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2013

Editor's Introduction 2

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Long, Ada, "Editor's Introduction 2" (2013). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive*. 389.
https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchcjournal/389

Editor's Introduction

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At least as much as the curricular or extracurricular opportunities that an honors program offers to students, its admissions and retention policies determine the teaching and learning that take place within it. In defining which students will be welcome in the community of honors, administrators broadcast their values before students even apply. If grades and test scores are the criteria for admission, then students can anticipate that the program will hold such competitive rankings in high regard. The higher the required grades and scores, the more rigorous the competition that students can expect. Students should also anticipate that retention policies will reflect admissions policies and that strong academic performance as reflected in grades will be a—probably the—necessary requisite to remain in the program.

As much as admissions and retention policies are signals to students of what to expect, they are also assertions, either conscious or unconscious, of how the administrators and faculty of a program define excellence. A mix of different admissions criteria—perhaps essays, recommendations, service projects, and interviews as well as grades and scores—implies a definition of excellence that might be harder to test and so might also imply a less stringent retention policy; it might also imply that students will be part of a diverse community where more will be expected of them than good grades.

While educational philosophies and definitions of excellence matter, other complicating factors come into play: external pressures to limit or, more likely, increase the size of a program; the negative implications of low retention and graduation rates; the presence (or not) of underrepresented minorities on campus or in the region; the institutional mission; legislative mandates about in-state or out-of-state recruitment; limits on class size; and a varying availability of faculty members to teach the requisite number of courses.

Consequently, the Forum on Admissions and Retention addresses a fraught issue for any honors program or college—an issue that should ideally be examined as frequently as possible. The Forum invited this kind of examination in its Call for Papers:

> The lead essay for the Forum . . . is by Jerry Herron of Wayne State University. His essay—titled "Notes toward an Excellent Marxist-Elitist Honors Admissions Policy"—argues for

quantifiable measurements of the interconnections between admissions policies and other data such as retention and graduation rates or GPAs as a means to demonstrate the value-added of honors. Contributions to the Forum may—but need not—respond to Herron's essay or the issues he addresses.

Questions that Forum contributors might consider include: Are data available that show a significant correlation between admissions criteria and retention? Should admissions and retention criteria for honors be absolute or flexible, objective or subjective, impersonal or personal, and why? Should admissions criteria focus on academic excellence or social justice or a mixture of the two? Is the quality of an honors program determined by who gets in or by who stays in and graduates? Does a focus on measurable data in admissions and retention limit a program's potential for innovation and experimentation? What is the ideal mix of admissions criteria (e.g., SAT/ACT, GPA, extracurricular activities, letters of recommendation, personal interviews)? Should conventional academic criteria necessarily take precedence over non-academic talents in, for instance, the arts, athletics, or community service? What do admissions and retention criteria tell students about the program to which they are applying? Is using the SAT or ACT as an admissions criterion a way of shifting the burden of selection to a testing service? Is using GPA as an admissions criterion a way of shifting the burden of selection to high school teachers? How should admissions and retention criteria in honors relate to those criteria within the larger institution?

Forum essays should focus on ideas, concepts, and/or opinions related to "Admissions and Retention in Honors." Examples from one's own campus can be and usually are relevant, but essays should not simply be descriptions of "what we do at our institution."

The Forum includes five responses to the Call for Papers in addition to Herron's lead essay.

In "Notes toward an Excellent Marxist-Elitist Honors Admissions Policy," Jerry Herron conjures up ancestral preachers and car salesmen, along with Tom Wolfe and Groucho Marx, in examining how we sell the "elitist entitlement" of honors to a "flock of middle-class aspirants and strivers who wish to make their way up." Among the dizzying array of options for determining who will be chosen to enter into the honors elect, Herron describes a mathematical

formula that the Wayne State University Honors College has come up with to predict the success of applicants using data about current and past students. Having described how the college chooses students, he then describes the ritual it stages to convince the chosen flock that they have been called to a company of worthies. The task then remains to prove that the college has chosen wisely, using other possible mathematical formulas to sell the institution on the value of honors. Aided by evangelism and salesmanship, Herron argues that statistics on admissions and retention need to underpin the articles of faith in honors.

In "Assessing Success in Honors: Getting beyond Graduation Rates," Sean K. Kelly of Florida Gulf Coast University argues that graduation rates are not a good measure of a program's quality: any student who participates in honors, he suggests, gains valuable skills and opportunities whether that student completes the program or not. He writes, "If directors and deans could demonstrate that students who have 'touched' honors graduated from the university at a higher rate, accomplished more, were more fully engaged in university life, and demonstrated higher satisfaction rates with the institution than their peers who never joined honors, then honors administrators would have powerful evidence that their work promotes individual and institutional successes regardless of honors' own graduation rate." This potential area of assessment would make an interesting topic for future research.

Michael K. Cundall, Jr., of North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University addresses the question that high-achieving students and their parents often put to honors administrators about potential damage that an honors program might do to a student's undergraduate GPA and quality of life. His essay "Admissions, Retention, and Reframing the Question 'Isn't It Just More Work?'" cites research on undergraduate education showing that three factors in particular have a positive influence on student success: meaningful student-teacher relationships, peer interactions, and student expectations. These three factors are all hallmarks of honors education, Cundall argues, and thus constitute a sales pitch that honors administrators can deliver in good faith when inviting students to join their programs.

