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The Confidence Game in Honors Admissions and Retention

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In "Notes toward an Excellent Marxist-Elitist Honors Admissions Policy," Jerry Herron argues that "a well-conceived admissions policy tells us much more than whom to recruit; it becomes the basis for a quantitative defense of what we do with data and puts a convincing dollar value on the good evangel of excellence." As a rhetorician who worked at an advertising agency in a previous life, I can certainly acknowledge the value of promoting a product, whether we are pitching our programs to prospective students or performing feats of statistical prestidigitation for upper administration. I am also, however, skeptical about administration's increasing overreliance upon quantitative data to the exclusion of all other assessment measures. True, numbers are easy to review and use for longitudinal and latitudinal comparisons, but do they effect authentic, productive change in our institutional and educational practices, or do we merely rotate instruments or revise existing ones until we achieve the desired results?

Even when we put honest effort into designing and adhering to accurate assessment instruments, we can admit that, while we should not doctor or outright falsify the results to meet administration's expectations, we can cherry-pick numbers to present the product in the best light. Students know how to play these statistical shell games as well, calculating which classes produce the best GPAs and what test scores are needed for prestigious schools and scholarships. Herron relates the ACT x GPA equation as a useful predictor for student success in his program, but I wonder how many times the students took the test to finally achieve the desired score. For example, would a student who finally earned a 30 on his fifth attempt be as successful as the student who earned a 30 on her only attempt? Administration may be satisfied with attractive numbers that they can sell to their constituencies, but those of us with our boots on the ground in the classrooms need something a little more substantial to guide our honors students to successful program completion.

**CON • FI • DENCE, *ADJECTIVE*:
OF, RELATING TO, OR ADEPT AT SWINDLING
BY FALSE PROMISES**

Honors administrators may still see national test scores as predictors of a student's academic success in college, but more students and parents now see scores as predictors of a student's financial success in the scholarship hunt. In my fall 2012 honors composition course, every student had taken the ACT at least twice, and two students had taken it *seven* times. They reminded me that our honors scholarship amounts increase in correspondence with ACT scores and that involvement in the honors program can reap more financial rewards than the general presidential scholarship, as seen in Figure 1 below.

Applying some visual rhetoric to these figures, I can create a bar chart, adjust the labels, change the horizontal and vertical aspects, and alter the zero point on the y-axis to further highlight the correlation of ACT scores to honors scholarships. As seen in Figure 2 below, I have not changed the data but have created a *USA Today*-style graphic that emphasizes to students the monetary value of their ACT scores. Contrary to the old saying, the numbers do not speak for themselves. We decide how to present the numbers and thus how to create the desired perceptions for our prospective students and their parents and, in turn, for administration as well.

**CON • FI • DENCE, *NOUN*:
THE QUALITY OR STATE OF BEING CERTAIN**

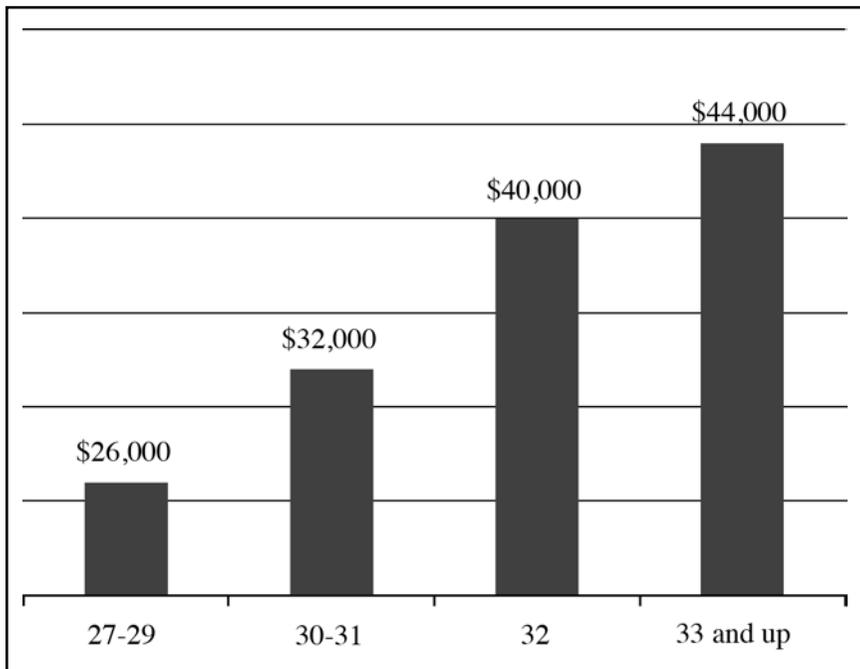
In fall 2006, our program was streamlined in an attempt to increase retention rates. The total program requirements were reduced from thirty to twenty-four hours, and specific honors classes in English, math, and computer science were replaced with electives and a sequence of one-credit-hour "honors experience" courses. In addition, the community service requirement was eliminated. Some students and faculty complained that the heart of the program was being gutted, but the graduation rate did increase from approximately 36% to 48% under the new requirements.

