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Why Honors is a Hard Sell in the Community College

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The proposed honors program at our two-year community and technical college hangs in limbo. At the college president's request and after attending the 2013 NCHC conference in New Orleans, we developed a comprehensive honors program framework and spent the spring semester of 2014 sharing it with units across the college for discussion and feedback. The response was overwhelmingly positive. Our audiences suggested ways the program could leverage ongoing initiatives to meet strategic college goals and enrich current programming and opportunities for students, both in the technical and liberal arts areas. Moreover, the college saw the initiative as an opportunity to build a unique niche for itself since no other two-year colleges in the state of Minnesota offer a comprehensive honors program of this nature. Despite the many benefits of this proposed program, the administration hesitated to go forward.

The administrative indecision around our proposed program is but one manifestation of how honors education threatens to subvert larger narratives about the purpose of community colleges. Certainly many forces—structural,

financial, and institutional—come together to impact the development of and investment in a new academic program. However, beyond the constraints all institutions face—financial pressures, enrollment issues, diminishing public support, and individual institutional characteristics—prominent contemporary discourse on community colleges seems to define their mission as incompatible with honors education. Two-year colleges have been framed as the locus of remedial classes and “workforce skills training,” not as sites of the academic and professional opportunity sought out by those in the more privileged social strata. Given this assumption about the role of community colleges, they have also been deemed the place of choice for a student population for whom academic and career expectations are low, students without the cultural capital of a middle-class upbringing. However, not only is honors education particularly suited to disrupt this narrative but, at its best, destabilizes it by recognizing all students’ potential and—through mentoring, academic engagement, and high expectations—enabling them to realize their potential.

THE MISSION OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

The present status of community colleges developed concurrently with major shifts in the economy and education sectors. Prior to the end of World War II, four-year college completion rates in the United States were just 6% for men and 4% for women (National Center for Education Statistics). In the post-war period, good jobs that could support families in a middle-class lifestyle were available to those with at most a high school diploma. The ranks of the college-educated began to increase, however, as returning GIs used their benefits to further their educations. The Truman Commission Report of 1947 further spurred access to higher education by advocating the establishment of community colleges: locally based, open-access institutions of higher education that would democratize access and promote an educated citizenry. Further, a college degree started to become more of a necessity as, beginning in the 1970s, the shift from a manufacturing to a service economy resulted in the loss of readily available, well-paying, union jobs that did not require post-secondary education. Today, however, an increasing number of jobs in all categories require degrees, and young people are told that they have essentially no future unless they obtain degrees and credentials. More and more, the focus on going to college is not to be well-educated but rather to be equipped to get any job at all. At the same time that these huge shifts in the economy have been occurring, college tuition has increased tremendously, even at state

colleges and universities, making community colleges for many students the most affordable institutions of higher education. For this reason, community colleges can be, and for a small segment of their student bodies are, a place for students to start a college degree and from which to transfer to a four-year school, possibly then pursuing graduate study in their chosen field.

However, while 80% of two-year college students express a desire to earn a bachelor's degree, only 20% actually transfer, and only half of them will have earned a bachelor's degree after six years (Altstadt, Schmidt, and Couturier 3). For the overwhelming majority of community college students, their institutions are not an entry point to a bachelor's degree, let alone graduate or professional study, but rather a way station on the road to low-level employment. Industry efforts to save costs by deskilling positions have necessitated that community colleges train workers for discrete job skills such as medical coding and charting. Businesses only want to hire individuals who already possess the specific skills that in the past might have been taught in an orientation period or on-the-job training. Even though this training has been outsourced at worker and taxpayer expense to both publicly supported community colleges and private technical schools, industry still claims it would be able to hire more employees if only they were better trained by our educational institutions. Consequently, political leaders have responded with legislation to fund job training, and community colleges have been seen as the logical place in which to locate these efforts (see, e.g., the Community College to Career Fund Act legislation, Senate Bill 1269, introduced in 2013).