While admiring Herron's essay and appreciating his argument, Scott Carnicom of Middle Tennessee State University offers a suggestion and a caveat in "Predicting Student Success, Ameliorating Risk, and Guarding against Homogeneity in Honors." He suggests that an algorithm predicting success in honors based on retention and graduation rates should be expanded to include other factors such as gender, income, and race, and that such an algorithm should be used to predict the risk of failure as well as success; in this way, honors administrators could intervene to prevent potential problems for high-risk honors students as soon as they are admitted to the program.

His caveat is that measuring success only in terms of program completion reflects the current national obsession with this measurement alone, exclusive of academic integrity, and can lead to competition among institutions and programs to graduate students at any cost while also sacrificing access and diversity.

Annmarie Guzy echoes Carnicom's caveat in "The Confidence Game in Honors Admissions and Retention," where she points out that decreasing the requirements for completion of the honors program at the University of South Alabama resulted in a substantial increase in the percentage of students who completed the program. She also argues that students as well as honors administrators are masters of the numbers game and that they use all the admissions formulas to jockey themselves into richer scholarships by, for instance, taking the ACT or SAT tests over and over again. Guzy makes the case that qualitative judgments based on expertise in teaching are at least as trustworthy as data-driven assessments, which are easily manipulated in order to appease and impress higher administrations.

Jeffrey A. Portnoy takes Guzy's argument one step further and argues that data-driven definitions of success in honors impede rather than advance the cause of recruiting, retaining, and, most importantly, educating students. In "An Honors Koan: Selling Water by the River," Portnoy uses as an example the multi-campus honors program he directs at Georgia Perimeter College to illustrate the primacy of integrity and institution-wide support, not data, in maintaining a healthy and viable program and in providing the best service to students in the context of a unique institution. Since all institutions and programs are unique, algorithms do not just miss the point but sabotage it, the point being that, in good times and especially hard times, integrity, credibility, trust, and service trump data every time. In Portnoy's metaphor, drinking from the river of honors should not require a measuring cup but rather an open invitation to drink deeply.

Four of the five research essays in this issue address the theme of the Forum, focusing on recruitment, admissions, retention, and graduation.

We begin with an essay that answers Jerry Herron's challenge to find a formula for predicting retention and to use this formula as the basis for admissions criteria. In "Improving Retention and Fit by Honing an Honors Admissions Model," Patricia Joanne Smith and John Thomas Vitus Zagurski describe a statistical analysis they performed at the University of Central Arkansas to determine which admissions criteria are the best predictors of retention and high GPA. Their research showed that at UCA "[n]o single variable meaningfully predicted retention," but the high school GPA seemed to have a high predictive relationship with freshman GPA while the ACT had no predictive relationship. Their research also affirmed the value of qualitative evaluations.

The UCA Schedler Honors College adjusted its admissions formula to reflect the research findings, resulting in both a higher retention rate and an increase in diversity.

In "Propensity Score Analysis of an Honors Program's Contribution to Students' Retention and Graduation Outcomes," Robert R. Keller and Michael G. Lacy follow up on the earlier research of Charlie Slavin et al., Frank Shushok, and John Cosgrove by employing a type of statistical analysis used most often to study the medical outcomes for treated and untreated patients. Using this Propensity Score Analysis, the authors studied the retention and graduation outcomes for honors and non-honors students at Colorado State University, concluding that "participation in the honors program was associated with meaningful increases in the proportion of these students who returned for their second year at the university and in the proportion of them who graduated within a four-, five-, or six-year period."

Lynne Goodstein and Patricia Szarek of the University of Connecticut target the issue of retention and graduation rates in "They Come But Do They Finish? Program Completion for Honors Students at a Major Public University, 1998–2010." In addition to providing academic enrichment, institutions typically expect honors programs to attract and retain high-achieving students, but previous research has generally not yielded encouraging results on completion rates in honors programs and colleges. Goodstein and Szarek present a longitudinal study of honors at their institution to suggest the impact of programmatic changes on improved rates of completion, identifying specific factors such as honors housing, mentorships, micro-communities, and higher admission standards that seem to have boosted retention and graduation rates in honors.

In "Factors Influencing Honors College Recruitment, Persistence, and Satisfaction at an Upper-Midwest Land Grant University," Timothy J. Nichols and Kuo-Liang "Matt" Chang present the results of a survey they conducted of 138 honors students at South Dakota State University. The survey focused on why students decided to join the honors college, why they stayed in it, what challenges they faced in trying to complete it, how satisfied they were with it, and how demographics affected their responses. The authors present and discuss the data they collected and describe how their honors college has used the results of the study to develop or adjust policies and practices such as recruitment strategies, mentoring opportunities, and curricular and extracurricular offerings.

In the final research essay of this issue, "Real-Life Solutions to Real-Life Problems: Collaborating with a Non-Profit Foundation to Engage Honors Students in Applied Research," Emily Stark argues for the value of applied research projects within an honors curriculum. She suggests that, in addition to the benefits of independent research that are part of virtually all honors

curricula, applied projects can both provide a service to community organizations and show students the immediate relevance of their efforts. Using as an example the collaboration between the Minnesota State University, Mankato, Honors Program and Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation, Stark demonstrates how such projects can be structured within a traditional honors program to benefit both students and the community.