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Inclusive and Effective Holistic Admission Frameworks for Honors Programs: A Case Study Continued

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Abstract: This study continues an earlier (2021) examination of a program's move from an admissions framework that used standardized test score thresholds to a test-blind holistic review. While the initial study evinced holistic review as a more equitable gateway to honors education for students from underserved backgrounds (as compared to admission frameworks that rely heavily on SAT/ACT thresholds), the current study further substantiates this finding as the program fully transitions to its subsequent admission cycle. In addition to affirming holistic admissions practice as effective for diversifying honors populations, the study considers two additional results. First, the holistic review rubric is assessed from the lenses of equity and efficacy. The revised rubric and the rationale for revision are provided. Results indicate that high school GPA and co- and extra-curricular involvement are key predictors of success in honors programs. Second, researchers track annual achievement and involvement of students in the fall 2020 cohort based on which admission track they followed. Students admitted through holistic review without SAT/ACT scores tend to be more involved in the program but experience difficulty in maintaining the minimum honors GPA in their first year. Results offer a backdrop for important discussions currently underway in the honors community regarding how to best provide equitable gateways and welcoming and supportive programs that give students tools for success in honors.

Keywords: holistic admissions review; educational equalization; standardized tests; student retention; Northern Illinois University (IL)–Honors Program

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INTRODUCTION

Recently, honors programs and colleges have reflected on the systemic issues of excluding underrepresented minorities and the challenging historical association of honors education with elitism (Cognard-Black & Spisak, 2021). The authors of the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) position paper *Honors Enrollment Management: Toward a Theory and Practice of Inclusion* (2020) explain that the promotion of diversity and inclusion in honors programs depends on many practices beyond admissions, although replacing the reliance on standardized test scores with holistic review is a crucial step. In an article published last year in this journal, “The Role of Admissions Practices in Diversifying Honors Populations: A Case Study” (2021), we shared the experience of the Northern Illinois University Honors Program (NIU UHP) shifting the honors admission protocol from one relying heavily on standardized test scores to a test-blind holistic process. As reported in that study, holistic admissions helped produce an honors applicant pool and first-year cohort that were significantly more ethnically diverse than in prior years. In addition, the study reported on the first iteration of the holistic review mechanism, and we offered a rationale for the review rubric measures, focusing especially on the goal of not embedding privilege in the new admissions process (Radasanu & Barker, 2021).

A year later, we are eager to provide further findings. First, additional data support the contention that holistic review helps diversify honors populations. In the first study, we tracked the transitional year in which applicants to the honors program could qualify via high school GPA (HSGPA) and standardized test score (ACT/SAT) minimums or through holistic review, which was test blind. In the following recruitment year for fall 2021, having fully transitioned to holistic review, we were able to see that the pattern of ethnic diversification of the honors applicant pool and cohort continued. Second, we followed the 2020 first-year cohort through their first year in the NIU UHP to see whether the mode of entry (through minimum test and HSGPA scores versus holistic review) helped predict either GPA program eligibility at the end of the first year or level of activity in the program. Third, we wanted to assess the efficacy of the rubric used for holistic admission review in 2019–2020. We found that HSGPA and engagement or involvement measurements provided the most meaningful predictors of both success and engagement in the NIU UHP while some of the other measures offered little or no predictive value. Here, we offer a discussion about the rubric updates that were implemented to address both efficacy and equity.

The two-year study of NIU UHP's transition to holistic admission review confirms that holistic review provides a more equitable gateway into honors programs and offers an example of how to develop a rubric that captures important aspects of applicants' qualifications and experiences. Holistic review also confronts honors programs with the challenge of providing students with welcoming and supportive programs in which they can meet their goals. After one year in the NIU UHP, some important differences emerged between students who entered the program holistically without the qualifying ACT/SAT scores and the ones who met the ACT/SAT scores previously required to qualify for the program. On the one hand, many students who would not have been admitted through the now-defunct standardized test score cutoffs thrived in the program in their first year. Indeed, they outpaced their test-score eligible counterparts (slightly) in their participation in the program (taking courses and doing co-curricular experiences). On the other hand, those who were admitted through holistic review maintained the honors-eligible 3.3 GPA at significantly lower rates than students who entered the program with a qualifying ACT/SAT score. This disparity coincided with an equity gap for Black and Hispanic students, who disproportionately benefited from the holistic review gateway during the 2020 recruitment cycle. While the results are likely influenced by the fact that this cohort started college during the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings still challenge the program and the honors community to consider retention and student success as honors education continues its self-reflection on what it means to balance inclusion and access with the supports necessary for students to succeed.

