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K. CELESTE CAMPBELL

Allocation of Resources: Should Honors Programs Take Priority?

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Two of the major challenges facing higher education in the 21st century are the determination of priorities and the allocation of shrinking resources to reflect these priorities. Many colleges and universities, when blessed with sufficient funds during the last half of the 20th century, dedicated resources to develop honors programs (or similar honors colleges) to attract and nurture academically talented undergraduate students.¹ Substantial funds are required for honors programs to offer benefits such as small classes, special honors advising, and honors housing. In addition to annual funding, other resources are needed to operate a successful honors program, such as faculty time for honors courses and physical space for classrooms, offices, meeting rooms, computer labs, and study areas.

Today's climate is different from the era of widespread honors program creation. Institutions no longer have enough resources to fund all existing programs. According to McPherson and Schapiro (2003), "Public colleges and universities in the United States have been on a financial roller coaster in recent years because of dramatic changes in the fiscal environment of the states" (p. 1157). A recent plunge that began in the 2001-02 academic year threatens to be as deep or even deeper than the serious slide of the early 1990s. Institutional leaders are confronted with difficult decisions as they allocate resources that are inadequate to meet the needs of all programs. They are forced to prioritize, and those programs that do not surface as priorities must be modified or eliminated.

This essay addresses the question: Are college honors programs important enough to be considered priorities that receive institutional funding and other resources? Although there are thoughtful educators who argue against supporting honors programs as institutional priorities, the arguments in favor of such support are ultimately more persuasive. Much can be learned, however, from arguments against honors programs, and this essay presents some of the strongest of these arguments. Rather than ignoring or dismissing such positions, honors administrators must use them to gain insight for improving their programs, securing wider acceptance of their programs, and helping to ensure that their host institutions remain fully aware of the crucial and diverse value of their honors programs. This essay is intended to assist honors administrators as they strive to position their programs as deserving priorities within their institutions.

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The colleges that choose to allocate substantial resources to honors programs do so because they see the value of the programs to serve not only students but also the institutions themselves. One example is the University of Minnesota, which, although confronted with economic challenges, is currently considering a plan to *add* an honors college, closing two other longstanding colleges in the process (its General College, which provides services to students who need remedial assistance, and its College of Human Ecology). This plan is intended to help the university better focus its resources, compete for top students and faculty, and improve its status as a top research institution (Hebel, 2005).

Honors programs clearly assist with the recruitment of high-ability students, and honors administrators must find ways to measure and document this role so that it can serve as solid evidence of the value of their specific programs to their institutions as a whole. For example, new freshmen enrolling through the Honors College at Oklahoma State University complete a brief survey that includes the question, "In selecting OSU as your university, how important was it that you were accepted into the Honors College?" The response results are documented in the Honors College annual report and are distributed to appropriate university personnel. The 2003-04 annual report (OSU Honors College, 2004, p. 8) shows that 44% of new honors freshmen indicated that their acceptance into the Honors College was "very important," 48% said "somewhat important," and only 8% said that Honors College acceptance was not an important factor in their selection of universities.

One reason that the recruitment of honors students is important to colleges is that research indicates that these students, who typically are at the top of their high school classes and have high ACT or SAT scores, are more likely than average students to persist in college and to earn their degrees quickly. Because graduation rate is frequently seen as an important indicator of institutional quality, colleges need to attract the types of students who are most likely to finish a degree. The literature on honors programs rarely focuses on graduation rate. However, a few isolated studies do exist. Lucas, Hull, and Brantley (1995) performed a study at William Rainey Harper College in Illinois to determine the effect of their honors program on students who had participated. They found that the students who had completed at least one honors course had a higher graduation rate than did the general student population (37% versus 31%). Similarly, the 2002 Program Completion Rate Report from St. Cloud State University in Minnesota shows that students who participated in their honors program had higher completion (graduation) rates than did the rest of the student body: the six-year completion rate of honors students was 72%, while that of the university at large was 39% (St. Cloud State University, 2002). Finally, Astin's (1975) longitudinal, national study focusing on college dropouts found that "Participation in honors programs is uniformly associated with improved chances of college completion" (p. 103).

Colleges value their honors programs not only because they attract top students but also because they generate interest from donors. For example, two-thirds of the \$300 million pledged to the University of Arkansas by the Walton family, "the largest gift ever promised to a public institution of higher education" (Pulley, 2002, p. 1), was designated to develop an undergraduate honors college there. Cleveland State

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University likewise received a total of \$2 million from two separate donors in 2003 to fund honors program scholarships (Gazette, 2003), and a recent \$1 million gift to Rowan University was dedicated to enhance academic and research activities for honors program students (Rowan University, 2004).