FORECLOSED OPPORTUNITY

The problem with a narrow focus on skills training, however, is that, while well-intentioned, rather than opening educational opportunity this focus has resulted in a system of higher education stratified by race and class that tracks poorer students, first-generation college students, and racial and ethnic minorities into job-skill programs leading to low-level jobs with little opportunity for advancement and economic security. As Hanson explains,

When two-year colleges shifted their focus away from preparing students for continued studies and the baccalaureate, our education network became strictly hierarchical. Top-ranked schools continue to serve the sons and daughters of the privileged. These students continue to receive educations in subjects such as music, history, and physics—the finest and highest achievements of humanity. At

the same time, lower-middle class students attend two-year schools where they learn a set of skills of temporary use to businesses. (Hanson 1–2)

Not only are these students being channeled to community colleges as the presumed choice for their higher education, but the programs to which they then have access and the type of education to which they are exposed and for which they are seen as best suited are restrictive. In effect, this channeling amounts to a continuation of the documented tracking to which these students are subjected throughout their educations starting in elementary school. In addition, as the voices of the powerful—our legislators and even the President—join the push to make community colleges the new locus for job-training programs, thinking they’re doing the right thing, they further reinforce the hierarchy, denigrating education for students of fewer means as “vocationalism fram[es] almost all educational policy for nontraditional students” (Rendón 196). She continues, “If all the community college emphasizes is the opportunity to learn vocational skills at the expense of diminishing other possibilities and diminishing student futures, it reproduces a class structure” (198).

Thus, forces both at the larger societal level and within the institution itself work to maintain the status quo of inequality for the lower-income, first-generation students who make up the greater part of our student body. As Pressler notes, “The correlation between the degree of autonomy in an occupation and the class status it confers is striking. All else being equal, the more routinized and supervised the job, the lower its status and income” (38). Through low-skill vocational training programs, community colleges restrict class mobility and fail to function as the educational steppingstone they were originally intended to be.

In this stratified system, honors education does not fit into the picture of the community college mission. First, students tracked to community colleges are channeled there precisely because they are not seen to have the potential required to benefit from the liberal education and advanced scientific training available at four-year colleges and universities, and thus they are not considered “honors material.” Second, honors education is seen as irrelevant to the discrete work skills promoted in the job-training programs that are currently a primary focus of community colleges. This “lack of fit” between honors and the *raison d’être* of the community college today becomes a latent factor in decision-making about honors-related programming. Unlike budget constraints that appear in black and white on balance sheets and other concrete

issues such as space and staffing that are more readily visible, this uncomfortable disjunction between honors and the institution's charge is harder to name and thus to account for in deliberations regarding priorities and the viability of launching a new program.

SUBVERTING EDUCATIONAL STRATIFICATION

At its best, honors education at community colleges has the potential to be subversive and to reject the educational stratification inherent in the current model along with the resultant tracking by race and class. This stratification begins in grade schools whereby white students and those more affluent are likelier to be identified for gifted programming while students of color and poor students flow into special education and are disproportionately subject to disciplinary measures (Codrington and Fairchild; Fenning and Rose; Rinn and Cobane).

Instead, honors programs can level the playing field between more privileged students and the typical community college student, who faces work/school conflicts, low family support, reduced access to paid tutors and prep courses, and low expectations of success (Moritz). Honors education seeks out the potential in all students, recognizing that past bad experiences in school do not necessarily reflect students' capabilities. As Rendón notes, "many of these students, often labeled 'nontraditional,' do not consider themselves to be college material, have never made an 'A' in their lives, and have been retained in high school" (196). A recent study at a large community college on the East Coast found that 60% of honors program students initially placed into at least one developmental course (Trucker). In addition, "considerable educational literature documents the struggles of first generation college students with the world of higher education—not with their coursework, but with the culture and expectations of the academic milieu" (Pressler 37). Honors pushes back against these societal expectations and structural barriers that would deprive our students of the educational opportunities and high expectations to which they are entitled regardless of where they come from.

Indeed, recognition of the power of honors education is becoming more widespread as honors programs are growing at community colleges. Not every honors program fulfills this mission, however. To disrupt educational stratification and see all students as having potential, a program must do more than just accept those who already have a track record of academic success; rather, it must include intentional recruitment, mentoring, and coordination

with initiatives throughout the college that address achievement gaps and meet the needs of underrepresented students. By creating a pipeline through which to move students from developmental classes into college-level and honors coursework and beyond that to transfer, the promise of honors can be fulfilled. Such is the comprehensive program we have envisioned and proposed to our administration.