DIVERSIFYING HONORS POPULATIONS THROUGH HOLISTIC REVIEW

In 2019–2020, the NIU UHP transitioned from automatic admission thresholds, whereby students were excluded if their HSGPA and/or their standardized test score was below a specific level, to test-blind holistic review of applications. The study conducted at that time and published in this journal provided hopeful results regarding the increased diversity both in the applicant pool and first-year entering cohort that seemed to be the result of the shift in the admissions protocol (Radasanu & Barker, 2021). The dramatic increase in the ethnic diversity of the first-year class in 2019–2020 gives a powerful indication that gatekeeping was responsible for at least part of the former lack of ethnic diversity in the program. With the opportunity

to witness another admission cycle, one that was entirely test blind, we have further confidence that holistic test-blind review of applications provides a potent tool to help increase the diversity of the program.

The proportion of White students in both the applicant pool and the enrolled cohort fell from 2019 to 2021. In fall 2019, 70% of honors applicants and 79% of the enrolled cohort were White. In fall 2021, 54% of honors applicants and 50% of the enrolled cohort were White (Tables 1 and 2). While this group continues to be overrepresented compared to NIU's first-year class (31% of which was White), there is a clear movement toward alignment with the overall NIU population (Table 3). Black and Hispanic students applied to and joined the NIU UHP in higher numbers than previously and as a higher percentage of each group. In the two preceding years, the number of Black applicants to the honors program jumped by 308% and that of Hispanic applicants by 377%. These two groups are known to be most negatively impacted by standardized test scores (ACT Profile Report, 2020). Encouragingly, the Hispanic cohort in honors is slightly overrepresented with respect to the overall composition of NIU's incoming first-year class in fall 2021 (Table 3).

TABLE 1. HONORS FIRST-YEAR APPLICATIONS BY ETHNICITY

Ethnicity	Total Applicants 2019		Total Applicants 2020		Total Applicants 2021	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Asian Non-Hispanic	21	9%	22	9%	15	5%
Black Non-Hispanic	12	5%	30	12%	49	13%
Hispanic	13	6%	26	11%	62	25%
Other	23	10%	15	6%	13	3%
White Non-Hispanic	158	70%	154	62%	147	54%
Totals	227	100%	247	100%	286	100%

TABLE 2. NEW FIRST-YEAR HONORS STUDENTS BY ETHNICITY

Ethnicity	Fall 2019		Fall 2020		Fall 2021	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Asian Non-Hispanic	5	4%	13	7%	7	4%
Black Non-Hispanic	6	5%	20	11%	30	16%
Hispanic	13	10%	26	14%	47	25%
Other	4	3%	11	6%	9	5%
White Non-Hispanic	104	79%	112	62%	95	50%
Totals	132	100%	182	100%	188	100%

FALL 2020 FIRST-YEAR COHORT: ELIGIBILITY AND PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

As well as continuing to see if the initial shifts in the admissions regime helped the NIU UHP become more ethnically representative of NIU's population, we followed the 2020 first-year cohort to assess if the mode of entry into the program was related to student success and program participation. Student success was measured by attainment of an honors-eligible GPA (3.3 cumulative or higher), and participation in the program was measured by taking honors courses or completing significant co-curricular experiences within that first year at NIU. We also sought to understand whether student ethnicity was related to either GPA eligibility or program engagement.

