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2014

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Avery, Lisa, "Public-Private Honors Success at Community Colleges of Spokane" (2014). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council –Online Archive*. 418.  
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# Public-Private Honors Success at Community Colleges of Spokane

LISA AVERY

COMMUNITY COLLEGES OF SPOKANE

Many community college honors programs have seen steep budget cuts in recent years, affecting the number of honors students that can be served at the 1,200 community colleges in the United States. Many excellent, long-standing honors programs at community colleges have recently struggled with enrollment and resources. NCHC-member colleges have often described their challenges in filling honors classes and their ongoing struggles with resourcing honors programming. Especially at the community-college level, honors programs in the United States are often being asked to do more with less.

These developments are certainly true in Spokane, Washington, where, prior to working with American Honors, our community colleges had struggled for many years to provide substantial honors offerings. In 2011, Spokane had approximately 16,000 full-time equivalent students enrolled in its two accredited community colleges, but fewer than twenty students per year enrolled in honors courses, which have existed in some form for over twenty years. At Spokane Falls Community College (SFCC), one of the colleges in the Spokane District, an average of twelve students per year enrolled in a section of an honors anthropology seminar. No other honors courses were offered. After a long planning process undertaken by faculty and a subsequent task force, SFCC offered four honors seminars in 2011–12, enrolling an average of only 7.5 students per section. Given recent state budget cuts, these class sizes were fiscally unsustainable, even in only standalone honors courses rather than a full-scale program. With only a handful of sections offered, the administrative and clerical oversight necessary for large-scale growth was not feasible. Honors-specific student services, including extensive transfer coaching and a full menu of coursework, were also not practical.

As a result of our public-private partnership, however, CCS has been able to dedicate additional staff time and the resources of American Honors to plan and recruit for the honors program. Previous CCS honors efforts did not include a large-scale recruiting effort, which has been one of the most immediate and tangible benefits of the partnership. Since working with American Honors, Spokane's honors programming has grown tremendously, expanding our ability to serve more honors-caliber students and to serve them better. After a

pilot program in 2012–13, the current academic year saw 147 honors students enrolled at Spokane’s two community colleges. Over 700 applied for seats in this competitive program, suggesting that far more honors students than had been drawn to our honors offerings. Retention has been high so far: 92% of the fall 2013 students progressed into winter 2014. Their average GPA at admission was 3.6. Average SAT scores, too, were higher than among most college students: 542 (reading), 554 (math), and 529 (writing) <<https://professionals.collegeboard.com/testing/sat-reasoning/scores/averages>>. SAT data are only available for 60% of incoming Spokane honors students, suggesting that many did not initially see themselves as headed to four-year colleges and universities.) The high number of applications, despite the higher cost of participating in honors, suggests that many high-caliber students may consider community college honors options if they are available. The cost of full-time enrollment in American Honors at CCS is \$6,700, including fees, which is approximately 40% higher than regular CCS tuition but is still lower than the cost of the closest and most affordable four-year public institution in our state.

Data indicate that the AH student services model has helped Spokane’s students succeed. From the day students enroll, they are paired with an honors mentor, provided by American Honors, who remains their single point of contact throughout their duration in the program. The honors mentors are hired by American Honors, but the Spokane team participates in interviews and provides input into staff selection. All honors mentors have had experience in the education field, and most have come from a background similar to community college students. Through a structured program, the honors mentors provide academic, personal, and intensive transfer support in a ratio of less than 100:1, which is far lower than the ratio of the standard services at CCS and many other community colleges; data from the 2011 NACADA National Survey of Academic Advising show a median student caseload of 441 students for each community college advisor (ctd. by Robbins). To understand their students’ needs, the honors advisors touch base with faculty to identify what additional guidance, academic support, or skill training is appropriate for individual students. In last year’s pilot student survey, 97% of students rated AH mentoring/coaching the best or better than they had ever received.

Admissions data also suggest that additional high-aptitude students have come to Spokane Community College and Spokane Falls Community College as their first-choice destinations, largely due to the excellent advertising of academic programming with the assistance of the American Honors marketing staff. These students have enrolled in courses ranging from Honors Calculus to Honors Literature, with an emphasis on service learning and civic engagement infused throughout. Faculty members have had the opportunity to participate in development and training opportunities that are not within the colleges’

budgets. These opportunities have included conference sessions with leaders from the Khan Academy, Community College Research Center, and more. Honors students have benefited from smaller classes (the average class size in fall 2013 was 10.7), heightened emphasis on selective transfer institutions, and financial literacy about the costs of completing their four-year degree.

