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AP, Dual Enrollment, and the Survival of Honors Education

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At the NCHC annual conferences, in publications, and on the discussion list, honors educators frequently compare admissions criteria for individual programs and colleges, including minimum ACT and SAT scores, high school coursework and GPAs, and AP and IB credits and scores. In light of the seismic issues NCHC has faced over the past two decades—significant restructuring of governance, establishment of a central office, the accreditation debate—matters of admissions criteria and freshmen with incoming credits seem mundane, but a new admissions crisis has begun to emerge in the honors community. In an increasing number of states, legislatures are mandating uniform minimum AP and dual enrollment credits that public colleges and universities must accept, and consequently the honors students we have admitted based in part on their willingness to take on challenging coursework such as AP classes are now struggling to find enough liberal-arts-based honors electives to complete an honors program.

Neither parents nor state legislatures want to continue paying the ever-escalating costs of higher education, so fast-tracking students through a

bachelor's degree program in three years has become particularly attractive. Reports of freshmen coming into public institutions with 30–60 credit hours are becoming more frequent. The intensely competitive twenty-first-century high school recruitment process readily exploits parents' tuition fears by hard-selling AP and IB programs and dual enrollment, touting their "Best High School" rankings in *U.S. News & World Report*. For example, I learned from students in my fall 2014 and fall 2015 Honors Composition courses that one local high school is now paying students \$100 per test for simply taking each of the four core AP tests, regardless of score, and thus improving the school's "tests taken" rating. The students confessed that they were not as concerned about their scores as they were about getting paid \$400. In turn, the schools claim that they will not only rigorously prepare students for their schools of choice but also save parents a great deal of money along the way.

The legislative movement toward reducing tuition costs through fast-tracking accelerated markedly in 2015, when states such as Virginia, Texas, and Illinois enacted key pieces of legislation in rapid-fire succession. According to the Education Commission of the States (ECS) website, which serves as a database for education initiatives in the U.S., the dates, titles, and summaries of these laws are as follows:

Virginia, March 23, 2015—Uniform Policy for Granting Undergraduate Credit for AP, A/AS, IB, and CLEP Examinations (H.B. 1336)

Requires the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV), in consultation with the governing board of each public institution of higher education, to establish a uniform policy for granting undergraduate course credit to entering freshman students who have taken one or more Advanced Placement, Cambridge Advanced (A/AS), College-Level Examination Program (CLEP), or International Baccalaureate examinations. ("State Legislation: High School—Advanced Placement")

Texas, May 23, 2015—Prohibiting Limits on Number of Dual Credit Courses/Hours a Public High School Student May Enroll In (H.B. 505)

Prohibits regulation from limiting the number of dual credit courses or hours a student may enroll in each semester or academic year (or while in high school), or limiting the grade

levels at which a high school student may be eligible to enroll in a dual credit course. Repeals statutory provision that limited a student from enrolling in more than three courses at a junior college if the student's high school is outside the junior college's service district. ("State Legislation: High School—Dual/Concurrent Enrollment")

Texas, June 3, 2015—Minimum AP Score for Postsecondary Course Credit (H.B. 1992)

Prohibits an institution of higher education from requiring an Advanced Placement (AP) exam score above 3 for granting lower-division course credit unless the institution's chief academic officer determines, based on evidence, that a higher score on the exam is necessary to indicate a student is sufficiently prepared to be successful in a more advanced course for which the lower-division course is a prerequisite. ("State Legislation: High School—Advanced Placement")

Illinois, August 13, 2015—Recognition of Advanced Placement Exam Scores at Postsecondary Institutions (H.B. 3428)

Beginning with the 2016–2017 academic year, requires that a score of 3 or higher on an AP exam be accepted for postsecondary credit by all public two- and four-year institutions. Directs each institution to determine for each test whether credit will be granted for electives, general education requirements, or major requirements, and the AP exam scores required to grant credit for those purposes. Before the 2016–17 academic year, directs each institution to post on its website its updated policy on granting credit for AP exam scores. ("State Legislation: Postsecondary—Postsecondary/K–12 Alignment")

The noble, pragmatic goal of this barrage of legislation is to eliminate confusion about credit acceptance and create uniform policies that apply to all state colleges and universities, but the bottom line is, of course, money. As summarized succinctly by Matthew Watkins of the *Texas Tribune*, "The aim of the new law [H.B. 1992] is to save money for students and universities. [Texas] State Rep. John Zerwas, R—Richmond, the bill's author, predicted during the session that accepting all scores of three could save Texas students up to \$160 million in tuition."