GPA Eligibility

Table 4 breaks down eligibility by the way incoming first-year students were admitted into the NIU UHP in fall 2020. Students were admitted either through automatic admission standards (a combination of HSGPA

TABLE 3. FIRST-YEAR HONORS VS. NIU COHORT PERCENT BY ETHNICITY (FALL 2021)

Ethnicity	% of Honors Cohort	% of NIU Cohort
Asian Non-Hispanic	4%	4%
Black Non-Hispanic	16%	38%
Hispanic	25%	22%
Other	5%	5%
White Non-Hispanic	50%	31%
Totals	100%	100%

TABLE 4. HONORS GPA ELIGIBLE END OF FIRST YEAR (3.3+) FOR FALL 2020 COHORT

Eligibility	Holistic		Test (ACT/SAT)		All	
	#	Honors Eligible Spring 2021	#	Honors Eligible Spring 2021	#	Honors Eligible Spring 2021
Admit Non-Conditional	73	66%	73	81%	146	73%
Admit Conditional	22	41%	13	92%	35	60%
Totals	95	60%	86	83%	181	71%

and ACT/SAT results) or through holistic review. If students were admitted through the outgoing automatic admission criteria, their application was also assessed through the holistic review process. If applicants did not qualify via the automatic admission cutoffs and had a holistic score that was neither desirably high nor clearly low, they were admitted into a category we labeled “conditional” admission. Students in this latter category were admitted to the NIU UHP and did not know that they scored sub-optimally on their holistic review. These students were merely offered more outreach and resources through their first year in the program.

Students who qualified via test scores were more likely to be GPA-eligible at the end of the first year in the honors program than their holistic entry counterparts: 83% vs. 60% (Table 4). All entrants into the program who qualified via test scores also qualified via holistic review. However, a segment of the test-qualifying students scored in the conditional range on their holistic reviews; these 13 students were most likely to remain honors GPA-eligible after the first year, with 92% of them maintaining a 3.3 GPA or higher. The performance of this group of students was likely mediocre on their holistic review because they knew that they already qualified via automatic scores and did not exert much effort in completing the remainder of their applications; this is a unique circumstance that has no future relevance since all applications after 2020 have been assessed test-blind and through holistic review. For students who were admitted non-conditionally, the test-score-eligible students finished with stronger GPAs overall (81% honors GPA eligible) than those who entered holistically and would not have been eligible via test scores (66%). Students who were admitted conditionally and only qualified via holistic review had the worst GPA eligibility rates at 41%.

GPA eligibility sorted by ethnicity reveals some significant variations (Table 5). Of the 181-student cohort, 71% remained eligible after the first year, but Asian and White students were eligible at higher rates—77% and 79%, respectively—while the other groups ranged from 45% to 55% GPA-eligible.

The conditional holistic admission category provided some of the starkest bifurcations according to ethnicity. See Table 6 to recall the breakdown of students by ethnicity in the conditional holistic range with respect to whether they did or did not also qualify via standardized test scores (reproduced from Radasanu & Barker, 2021). Three quarters of the White students in this category qualified via test scores while three quarters of the Black students did not.

Focusing on the students who qualified only via conditional holistic review, where students from marginalized groups are overrepresented vis-à-vis the overall NIU UHP entering class of 2020, we found a further disparity

in GPA eligibility after a year in the program (Table 5). With only 22 students in this group, disaggregated data renders very small numbers. Still, White and Asian students completed the year with an honors-eligible GPA at higher rates than Black and Hispanic students from this “at risk” honors group. Less than a third of the historically underserved minorities in this group sustained the minimum GPA required to remain in the program. Similarly, 31% of Pell-eligible students in this group remained honors-eligible while 56% of non-Pell-eligible students maintained a minimum honors GPA. This pattern continued with first-generation students, a third of whom had an honors-eligible GPA after the first year as opposed to 50% of non-first-generation students. We found little gender disparity, with 40% of women and 43% of men in this conditional holistic admission group achieving an honors-eligible GPA after two semesters.

