

College and University Honors Programs in the Southern United States

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Abstract

Articles focusing on American higher education seem to be dominated by difficulty. Institutions struggle with underprepared students, skyrocketing expenses, and declining state funding. Students struggle with the costs and demands of college, not to mention the graduation hurdles. The scene on campus is not always so bleak. Colleges and universities still enroll students who excel academically. This article examines the results of a study of honors programs in the United States.

An honors program is one of many approaches used to meet the needs of the superior student at the college level (Robinson, 1997). According to Lindblad (1988), “honors is an educational program especially for high ability students” (p. 26). Cohen (1966) defined honors as “organized attempts to provide all superior students with a special and different learning experience” (p. 1). Honors programs began in America in 1922 when Frank Aydelotte instituted the pass/honors approach at Swarthmore College (Austin, 1986). The launching of Sputnik in 1957, “called attention to the need to foster talent” (Austin, 1986, p. 6), and the development of honors programs was revived. The Inter-University Committee on the Superior Student (ICSS), founded by Joseph W. Cohen (1966), brought about a “systematic, coordinated effort” (p. 9) to broaden honors programs to large public and private universities and to make these programs available in the freshman year. The National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) superseded the ICSS and “continues to provide a variety of services to those responsible

for college and university honors programs” (Austin, 1986, p. 6).

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education stressed the need for educational excellence and the necessity of serving the diverse requirements and talents of students in a report titled, *A Nation at Risk*. The report also emphasized meeting the needs of high ability students at all levels of their education, including higher education. Austin (1986) noted that two groups of students are at a disadvantage in the standard curriculum: those students whose aptitude or preparation hinders them from being able to meet the standard program requirements and those students whose superior ability and achievement attribute to their being insufficiently challenged by the regular program. Several programs have been developed to address the needs of the disadvantaged students on the premise that “all students should be encouraged and enabled to realize their talents” (Austin, 1986, p. 6). The same premise provides a rationale for addressing the needs of the superior student. Educational programs should be designed so that the needs of all students are met, including the two groups mentioned above.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to report the results of a study conducted to identify the major characteristics of honors programs at colleges and universities in the southern region of the United States and to review the perceptions of honors programs directors relating to the effectiveness of and challenges facing honors programs at these institutions. The researcher requested participation by the honors directors at the 159 colleges and universities accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), which also offered coursework leading to a bachelor’s degree and were members of the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC). Most honors program research focuses on student satisfaction, the demographic characteristics of honors program participants, or honors program effectiveness (Bulakowski & Townsend, 1995). This study fills a gap in the literature by providing the opinions of the honors program directors regarding the successes and struggles of honors programs at various institutions of higher education.

Rationale for the Study

According to Aydelotte (1925), honors programs in America are based on the following principles adopted from the English system: distinguish between superior and nonsuperior students and allow superior students to become more involved in their educational development. The support that an institution provides to an undergraduate student is a major contributor to the student’s adjustment, growth, and development (Noldon & Sedlacek, 1998). As a result, many institutions have developed programs geared toward specific subgroups of the student body (Klein, 2002). Although superior students have similar academic and developmental needs and interests, educators have recognized the importance of developing an atmosphere specifically for their needs (Noldon & Sedlacek, 1998; Rich, 1991). “Honors programs are of vital importance in our universities, for without the encouragement and support which they offer, many honors students would abandon the struggle for excellence” (Osbourne, 1989, p. 28). Several institutions have developed honors programs or honors colleges to serve the needs and to

increase the enrollment of superior students (Gerrity, Lawrence, & Sedlacek, 1993; Mathiasen, 1985; Noldon & Sedlacek, 1998; Pflaum, Pascarella, & Duby, 1985).

Over the past two decades, greater emphasis has been placed on meeting the needs of honors students. This emphasis has caused an increase in honors programs. According to the NCHC, honors programs in colleges and universities increased 10% from 1999-2003 (Boulard, 2003). Today, more than 220 honors programs exist nationwide in comparison to the 100 programs that existed over 30 years ago. Although honors programs vary widely among different institutions, they all generally have the following goals: (a) meet the needs of superior students, (b) attract and retain superior students and faculty, (c) enhance the institution's public image, (d) recognize and reward superior students and faculty, and (e) increase the transfer rate of students to 4-year institutions (Bulakowski & Townsend, 1995; Heck, 1986).

Austin (1986) indicated that a fully developed honors program is comprised of at least two components: a general honors program and departmental honors. A general honors program, which comprises 20% to 25% of the total coursework, offers a special curriculum with distinct courses, seminars, and independent study during the first 2 years of school, which may continue all the way through 4 years. Departmental honors are available to limited students after a major is chosen, include special courses within the major, and may require the students to complete a research project or thesis. Students who participate in departmental honors programs do not have to be enrolled in a general honors program. Byrne (1998) discovered honors programs offer one or more of the following options: (a) conversion of a standard course to honors status by completing additional requirements such as labs or research projects; (b) independent study, often guided by a single faculty member; (c) distinct sections of principal courses, which require more reading, writing, discussion, problem-solving, independent study and research, and other requirements; and (d) special courses, often interdisciplinary, offered to honors students.