A CATALYST FOR SOCIAL MOBILITY

The potential for subversion that honors represents goes beyond the educational experience. The role of education in reproducing the social hierarchy is well known. Compared to students who choose to attend a community college, students at elite schools are more likely to draw on the cultural capital of a middle-class background such as private preschool, enrichment activities, books, museums, travel—all taken for granted (Pressler; Digby). This cultural capital, in turn, allows them to leverage their elite education in the labor market with lifelong opportunities for careers that offer security, autonomy, and vertical mobility. Lacking these resources, community college students enter the labor market and their roles as citizens at a significant disadvantage, yet, as Pressler explains, “These intellectual experiences and dispositions can be instilled through an honors education so that students who did not ‘inherit’ them can acquire them and use them to climb the class ladder” (38). In this way, honors is subversive of the class hierarchy because it provides students the tools for social mobility:

Helping our students climb the class ladder is an important latent function of honors education. So is helping our students realize how smart and talented they are despite their society’s assumption that the more something costs, the better it must be. So is encouraging them to develop their own ideas and explore means of living up to and benefiting from their full potential. (Weiner 23)

Thus, as honors seeks to nurture and develop students who do not come to us with the resources and social capital of a middle-class background and who may have been poorly served by educational institutions in the past, it provides them with the social capital to access opportunity and class mobility.

A colleague who directs an honors program at a large community college shared with us the story of one of her graduates. “David” had been unsuccessful in high school, but excelled at the college, joined the honors program, and went on to earn his BA *magna cum laude*, followed by an MA and PhD, all in

physics. After earning his degrees, he held several prestigious positions and recently founded his own consulting company. He frequently returns to his community college alma mater, serving as a role model to current students, supporting honors scholarships, speaking at events, and offering students paid internships at his company. Stories such as this illustrate the important role honors can play at the community college in changing the trajectory of individual lives.

Honors also has the potential to subvert a dominant current of thought on the position of community colleges in the contemporary higher education landscape. At the same time, it can challenge the resulting stratification by race and class within these institutions and within the larger society. Ironically, honors education has the potential to enact this subversion against the backdrop of the community college rhetoric of “opportunity,” which, while purporting to offer training and jobs, too often constrains life chances and forecloses access to the education and cultural capital that provide real opportunity for advancement and full participation in our society. Indeed, honors education at the community college can constitute a radical project of democratization, bringing the institution back to its roots as originally intended: a community-based, open-access institution (President’s Commission on Higher Education). Fully developed honors programs can embody many of the objectives designed to achieve just such a result. The 2013 Century Foundation report, *Bridging the Higher Education Divide*, calls for destratifying the community college by attracting “talented students from a range of economic and racial backgrounds” and facilitating transfer to four-year institutions; it further suggests that honors programs provide an important vehicle to realize these goals.

CONCLUSION

We began this paper by presenting the paradox of indecision regarding a proposed honors program at our college. Our institution is typical in that its experience is greatly shaped by the many issues we’ve discussed. Tuition at two-year colleges statewide has risen as the state’s contribution to the cost of a student’s education has decreased by half. At the same time, the stratification described above is visible at our institution. While the proportion of first-generation college students among our student body has hovered around 61% for the past decade, students of color have increased from 18% to 36% of the student body in that same period, an increase that is all the more noteworthy given that our college is situated in a largely white, suburban area. A sense

that investing in an honors program might be a dramatic and perhaps out-of-character move for the institution arises in part from recent investments and special initiatives in remediation and technical programs at the college. The pervasive notion that honors programs are “elitist,” associated no doubt with the equally misconceived idea that they are relevant only to liberal arts students and not students in technical programs, magnifies the sense that a comprehensive honors program belongs in a four-year baccalaureate program rather than a combined community and technical college.

Thus, our institutional environment is a microcosm of educational and societal stratification and assumptions that job training and students for whom we have lower expectations belong in our institutions while students with bright futures will go elsewhere. Against this backdrop, as counterintuitive as the discussion above may make it seem, the best antidote is precisely a fully realized honors program that functions as a magnet within the community and promotes the kind of economic and racial integration that holds promise for all students by opening opportunity and increasing life chances.

CODA

After initially submitting this paper, we learned that our college administration has decided to move forward with the honors program. We are pleased that they recognize the transformative potential that is honors.

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