TABLE 5. GPA ELIGIBILITY BY ETHNICITY

Ethnicity	Full Cohort 2020		Conditional Holistic Admitted Students	
	Number of Students	% 3.3+ GPA Spring 2021	Number of Students	% 3.3+ GPA Spring 2021
Asian Non-Hispanic	13	77%	3	67%
Black Non-Hispanic	20	55%	6	33%
Hispanic	25	52%	2	0%
Other	11	45%	3	33%
White Non-Hispanic	112	79%	8	50%
Totals	181	71%	22	41%

TABLE 6. CONDITIONAL HOLISTIC ADMISSIONS INTO NIU UHP IN FALL 2020

Ethnicity	Qualified via test		Did not qualify via test		Total	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Asian Non-Hispanic	4	57%	3	43%	7	100%
Black Non-Hispanic	3	27%	8	73%	11	100%
Hispanic	3	60%	2	40%	5	100%
Other	3	75%	1	25%	4	100%
White Non-Hispanic	23	72%	9	28%	32	100%
Totals	36	61%	23	39%	59	100%

Honors Program Activity

While students with higher test scores had an advantage in achieving honors-eligible GPAs after two semesters, the story is different when considering whether students were active in the honors program. Students are considered active in the program when they complete at least one honors course or approved co-curricular experience every year; if they fail to do so, they do not retain their honors program status even though they can reactivate their program activity at any time. While one honors course or activity is the annual minimum to stay in the program, students need to complete one to two requirements per year to stay on track to graduate with the University Honors designation. Students must complete a combination of 12 honors courses and experiences to graduate with Full University Honors. We looked only at whether students in the incoming honors cohort of 2020 successfully completed at least one honors course or co-curricular experience during the first year, which would make them eligible to continue in the program.

Students admitted holistically rather than through test scores were more likely to have completed at least one honors course or experience in academic year 2020–2021 (Table 7). While close, the holistically admitted students (across conditional and non-conditional categories) were slightly more likely to take advantage of the program in this first year (58% versus 53%). Those who were admitted nonconditionally, in both categories, were more likely to earn honors credit than students who were assessed as conditional, showing that the rubric is somewhat meaningful (Tables 8 and 9). The least likely group to participate in the program were those who had qualifying standardized test scores but a lower score on the holistic review such that they were conditional on that measure. Recall that this group (albeit small: 13 students) had the highest GPA-eligibility rate of any group at 92%, but only 38% of them participated in the program.

Having approximately 40% of the first-year entering class fail to complete any honors activities during two semesters is far from ideal and not characteristic of the usual program patterns. This failure rate may well be a COVID-19 effect and is surely not the new admission practice given that, as hoped for at implementation, holistic review helps identify students who are more likely to be active once joining the program. An intersection of inactivity and ineligibility needs to be addressed: 41% (33 out of 80) of the students who earned no honors credit were also ineligible to be in the NIU UHP with respect to GPA requirements.

We found no significant disparity among ethnicities regarding who is or is not active in the program (Table 10). White students, who represent 62% of the cohort, are proportionally somewhat underrepresented among the group of students who earned no honors credit in their first year at NIU (56%). If, however, we consider the breakdown of students who completed at least one honors course and one co-curricular experience, White students are heavily overrepresented; they make up 62% of the cohort and 76% of the students who achieved at least one of each kind of honors-worthy experience (Table 11). Another observation is that White students completed proportionally

TABLE 7. ALL ADMITTED

Student Activity	Holistic	%	Test	%
Earned no honors credit	40	42%	40	47%
Completed at least one course or experience in honors	55	58%	46	53%
Totals	95	100%	86	100%

TABLE 8. ADMITTED (NON-CONDITIONAL)

Student Activity	Holistic	%	Test	%
Earned no honors credit	28	38%	32	44%
Completed at least one course or experience in honors	45	62%	41	56%
Totals	73	100%	73	100%

TABLE 9. ADMITTED (CONDITIONAL)

Student Activity	Holistic	%	Test	%
Earned no honors credit	12	55%	8	62%
Completed at least one course or experience in honors	10	45%	5	38%
Totals	22	100%	13	100%

TABLE 10. HONORS INACTIVE BY ETHNICITY

Ethnicity	No Honors Credit		Fall 2020 Cohort	
	Count	%	Count	%
Asian Non-Hispanic	6	8%	13	7%
Black Non-Hispanic	10	13%	20	11%
Hispanic	12	15%	25	14%
Other	7	9%	11	6%
White Non-Hispanic	45	56%	112	62%
Totals	80	100%	181	100%

more co-curricular experiences than their non-White counterparts. Students in general were three times more likely to take a course than complete a co-curricular experience, which may be related to COVID-19 limitations as well as the fact that, although graduating with honors requires students to do both, they need to complete more courses than co-curricular experiences. Very few students who identified as either Hispanic or Black completed co-curricular experiences: 7 total out of 45 who completed co-curriculars (Table 11).

