors college moved from an application-based model to a mostly invitation-based model for incoming students. Although this shift might run counter to current opinion as expressed in a document such as NCHC's *Honors Enrollment Management: Toward a Theory and Practice of Inclusion*, we consistently found that the application itself—no matter how easy to find or widely available—was limiting access to our program. While we might be personally attracted to any number of holistic admissions processes that include essays and other materials, a number of factors impeded this approach. First, our limited staffing and faculty mean that we simply do not have the resources to run a parallel admissions process at the scale and scope necessary to do it effectively. But perhaps more fundamentally, we have found that an invitation-based model, which identifies incoming students based on high school GPA, coupled with an application process for those who do not receive an automatic invitation, allows us to capture the largest swath of interested and available students. Although imperfect, this strategy has led to growth for the honors college, which means more access to the benefits it offers. An invitation to a prestigious program and a scholarship are welcoming and motivational overtures.

For the recruitment of our 2021class, we, like many institutions, went test blind. This shift was a welcome experiment, one that we will measure the impact of over the coming years. Of course, many institutions were test blind or test optional pre-pandemic; nevertheless, we cannot be sanguine about continuing the practice (Fair Test). The University of North Carolina Board of Governors is divided on this issue, and it only narrowly passed the current extension to the class of 2022. The test-blind admissions system

led to another increase in enrollment for the honors college, again extending our reach and influence, so we can only hope the administrators at the campus and system levels see the benefits of the last two years and allow us to continue with test-blind admissions.

In the past two years, we have also expanded our recruitment efforts to include transfer students and current students who missed the high school GPA cutoff or opted not to apply to the honors college upon arrival at UNCP. At campus- and community-wide recruitment events, we make opportunities to apply to the honors college a part of our message by reminding students and parents that their academic profile is not fixed in stone when they arrive on campus as first-year students. We proactively recruit these eligible current students in order to counteract the self-selection that often eliminates first-generation students from honors college applicant pools. We send out invitations celebrating the great work they have done at the institution thus far and personally ask them to apply with a short essay and letter of recommendation. Even those students who ultimately decide not to apply to the honors college have expressed surprise and deep gratitude at the institutional recognition that an honors college invitation brings, if only to their email inbox.

Two recent additions to our honors curriculum highlight the formal and informal ways that equity work can take place. HON 3200 is a one-credit-hour practicum in service learning, and HON 3500 is a one-credit-hour seminar that focuses on professional and academic development. Both courses address the issue of "success scripts," a way of recognizing the specific assumptions, understandings, socializations that accompany students onto our campus. Following from the work of groundbreaking intersectional theorist Sara Ahmed, Richard Badenhausen has proposed "honors success scripts" as a way of understanding the unquestioned and institutionalized forms of power that prevent students from acting outside of a narrow band of established norms. In her 2010 book, *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed proposes the idea of "happiness scripts" to explain the myriad ways social groups structure and predetermine what counts as "happiness" and how to achieve it: "Happiness scripts could be thought of as straightening devices,

ways of aligning bodies with what is already lined up. The points that accumulated as lines can be performatives: a point on a line can be a demand to stay in line. To deviate from that line is to be threatened with unhappiness" (91).

As Badenhausen observes, Ahmed's "happiness script" is easily applied to honors education in thinking through what counts as a "happy" student, or, more specifically, what counts as a "good" or "successful" student. Honors success scripts typically involve doing well in high school, being admitted to a prestigious university, and moving on to a prominent graduate program or lucrative job. But, of course, that is not the script shared by everyone. The "success script" valued by college-educated, middle/upper-class families is not necessarily shared by all, and particular points on the line may deviate from the standard script for many student populations. These varieties are precisely why honors colleges at rural and first-generation-centered institutions, then, are ideally placed to meet students where they are and provide opportunities and resources on their terms.

Our two recent additions to the honors curriculum address the issue of "success scripts" in diametrically opposite ways. Our professional development seminar (HON 3500) gives students an opportunity to interrogate and understand the success scripts associated with their chosen fields and make concrete plans to address them in the near term. Through class activities and assignments, students are required to develop and receive detailed professional feedback on materials connected to a specific internship, scholarship, graduate program, or to another significant opportunity. Through this process, they are introduced to the major opportunities for growth and development in their chosen field and must contact a variety of stakeholders around the campus who can assist with these opportunities, such as the Career Center, the Undergraduate Research and Creativity Center, the Graduate School, or the Office of Global Engagement. Students typically finish the semester with a robust portfolio full of useful documentation related to their academic and extracurricular work thus far. For students who arrive on our campus without deeply ingrained scripts or a reservoir of

social and cultural capital, the professional development seminar provides a leveling function. The course is meant to lay bare these honors success scripts in an effort to provide explicitly what more privileged students often received through implicit socialization.