At the state level, honors programs are seen as weapons for fighting against academic “brain drain,” where bright students are lured out of state to attend prestigious colleges and do not bring their expertise back to their home states after college. Long (2002) contends that honors programs allow states to funnel funds to the goal of retaining top students without drastically disturbing the existing college structure or mission. These funds are used for programming and operational expenses as well as scholarships for honors students. Although few would argue with the assertion that honors programs combat “brain drain,” this author could locate no evidence that collegiate honors programs keep students in their home states. Similar evidence does exist, however, in states that have instigated merit-based scholarships in order to retain top students. The HOPE Scholarship in Georgia, for example, has decreased the flight of top students to out-of-state institutions. The scholarship covers tuition, fees, and book expenses for qualified residents who attend in-state public colleges and provides subsidies for in-state private colleges. During the first seven years after the instigation of the HOPE Scholarship, 1993-2000, the number of Georgia residents with SAT scores greater than 1500 who remained in the state for college rose from 23% to 76% (“A Celebration of HOPE” as cited in Cornwell, Mustard, & Sridhar, 2003).

In addition to the benefits that honors programs bring to their institutions and states, these supportive programs also provide benefits for students. In fact, institutional and state benefits are realized as by-products of the primary work of honors programs: facilitating the success and enhancing the overall satisfaction of students. Research suggests that students participating in honors programs improve their writing and critical thinking skills (Bulkowski & Townsend, 1995; Tsui, 1999); increase their intellectual self-esteem (Bulkowski & Townsend, 1995; Lucas et al., 1995); and report high levels of satisfaction with their college experience (Byrne, 1998; Shushok, 2002). Is it any wonder, then, that honors students should have higher college retention rates and graduation rates than do non-honors students (Astin, 1975, chaps. 5 & 8; Lucas et al., 1995; St. Cloud State University, 2002)?

Astin’s (1984) theory of student involvement proposes that students learn and succeed in college by becoming actively involved in their education. Astin’s work points to several aspects of the college environment that facilitate student involvement, and many of these are the very aspects that characterize honors programs: an engaging and challenging curriculum; individual interaction with faculty; opportunities to reside on-campus, such as in honors residence halls; and participation in social and organizational activities like those sponsored by honors programs. Small class size, which Gibbs and Lucas (1996) found to be positively related to student performance, is a fundamental component of honors programs and a further encouragement for students to become involved in their education. Likewise, on-going counseling on academic performance, such as the advising provided by honors programs, is another type of student involvement that has been shown to increase retention (Turner & Berry, 2000).

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Yet in spite of such evidence of the positive effects of honors programs, not all educators are in agreement regarding their value as institutional priorities. The arguments against honors programs stem largely from the feeling that they are elitist—that they isolate the top students from the rest of the academic community, that they lack diversity, and that they are at least partly responsible for the growing extent to which merit-based scholarship and programming funds are taking precedence over need-based awards and other deserving programs. Some educators feel that the allocation of funds for honors programs is made at the expense of the larger student body. Sperber (2000), for example, contends that

Schools publicly promote their excellent and well-funded honors programs and never mention their deteriorating regular undergraduate education ones—as if somehow the flashy honors colleges compensate for the poverty of ordinary classes. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the enrichment of already affluent honors programs increases, and the impoverishment of regular undergraduate education also continues.

—Sperber, 2000, p. 148

The concept of elitism runs contrary to the mission of some institutions, particularly in the environment of open access that is the foundation of the community college. As part of their qualitative evaluation of an Illinois community college honors program, Bulkowski and Townsend (1995) disclosed the roots of anti-honors sentiments from document analysis and interviews with faculty who were opposed to the establishment of the program. What emerged was the belief that the honors program would represent elitist values, segregate students according to ability, and tend to serve students whose demographic characteristics (age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status) were not representative of the student body as a whole. Other research provides grounding for such beliefs. Lucas et al. (1995) examined the demographics of honors students at William Rainey Harper College over a five-year period. When compared to the general student body, the students in the honors program tended to be younger and less likely to belong to a minority group. The percentage of African Americans and Hispanic honors students was less than half the percentage of these groups present in the college at large.

In his summary of his longitudinal work on college persistence, Astin (1984) states that the findings of his study “suggest that honors participation enhances faculty-student relationships but may isolate students from their peers” (p. 303). Such isolation can produce feelings of resentment on the part of non-honors students—a finding from the qualitative research of Bulkowski and Townsend (1995). Some honors program administrators openly combat this perception of isolation and separation. According to Freddy Davy, director of the Honors College at Hampton University, “We make a conscious effort not to be elitist, not to be separate.... The primary goal for honors here at Hampton is to affect the academic climate of the university as a whole” (Hamilton, 2004, p. 30). The policies of the Honors College at Hampton are designed to accomplish this goal. For example, after honors students have enrolled,

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remaining spaces in honors classes are open to the general student body with the understanding that these students must be willing to meet the challenges and expectations of the class. Another example is the requirement that honors students who are doing projects to fulfill honors contracts in their non-honors major classes must present their project results to the class. The Honors College also publishes a listing and description of all honors contract projects so that faculty and students throughout the university may benefit from student research ideas (F. Davy, personal communication, April 18, 2005).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, we turn again to the primary question: Are honors programs important enough to be considered priorities that receive institutional funding and other resources? The leaders of each college will ultimately make this determination for themselves, and it is the job of the honors director (or dean) to ensure that the evidence pointing to the benefits of honors education is more persuasive than the misgivings of those who are against it. Will honors programs survive and thrive, or will other deserving competitor programs take precedence? Honors directors can play a crucial role in distinguishing their programs as priorities by taking the following steps.