While parents and state governments are happily saving those tuition dollars, the traditional liberal arts foundation of honors education is being gutted. According to NCHC's "Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors College," the curriculum of an honors college should constitute at least 20% of a student's degree program; similarly, the "Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program" states that an honors program should be "typically 20% to 25% of the total course work and certainly no less than 15%." The average baccalaureate degree requires 120 credit hours, so the average honors component would be 24 hours, of which 9 to 12 hours might consist of lower-division honors general education electives. Due to state-mandated credit acceptance, however, incoming freshmen with high numbers of general education credit hours are having an increasingly difficult time fitting additional honors classes into their schedules in order to complete honors graduation requirements.

Incoming students have also been bombarded in high school with not only myriad standardized tests but also the cookie-cutter curricula that support the endless testing cycle. As college and university professionals, we question the equivalence of high school curricula and teacher preparation to college-level coursework, but then we find ourselves cast as elitist ogres picking on poor, put-upon high school teachers and defending an outrageously overpriced and outdated educational system. The students themselves, however, are also looking beyond the quantitative factors of their scores and credit hours toward the qualitative value of the instruction they received in the process. In preparing for the 2015 NCHC national conference, I asked my Honors Composition students to practice refutation and counterargument using the College Board's AP promotional materials. The students argued that while AP curricula and tests may be standardized, AP teaching is not. The students' concerns focused on qualification and preparation.

The College Board's website states that they have "no rigidly defined selection criteria for who can serve as an AP teacher. The College Board recommends that AP teachers have undertaken some form of professional development prior to teaching AP for the first time" ("Training AP Teachers"). The College Board provides training through fee-based workshops, summer institutes, and an annual conference, and the federal AP Incentive Program offers "teachers from low-income districts funding for professional development" ("Training AP Teachers"). According to recent findings from the Education Commission of the States, twenty-seven states provide funding for AP teachers to attend AP training, but only five states mandate that AP

teachers complete such training (“State Legislation: High School—Advanced Placement”).

While some of my Honors Composition students generally felt that their AP teachers were well-qualified, others had long lists of specific complaints: the class was taught by a student teacher, the teacher was far out of field for the subject matter, an AP Statistics class was taught by a long-term substitute PE teacher, the AP Calculus class was taught by the freshman remedial math teacher, and so on. They were also concerned about teacher preparation: good teachers were overloaded with too many AP classes, teachers were notified over the summer that they would be teaching AP in the fall and had no time to prepare, the class had none of the AP books or materials, the teacher only covered eight of twenty-two chapters in the book, teachers taught the opposite way from what was advocated by the AP study materials, and so forth.

By the end of the discussion period, the students had concluded that honors needs thinkers and problem solvers, not test takers, and that honors is based on leadership and research, neither of which is reflected in AP scores. The students reached this conclusion independently of the *JNCHC* fiftieth-anniversary issue’s “Forum on the Value of Honors,” in which editor Ada Long used her “Editor’s Introduction” to summarize the common values that university presidents find in honors programs and colleges around the country. First and foremost was critical thinking, which lead essay author James Herbert renamed “thinking and rethinking.” As Long argued, the familial nature of an honors community reinforces the opportunity for rethinking: “A big part of what makes thinking and rethinking possible is a *diverse community* in which *relationships can deepen over time*, and honors provides just such a community on most campuses” (xv, emphasis added). Through the innovative curricula and active learning programs that are essential to honors communities, students’ lives are transformed, and “[a]t the heart of this transformation are the thinking and rethinking that take place in honors programs, the habit of reflection, the widening of horizons that comes from listening to other people, listening again, and learning to listen to yourself” (Long xxi). The eighteen-year-old student who enters college with forty credit hours and immediately proceeds to focus on her major has little time for philosophical reflection or transformation, nor does she spend four years building ties in the honors community. Honors administrators have anecdotally reported attrition at honors functions as students move from lower-division honors general education courses into upper-division major coursework and thesis/capstone projects; the student who starts college as a sophomore or junior by

leapfrogging over lower-division coursework has little engagement with the honors community to begin with.