ASSESSING THE EFFICACY OF THE NEW ADMISSIONS RUBRIC

Evaluating the Initial Holistic Review Rubric

As we showed in the first part of this study last year (Radasanu & Barker, 2021), the admission rubric launched in the 2019–2020 recruitment year attempted to capture several measures of academic preparedness and level of interest in the program on a scale from 0–3 (Table 12). To evaluate the efficacy of the different honors admission measures, a logistic regression analysis was performed to predict honors eligibility (cumulative GPA of 3.3 or greater) at the conclusion of the students' second semester. The predictor variables were high school GPA (HSGPA), the number of AP credits, freshmen essay writing style, freshmen essay writing content, and the number of self-reported high school extracurricular activities. The R^2 estimates ranged from 0.113 (Cox & Snell) and 0.161 (Nagelkerke). The results of this analysis are presented in Table 13. Of the five predictor variables, only two were significant predictors of honors eligibility: high school GPA and high school extracurricular activities ($p < 0.05$). No other predictor approached significance. These results demonstrate that students who had a history of academic rigor as well as an

TABLE 11. HONORS CREDIT BY ETHNICITY

Ethnicity	No Honors Credit		Only Co-Curricular		Only Honors Classes		Both Classes & Co-Curriculars		Total Cohort Breakdown	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Asian Non-Hispanic	6	8%	1	6%	3	5%	3	10%	13	7%
Black Non-Hispanic	10	13%	2	12%	6	11%	2	7%	20	11%
Hispanic	12	15%	2	12%	10	18%	1	3%	25	14%
Other	7	9%	0	0%	3	5%	1	2%	11	6%
White Non-Hispanic	45	56%	12	71%	33	60%	22	76%	112	62%
Totals	80	100%	17	100%	55	100%	29	100%	181	100%

interest and willingness to be involved in non-academic activities were much more likely to remain honors eligible than those who did not.

Revising Holistic Review Rubric

Based on our analysis of the predictive successes and failures of the initial rubric, updates were made for the following admissions cycle (Table 14). HSGPA remained 50% of the rubric score (Table 14). In line with research, HSGPA was a fruitful predictor of college GPA after the first year (see Savage, 2019, for a summary of the literature). With respect to the AP measure, we had a concern about equity even when establishing it in the initial rubric (Radasanu & Barker, 2021, p. 49). As access to AP courses and exams is not universal, it

TABLE 12. HONORS ADMISSION RUBRIC (INAUGURATED 2019–2020)

Measure	Weight	Rationale
HSGPA	50%	Academic record/preparedness
AP credits/classes	10%	Academic record/preparedness
Essay of Interest (content)	10%	Commitment or interest in honor education
Essay of Interest (style)	10%	Example of academic preparedness with respect to written communication
Engagement Record/ Work Commitments	20%	Involvement preparedness/record (co- and extra-curricular engagement, leadership experiences, meaningful responsibilities outside of academics, including work and major obligations)

TABLE 13. VARIABLES IN THE EQUATION

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Step 1 ^a	HSGPA	4.068	1.179	11.898	1	.001	58.428
	AP Credits	-.062	.200	.096	1	.757	.940
	Freshman Essay Writing Style	.187	.408	.211	1	.646	1.206
	Freshman Essay Writing Content	-.120	.418	.083	1	.773	.887
	Extracurricular Activities	.670	.209	10.256	1	.001	1.954
Constant		-16.658	4.718	12.467	1	.000	.000

^a Variable(s) entered on Step 1: HSGPA, AP Credits, Freshman Essay Writing Style, Freshman Essay Writing Content, and Extracurricular Activities.

may signal high school resources more than academic preparedness and thus may privilege White and Asian students over Black and Hispanic students. White and Asian students in this 2020 cohort scored marginally better than Black and Hispanic students in the same cohort: 1.308 and 1.259 on average on a scale from 0–3 for White and Asian students, respectively, as opposed to Black and Hispanic students, who scored an average of 1.0 and 0.909 respectively on the same scale. Most applicants had some exposure to AP courses, but few took more than two courses and almost none passed AP exams.