1. Become informed about honors-related research and the benefits that honors programs bring to their students, their institutions, and their states—and contribute to such research.

Although the body of research focusing on honors programs is small, this essay highlights some examples of studies that confirm the benefits honors programs bring to the students who participate in them as well as to the institutions and states that house them. More honors-focused research is needed, particularly multi-institutional research that explores the value of honors programs and the effects of honors program participation on student development. When compared to other areas of higher education, relatively little published honors research exists, and much of what exists is neither available in libraries nor accessible through widely used search processes. (A 2005 search for the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* produced the following results: ERIC—Six articles from the Spring-Summer 2000 issue; OCLC FirstSearch—Five libraries worldwide that own the item; Proquest—publication not found.) One of the current challenges facing the honors community is to discover meaningful ways to measure, analyze, evaluate, and make public the effects that honors programs have on their students and their institutions. Such data would help institutional decision-makers determine whether honors programs are important enough to be considered priorities that justify the allocation of funds, personnel, space, and other resources.

2. Set up methods for documenting and evaluating the local honors program to assess whether it is deserving of priority status.

Before funds and other resources are allocated, individual honors programs should be evaluated to assess their quality and effectiveness. Such evaluation may be

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conducted internally on an ongoing basis and/or by external evaluators in a less frequent but more formal format. In order to validate their existence and build a case for future survival, honors programs must set up routine internal processes to assess and document their work. Examples of important areas for assessment are using annual surveys to measure student satisfaction with courses and advising, calculating the retention and graduation rates of honors students, and tracking honors alumni to determine how their post-graduation lives are different from those of non-honors students (particularly academically equivalent non-honors students). The National Collegiate Honors Council provides general standards of assessment that can help colleges evaluate their honors programs (Basic characteristics, 2000), and work is currently underway on similar standards for honors colleges. Although at this time no national, formal honors program evaluation or accreditation process exists, the NCHC web site provides a list of recommended site visitors who can assist with an evaluation or review of an honors program by serving as consultants or external reviewers.

3. Thoughtfully examine the local honors program in light of the arguments that honors programs promote various forms of elitism.

Honors administrators must be sensitive to and learn from the anti-honors arguments presented in this essay. The term that encompasses these arguments, elitism, is associated with preferential treatment of a privileged, closed group. Honors programs may be perceived as elitist in the sense that participants who meet designated academic criteria are afforded enhanced faculty contact, early enrollment, and other privileges. Honors directors may simply need to accept the fact that some people will always hold the opinion that this constitutes academic elitism. What directors must not accept is the exclusion of any group of people based on or stemming from non-academic criteria. In the Supreme Court decision from the University of Michigan law school affirmative-action case, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor wrote, "In order to cultivate a set of leaders with legitimacy in the eyes of the citizenry, it is necessary that the path to leadership be visibly open to talented and qualified individuals of every race and ethnicity" (*Grutter v. Bollinger*, 2003, p. 332). The honors programs of this country serve to educate talented, qualified students who hold the potential to become leaders in finding cures for disease and solving other problems of society. It is the responsibility of honors administrators to ensure that their programs are "visibly open" to all academically qualified students. This means that they must take steps to attract a diverse student body by targeting some of their recruiting efforts to minority students, non-traditional students, and others who may be missed by general recruiting methods. Honors directors should initiate collaborative efforts with campus multicultural offices to implement strategies for increasing effective minority recruitment. Honors administrators can attract international and non-traditional students (who are often missed by honors programs during their initial campus enrollment) to their programs by extending personalized, individual invitations to join the honors program to students who perform well during their first semester of college (rather than basing eligibility solely on college entrance criteria). These actions,

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along with other efforts such as sponsoring inclusive campus-wide speaker series and tutoring programs, will contribute to the visible openness of honors programs and will help combat the elitist stereotype, thereby securing wider acceptance of honors programs.

4. Make a conscious and consistent effort to ensure that the crucially beneficial work of the honors program is visible.

If an honors program is to become an institutional priority and maintain this priority status, its work and value must be visible. The honors administrator must cultivate and maintain lines of communication with institutional decision-makers and make sure that appropriate people receive information such as evaluation reports, annual reports, and notices of special honors student achievements that support the honors program. (See the "Responsibilities" section of the NCHC *Handbook for Administrators* (Long, 1995) for practical suggestions for effective administrative communication.)

This essay has examined some of the arguments for and against the inclusion of honors programs as top institutional priorities that warrant the allocation of scarce resources. It has also stressed the importance of research, documentation, and evaluation, but such efforts are futile if they remain secret. Instead, they must be used to inform institutional leaders about the crucial role that honors programs play in supporting student success, recruiting top students, attracting donor attention, and elevating the overall environment and status of the institution.

NOTES

1. To provide a perspective on the prevalence of honors programs, 802 institutions were members of the National Collegiate Honors Council as of December 2004 (NCHC, 2004).

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