As honors educators, we no longer have the luxury of continuing the “more vs. different” debate regarding whether honors courses should be differentiated from regular courses through more assignments (frequently the default setting in honors contracts) or through qualitatively different work. If students have already covered the material in high school, and the state mandates that they must be awarded college credit for it, then calling coursework “honors” by simply offering more of the same—more papers, more tests, more books, more labs—is indeed a waste of time and tuition. We must challenge ourselves to teach something substantively different, and as Long argues, innovation is the hallmark of honors education:

Often serving as incubators of new ideas on campus, honors typically is a place on campus that experiments with new courses, projects, and pedagogies. Interdisciplinary courses, team teaching, community service projects, peer counselling, cooperative student/faculty research: often these experiences take place first in an honors program and then radiate out into the university at large. (xviii)

For the honors programs and colleges at public institutions in over a dozen states that currently have legislation for uniform minimum score and credit acceptance, we must act now to ensure those programs’ survival. For those of us in states that don’t yet have such legislation, we must prepare for that eventuality. The urgency of this situation hit home for me when my family attended a fall 2015 open house at the public high school for which my daughter is geographically zoned. Offering one of only two IB programs in a county-wide district of 60,000 students, the school structured its open house around a 75-minute Prezi that focused almost exclusively on its AP and IB signature programs; when a parent asked what programs were available for “regular kids,” one of the teachers briefly responded that they do have programs for regular kids but then immediately returned to the IB/AP script. The crown jewel of the presentation was the story of a spring 2015 graduate who had been admitted to LSU with 59 credit hours. Normally, this young man would be in the target recruitment demographic for honors, but consider the potential resistance from the student and his parents when the honors administrator explains that he would need to take and pay for an extra year or two of credit hours just to graduate from the honors program.

To meet the emerging AP/dual enrollment crisis head on, we must remind ourselves of this pioneering spirit in honors and prepare to take action in some of the following ways:

- We must promote the hallmark active learning that honors did first—and still does best—through experiential learning, study abroad, and service learning projects that expand students’ horizons beyond a standardized, test-driven, high-school-as-college curriculum.
- We must focus on CUR-based research opportunities and honors thesis/capstone projects that promote individualized mentoring, student/faculty engagement, and professional development.
- We must hold the line on smaller class sizes under competing pressures to cut costs and to grow the program, or we risk offering the same large lecture classes that students took AP to avoid in the first place.
- We must re-examine our own pedagogical practices; if we criticize teacher preparedness at the secondary level, we must tend to our own houses as well. To support the goals above, we must recruit dynamic classroom teachers and cutting-edge researchers, and in turn we must weed out those who have stopped producing, begrudgingly deign to teach undergraduates only in an honors setting, or are more interested in the perks, such as smaller class size, than the responsibilities of teaching in honors.
- We must continue to foster the community nature of honors among students and faculty, advocating for the time and space to allow the personal, professional, and intellectual exchange that leads to Herbert’s “thinking and rethinking.”

When I reflect on my own experience as an honors student in the 1980s, I remember that our Presidential Scholars Program at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville had a competitive application and interview process that strictly limited admission to twenty students per year. Presidential Scholars were automatically admitted to the Dean’s College Honors Program, to which any academically qualified student could apply, but Scholars were also awarded full scholarships for four years, were assigned honors mentors in our majors, and were given priority advising and registration. While these benefits remain common in honors today, one significant difference was that we had no required honors coursework: no honors general education electives,

no upper-division seminars, and no senior thesis project. In fact, our general education credit-hour requirement was reduced, and we were allowed to take courses outside the designated general education list to “expand our horizons.” Still, even though we did not take many core courses together, our small honors cohorts had a highly developed sense of honors community through an active student organization, retreats with faculty, fundraisers, conference travel, and various receptions, of which my favorite was always the beginning-of-year gathering at the president’s house. In the end, we were able to maintain a vibrant honors family of students and faculty mentors without a mandated honors core. While this type of program might seem antithetical to our twenty-first-century beliefs about what an honors education should be, parents and state legislators across the country are arguing that their children cannot afford to incur the debt to pay for a full four years of college, and we in the honors community cannot afford to dismiss their concerns.

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