Rather than simply giving up on a way to capture applicants' enriched course or academic experiences, we decided to do so in a different manner, hoping that the revision would provide more meaningful data and avoid disadvantaging students whose high schools provided fewer enrichment opportunities. In the revised application, students are asked to identify if they have had experience with one or more of the ensuing options: 1) AP courses, 2) AP exams, 3) dual credit courses, 4) college courses, 5) other enriched courses, and 6) other examples they wish to add. In a follow-up question, they are then asked the following:

Please choose one of the enriched educational experiences and describe how you learned or benefited from it. If your high school didn't provide these experiences or there are other reasons you were not able to participate in them, please describe these circumstances and feel free to describe any experience that was meaningful to you, and made you want to prioritize your educational growth.

This approach captures varied experiences and makes space for students to describe unique ways in which they took advantage of their educational

TABLE 14. REVISED HONORS ADMISSION RUBRIC (UPDATED FOR 2021–2022)

Measure	Weight	Rationale
HSGPA	50%	Academic record/preparedness
Short Answer on any kind of enriched course experience	10%	Academic record/preparedness
Essay of Interest (content)	10%	Commitment or interest in honor education
Co/Extracurricular/Work Commitments	25%	Involvement preparedness/record (co- and extra-curricular engagement, leadership experiences, meaningful responsibilities outside of academics, including work and major obligations)
Community Engagement	5%	Sense of community/civic responsibility

settings or perhaps were unable to for a variety of reasons. Additionally, the quality of applicants' reflections takes priority over the number of courses they did or did not take, likely providing a better measure of their interest in and suitability for an honors educational setting.

While the essay of interest did not offer any predictive value with respect to GPA eligibility, it remains a component of the rubric as it is still important that applicants provide a thoughtful account of their interest in the program. Going forward, however, essay style is not considered; thus, the essay now counts for 10% rather than 20% of the overall score. In addition to the lack of correlation with academic success, the two essay components—content and style—offered no variation and therefore seemed to measure the same thing.

For this revised rubric, the engagement record component of the rubric went from 20% to 25% of the overall score to reflect the fact that it offers some predictive value of academic success and involvement. In the initial version of the rubric, this measure combined extracurricular activities, leadership experience, work responsibilities, and community service. In essence, if students dedicated time to any one or more of these, they scored well. Going forward, we thought it would be useful to disaggregate some of these different strands. For the engagement record, students are now scored on extracurricular activities separately from work experiences and major responsibilities. When the initial rubric was implemented, we recognized that some students do not have the luxury to devote much time to extracurricular activities because of the need to work or other responsibilities or resource limitations that make extracurricular activities prohibitive. With the updated rubric, we continue to recognize this fact, but we score each separately (extracurricular involvement and work responsibilities) and take the higher of the two scores. This way, we can collect more precise data about what kind of involvement and what sorts of responsibilities have a predictive effect on GPA and program activity and, eventually, completion as longitudinal data accumulates.

We pulled out community engagement from the engagement measure. It now represents its own category and is 5% of the overall score. This category seems separate from the overall co-curricular engagement that we are measuring but nevertheless important since community involvement and volunteerism reflect the NIU UHP's values.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

While it is encouraging to see further evidence that removing standardized test scores from the admission process can help diversify honors applicant

pools and cohorts, it is sobering to note how much more work needs to be done to avoid remaining equity gaps in honors eligibility. In addition, this study shines a light on the importance of continuing to consider what signifies success within an honors program or college.