The service learning practicum (HON 3200), on the other hand, flips the success scripts by recentering the classroom in an environment where the rural, first-generation students are fluent. Because the semester projects are almost always undertaken in collaboration with partners that serve the rural communities of southeastern North Carolina from which most of our students come, we find that the students who might be the least prepared for the success scripts of the classroom suddenly become the experts. Flipping the script in this way builds individual student self-confidence, productively disrupts or reconfigures hierarchical relationships within honors cohorts, and even reframes basic questions of knowledge in ways that reverberate widely outside the single credit hour the course provides. Going forward, we hope to continue the expansion of service learning opportunities for our students and build deeper relationships between our students and the rural communities that surround our campus. The service learning course also demonstrates the importance of "building stronger ties between honors programs and campus reform initiatives that explicitly seek equity and inclusion" (Jones 42). In spring 2021, our faculty senate passed an historic initiative called the Indigenous Cultures and Communities (ICC) requirement, which requires students to complete coursework and co-curricular activities (such as service learning) focused on indigenous cultures and communities. Our course was intentionally developed to support this initiative.

A new report using the data produced by Raj Chetty et al. along with other collections of economic data demonstrates that traditional higher education rankings do not reflect the impact universities have on social mobility. As Michael Itzkowitz notes, minority-serving institutions with high numbers of Pell-eligible students tend instead to score high on rankings that reward social mobility. Honors colleges in such universities are positioned to amplify the economic boost generated by these universities and should seize the

opportunity to provide traditionally underresourced students, who may be students of color as well as low-income, first-generation, or rural students, with the skills, knowledge, and cultural capital that they need for success.

Honors colleges are especially well suited to serve as forces of educational equity because of the degree of institutional autonomy they enjoy. This independence begins with control over factors of enrollment management: calibrating an enrollment and recruitment strategy, allocating financial aid resources accordingly, and creating messaging for current and prospective students that promotes inclusive practices. This autonomy also enables equity work at the curricular level. As an honors college, we can respond to the expressed needs of students through lasting and systematic additions, corrections, and expansions of our curriculum. At UNCP, for example, we enjoy total control over honors students' experiences in the required first-year seminar, which, together with coordinated efforts across the first-year living-learning community, provide a strong basis for success and achievement. For instance, all first-year seminar students participate in a service learning project where they exchange letters with middle school students, reflecting on the challenges and opportunities of their initial months in college, which positions them as experts and mentors. And, of course, our autonomy gives us additional flexibility and resources to provide the targeted professional and academic support that any honors operation strives to offer to students throughout their time on campus: encouragement to participate in academic conferences and to publish in undergraduate journals, connections to career center and job fair opportunities, and guidance navigating the graduate school application process. In each of these areas, honors colleges are well-positioned to open new possibilities for equity among our students.

That high-achieving students from underrepresented groups often self-select into lower-tier institutions may be discouraging on the surface; however, honors colleges at those campuses are poised to leverage their institutional powers to provide the support, encouragement, and opportunities for educational advancement. In fact,

they may offer a more personal approach and a cultural sensitivity than students may otherwise receive at more selective campuses. In the fall of 2021, our campus hosted an event with Tommy Orange, author of the *New York Times* bestselling novel *There There*, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, and a member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma. With a socially distanced audience full of students, Orange spoke about his decision to attend a historically American Indian institution for his MFA, the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Sante Fe, NM, rather than a more prestigious writers' program like the famous workshop at the University of Iowa. Orange explained that at majority-White institutions, indigenous students are either asked to bring too much of themselves to class—explaining every tiny nuance of Native life for a ravenous white audience—or too little—checking anything that makes them uniquely Indian at the door in the name of a White definition of universality. At IAIA, he explained, neither of those options were ever on the table, and so he felt much more freedom to simply explore and develop his craft as a writer. Those of us steeped in the academic world of hierarchies and rankings may not immediately understand why a student with a strong high school record would choose a less prestigious university over a more prestigious one, but this decision is something we encounter at UNC Pembroke often. "Deviant" success/happiness scripts value attending an institution that is affordable, close to home, "known" by the student's family and community, and able to provide a comfortable, familial atmosphere. These considerations do not necessarily involve notions of institutional prestige and prominence. We must assume that students, in choosing a less prestigious regional university, are making an informed decision. As a result, honors colleges at these lower-ranking institutions have a responsibility to ensure students have the opportunity to succeed, that their choice is a good choice, and that this alternative success script is viable.

ENDNOTE

[1]Although outside the scope of this essay, one must also note the ways in which skepticism of educational systems among

indigenous people is rooted in a history in which American Indian schooling proved to be a core part of the settler colonial project and "a systematic attempt to rid the world of American Indian culture" (Locklear 13).

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