At Spokane, while American Honors helps with logistics, our faculty teach our classes, using our curriculum. Honors assignments, assessments, and expectations have been added into courses using a rigorous, faculty-driven curriculum process. Five honors outcomes, modeled after the NCHC outcomes, have been approved by our faculty as the lens through which they analyze honors courses. Guiding principles and program-level are designed to maintain academic freedom, overall program quality, and student excellence.

### **Honors Outcomes Community Colleges of Spokane**

Demonstrate effective written communication skills and oral communication skills.

Exhibit ability to consistently locate, analyze, evaluate, synthesize and apply a broad range of material.

Demonstrate integrity of thought regarding how scholars construct problems and formulate hypotheses; research those problems and draw conclusions about them; and/or understand how creative artists approach the creative process and produce an original work.

Demonstrate independent and critical thought, including the ability to use knowledge and logic when discussing an issue or an idea, while considering the consequences of their ideas, for themselves, for others, and for society.

Successfully participate in community engagement appropriate to the course and curriculum.

This public-private partnership has, like many partnerships, included bumps in the road. Spokane's colleges are on a quarter system, presenting complications in partnerships with the 71.2% of colleges/universities on semesters (Smith). Perhaps more notably, some believe that this competitive program challenges the community college emphasis on open access. Further, some faculty members do not wish to teach for a program involving a private partner. Our administration and union agree that they should not be forced to do so; Spokane faculty who are uncomfortable working with a private partner or who do not wish to teach in a competitive program are not assigned honors

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courses. While Community Colleges of Spokane would not be able to offer the size, scope, and strength of honors programming we have without the support of our private partner, the willing and excellent contributions of our resident honors faculty are just as important.

The honors partnership has brought other less tangible benefits to Spokane's community colleges. CCS is now home to a more sizeable cohort of students who are active leaders on campus and in the community, improving the campus climate at our colleges. Our honors partner has also aggressively recruited diverse groups of new students, honors and non-honors alike. The Board of Trustees and CCS administration have started to place greater emphasis on honors programming and have formally recognized American Honors at CCS (AH@CCS) as a core element of our academic programming. American Honors has provided additional support for honors administration and for honors course offerings that was not feasible when operating independent and small-scale honors programming at our colleges in the past. Finally, the presence of additional honors students on campus helps our colleges with completion statistics, and the high-touch honors coaching helps push the students to complete their degrees more quickly and more efficiently. Given the financial pressures on students and their families, expeditious completion is an important accomplishment.

Data from our pilot cohort support the positive, though early, results of AH@CCS. In Spokane, 83% of the eighteen American Honors graduates from our first class were accepted at their top-choice universities, which included Stanford, Georgetown, Emory, USC, Rutgers, Michigan, Vanderbilt, and Cornell. Thanks to scholarships and grants, those transfer students paid an average of only 17% of the tuition at their destination institutions. These transfer data, combined with the 92% retention rate, suggest positive outcomes for the program so far in Spokane.

Community colleges are known for offering many choices to students. At times this student self-determination has been criticized, as in recent studies lamenting low graduation rates and the possible correlation with a "bewildering array" of options given to community college students (Jaggars & Fletcher, cited in Mangan). Students can enroll in non-degree, career/technical, enrichment, and transfer programs, among others, given the wide breadth of community college options. Many also believe that our colleges need to do more to position themselves as first-choice destinations for larger numbers of high-achieving or high-potential students, especially those seeking to avoid or minimize crushing student and parent loan debt. Often, these students can go further and faster in their education when starting at a community college, which in almost all cases are more affordable for them.

Considerable research has shown that low-income students tend to “undermatch,” (Hoxby & Avery 2), and two-year honors programs can provide the rigor to offset undermatching along with the support necessary for many first-generation students. Research on undermatching suggests that rigor may be better for students, who are most likely to graduate when they attend the most academically demanding college or university that admits them (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson A28–29). Accordingly, helping high-achieving and/or high-potential community college students find a more rigorous transfer destination can help increase graduation rates, particularly if scholarship aid is part of the admission package. In Spokane, providing such help has been at the heart of the American Honors effort, and our students have realized the academic as well as financial benefits.

Students today do have a “bewildering array” of choices to make, with no clear guarantees of completion, transfer, or postgraduate employment. Giving community college students an honors option, even when it is beyond the scope of our current budget and staffing, is crucial in today’s higher education marketplace. In Spokane, our leadership believes that a public-private honors program is one of the choices we would like to offer our students. Perhaps this option is not for everyone; it may not be a good fit for all institutions, all students, or all faculty. However, in Spokane, the transfer data, combined with student satisfaction indices and parent feedback, indicate that our honors partnership has been a successful one so far.

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