Of students who were admitted holistically for fall 2020, 34% failed to achieve an honors-eligible GPA after one year in the program, and 59% of holistically admitted students who were flagged as “conditional” also failed to meet that goal (Table 4), leaving us to wonder if this is a failure of holistic review and if standardized test scores provide valuable guidance and should not be discarded. However, while holistic review rubrics ought to be examined and fine-tuned continually, as we did after one year of using a provisional rubric, it should not be assessed based on how many people fail to maintain honors eligibility. Ninety-five students who would not have had the opportunity to benefit from honors resources during their first year did so because of holistic review that took their excellent HSGPAs into account as well as other important developmental activities. Of these 95 students, 57 of them did in fact secure an NIU GPA of 3.3 or higher.

Retention within honors is significant so that students can meet their own goals and profit from the additional resources available in an honors environment, but it is equally important that honors programs help their institutions with retention and degree completion rates (Kelly, 2013). Of the 181 who enrolled in the NIU UHP in fall 2020, 93% were retained in good standing, with only a slight decrease (81%) among those who did not remain honors GPA-eligible. The overall institutional retention rate was about 25 points lower than the former and 15 points lower than the latter.

In addition to the benefits that participation in honors programs provides to students who may or may not remain involved in and eligible for the program, we should acknowledge the intrinsic benefits of diverse student populations in such programs (Cognard-Black & Spisak, 2021, p. 109). Honors programs typically aim to provide breadth and to support curiosity and educational entrepreneurship. When students come from similar backgrounds, these sorts of holistic educational aims are not well served. The issue is not that student excellence should be juxtaposed or placed in opposition to inclusion; rather, what matters is the diverse human experiences that provide institutions of higher learning the ability to foster inclusive excellence. It should not be a surprise that, in the short-term, students who had the resources and opportunities that led to higher standardized test scores also ended up with higher GPAs after two semesters, especially in the middle of a

pandemic where online learning required students to have technological and living environments conducive to succeeding in these circumstances.

The sort of study undertaken here provides an example of how data-driven policy changes are a necessary component of honors program management. One possibly surprising finding was the equity gap among the fall 2020 first-year honors cohort in taking advantage of co-curricular programming. The NIU UHP requires that a number of these experiences be completed to qualify for graduation with honors distinction. Four students who identified as Black (out of 20 in the cohort) and three students who identified as Hispanic (out of 25 in the cohort) completed co-curricular experiences. However, in the engagement scores on the admission rubric for the fall 2020 cohort, Black students scored on average 1.64 on a scale of 0–3 and Hispanic students scored 2.60. White students scored on average 2.21. Hispanic students scored higher than any another group, while Black students scored lowest (just lower than Asian students at 1.71). Since the original rubric did not distinguish between students who scored well on engagement due to co-curricular involvement and work/family responsibilities, we cannot tell if Black and/or Hispanic students tended to score well due to one or the other. The new rubric will be able to distinguish between these two sorts of engagement. In any case, what emerged in the first year in the honors program was a real disparity by ethnicity among students who could or did take advantage of co-curricular programming. We need to discover the cause, diminish barriers where these are found, and determine whether program requirements need to be revisited to avoid inflicting unintentional harm on underrepresented students.

The two-year study that gave rise to this and the previous article on changing the admissions protocols in the NIU UHP stands to reinforce the importance of ongoing review of program practices. The changes to the rubric will be assessed, as was the first iteration of the mechanism, and as the incoming cohorts of students are more diverse, the ongoing review of program requirements and supports is a priority. In the case of the NIU UHP, we have already made program changes that we hope will prove useful to diminishing the equity gaps for students from underserved communities. For a start, we have ratcheted up the first-year mentorship program and continue to evolve peer mentoring in the program to help foster important connections and support structures. We have established a burgeoning student group (Honors Advocacy Initiative) to provide administrators with input on inclusive practices to ensure that the program is welcoming to all. Our honors curriculum is increasingly responsive to social justice issues that affect the lives

and prospects of our students, and fundraising efforts are explicitly geared toward providing the means for students to participate in resource-intensive activities like unpaid internships and study abroad programs. These are a few examples out of many, but the main point is that more equitable gateways into honors programs must be accompanied by more equitable programs. These efforts will result in both successes and failures, but the latter should be steppingstones to further advances that meet the goal of inclusive excellence.

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