When the honors composition course was eliminated as a program requirement for the sake of expedience in retention, I feared that enrollment would suffer. Aside from one semester, however, in which only eight students registered for my section, enrollment has remained near fifteen—or more if demand is high enough. Granted, much of the demand is generated by our university's freshman composition exemption policy: students are exempt from EH 101 with an ACT English score of 27, SAT verbal of 550 or higher, AP Language and Composition score of 4 or 5, or IB score of 5, but the only exemption from EH 102 is an IB degree with a score of 5.

Figure 1: Scholarship Amounts at the University of South Alabama

ACT score	Annual	Total	Scholarship type
33 or higher	\$11,000	\$44,000	Honors
			Presidential
32	\$10,000	\$40,000	Honors
	\$9,000	\$36,000	Presidential
30–31	\$8,000	\$32,000	Honors
			Presidential
27–29	\$6,500	\$26,000	Honors
28–29	\$5,000	\$20,000	Presidential

Source: <<http://www.southalabama.edu>>

Figure 2: Bar Chart for Honors Scholarship Amounts at the University of South Alabama

In recruiting students to my section of honors composition, I could, on one hand, readily describe the qualitative benefits of my course. We develop not only skills in university-level research and argumentation but also familiarity with discipline-specific research topics and resources as students investigate topics related to their prospective majors. Assignments such as an annotated

bibliography also introduce students to components needed for the undergraduate research program, the junior-year honors prospectus seminar, and the required senior honors thesis project.

On the other hand, I could tout some simple frequencies related to program retention. While approximately 43% of incoming honors freshmen have graduated from the program since its inception in fall 1999, 57% of students who took my honors composition course completed the program during the same period. For those who began the program under the new requirements, the figure increases to 62% as compared to the overall rate of 48%. This analysis does not take into account student reflections on the efficacy of the course, other coursework they have taken, professors who taught the courses, experiences with advising and thesis completion, and so on. Of course, these reports are not as easily digestible and marketable as “Hey, you’ll have a 14% better chance of graduating from honors if you take my class!” I have never taken this approach, though, because, truth be told, I find it neither seemly nor collegial.

**CON • FI • DENCE, *NOUN*:
FAITH OR BELIEF THAT ONE WILL ACT IN A
RIGHT, PROPER, OR EFFECTIVE WAY**

Most prospective honors students are adept at playing the numbers game, savvy about permutations of test scores and opportunities to boost GPA by taking certain classes and avoiding others. When I review applications, I find that applicants’ numbers are relatively equal, so I dutifully check those boxes on the review sheet and then move on to give more attention to recommendation letters and essays. Are the letters rote-form correspondence, or has the teacher taken the time and effort to support a truly special student? Similarly, has the student generated a flavorless, one-size-fits-all, five-paragraph essay filled to the brim with test prep vocabulary words, or does the piece evince creative and critical thinking beyond what the college prep coaches have drilled into their graduating seniors?

I also enjoy participating in the interview stage, when you can pull the student away from the miasma of numbers. Naturally, some interviewees are extremely introverted and occasionally paralyzed with nervousness or, conversely, condescending or overly polished, characteristics that are not easily quantifiable but can nevertheless indicate potential fit with a program. Our honors students are involved in all aspects of campus life from Greek organizations and various honoraries to athletics and student government, so I regularly ask interviewees what types of service activities they would be interested in leading on campus. In the end, I ask myself if I would want this student in my class. After twenty-plus years of teaching honors composition,

I have learned to trust my instincts and look beyond ACT scores and GPA for characteristics of potential success in my class.

Even as data-driven assessment continues to infiltrate every aspect of university life, I have the relative luxury, as a faculty member rather than an administrator, of not having to deal daily with the quantitative analysis of goals and objectives at every level. Despite repeated attempts to measure writing instruction by scoring readability levels, standardized tests, portfolios, common essays, and the like, I am like many faculty members in seeing the results as simply a way to satisfy administration rather than as any true reflection of instructional quality or student performance. Similarly, some faculty sense an increasing distrust coming down from higher administrators, who insist on ever-multiplying and sometimes redundant assessment measures at every turn along with concomitant nagging about mandatory participation, deadlines, and so on.

I am willing to trust all of these data-driven assessments, including Herron's admissions and retention equations, but please trust that I, as an expert with almost three decades of experience in post-secondary honors education, will be professional in my efforts to recruit, educate, and retain students who will fit well with and reflect well upon our honors program even if what I do is not readily quantifiable.

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