Honors programs benefit both the institution and the student. They help the institution recruit superior students who are seeking a program that will provide a challenge. Students in honors programs may provide inspiration to nonhonors students, particularly in those programs that offer inclusion of honors students in regular courses. "The presence of a gifted student in a college class...can enliven discussion and move a class toward higher level discourse..." (Robinson, 1997, p. 220). Honors programs may also assist the institution in recruiting and retaining faculty members. "Outstanding teaching talent is always in short supply, and honors teaching may attract and hold those whom the institution would least like to lose" (Austin, 1986, p. 7). "Honors programs provide a readily available peer group for many of the brightest incoming students" (Hammond, McBee, & Hebert, 2007, p. 198), which may help minimize transfer shock of students. The facilitation of peer groups for new students at institutions of higher education encourages success and satisfaction in addition to alleviating the transition from high school to college (Peat, Dalziel, & Grant, 2000). Finally, honors programs can enhance the institution's image.

This study fills a significant gap in the literature. It is a resource to current and future students, parents, institutions, and the community on honors programs in colleges and universities in the southern region of the United States. This research also provides insight on the perceptions of honors program directors and program areas that may be improved.

Summary of the Study

The purposes of this study were to determine the major characteristics of honors programs at colleges and universities in the southern region of the United States and to review the perceptions of honors programs directors relating to the effectiveness of and challenges facing honors programs in colleges and universities in these institutions. Additionally, the perceptions of the honors directors provided insight into the preferences for awarding scholarships to honors students; benefits of the honors programs to students, faculty, and the institution; and the areas in which changes should be made to the honors programs. The participants in this study were honors program directors or coordinators at 4-year colleges and universities in the southern region of the United States. This region includes institutions located in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. The selected institutions offered programs that led to a baccalaureate degree, had received accreditation through the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), and were also members of the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC).

Data were collected from a survey mailed to 159 honors directors. The survey instrument contained 42 items, 28 of which requested information related to the characteristics of honors programs at colleges and universities in the southern region of the United States. The remaining 14 items requested the perceptions of the honors director concerning the effectiveness of and issues facing the honors programs using responses that indicated their level of agreement with each statement as recorded on a four-point Likert scale. The survey questions were grouped into seven areas: (a) general background, (b) honors program information, (c) honors program management, (d) student selection and support, (e) faculty selection and support, (f) general assessment and effectiveness, and (g) perceptions of the honors directors. Surveys from 92 of the honors directors were returned, representing a response rate of 58%. The responses from the self-administered survey instrument were tabulated for each item. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data, and raw scores and percentages were computed.

Findings

Undergraduate enrollments at the 92 institutions ranged from 500 to 40,000 students. A total of 42 institutions (57%) had undergraduate enrollments of 5001 or greater, and 39 (42%) institutions reported 5000 or fewer undergraduate students. Almost half (43%) had between 5001 and 20,000 undergraduate students, while 13 institutions had more than 20,000 students with enrollments ranging from 21,000 to 40,000. Most (83%) institutions offered a general honors program, and most programs were open to students without restriction (76%). A few (15%) institutions offered a departmentalized honors program. Honors programs were offered for 3 or 4 years in over half of the institutions (56%), and only 7% offered an honors program for 1 or 2 years. Almost all honors programs (98%) began in the freshmen year and were completed during the senior year in 87% of the honors programs.

Enrollment in the honors programs during the Fall 2005 semester was greater than 400 students at 34% of the institutions and less than 400 students at 36% of the institutions. Honors program enrollment represented 8% to 12% of the student body population in 20% of institutions

and 3% to 7% of the student body population in 42% of institutions. Less than 3% of the student body enrolled in honors programs in 31% of institutions. The retention rate of students in the honors program was higher than the rest of the student body population in half (50%) of the institutions and was lower than the rest of the student body population in 25% of the institutions. Retention was the same as the general student body population in 18% of institutions.

Most (90%) of the institutions required a minimum grade point average in order to graduate. Other graduation requirements included the following: specific honors courses (70%), an honors thesis or project (66%), and independent study (13%). The honors program curriculum consisted of honors sections as regular courses and unique honors courses at 84% of institutions, projects and theses (78%), and independent study and/or contract work (67%). The most unique characteristic of honors programs incorporated theses and research projects (70%). Additional hallmarks included multidisciplinary honors courses (68%), special guest lectures or performances (63%), colloquia/seminar (62%), field trips (54%), independent study (38%), team taught classes (63%), and student visits in faculty homes (27%).

A part-time honors director or coordinator, who also had teaching assignments, administered the majority of honors programs (54%). The honors program was managed by a full-time honors director or coordinator at 38% of institutions. Full-time secretarial support was reported by 63% of institutions, and 23% had part-time support. Most (77%) honors programs budgets were funded by an independent line item in the institution's budget. A large number of institutions had some form of an honors advisory council (86%), which was comprised of faculty and students (43%); faculty and administrators (32%); or faculty, students, and administrators (25%).

Most of the honors directors (71%) rated the overall effectiveness and support of the honors program as "good." Approximately 40% of honors directors rated finance or program funding to be "adequate." Clerical staff support of the program was considered "poor" by 25% of honors directors. By and large, the honors directors indicated some level of satisfaction with most of the academic and cocurricular benefits that are available to students who participate in the honors program. The majority of honors directors had a positive perception of honors program recruitment, retention, facilities, and other benefits. The sense of community among members of the honors program, as well as personalized counseling and advising for students, received a "good" rating by 48% of honors directors. Honors directors felt that student retention in the program (49%), student recruitment for the program (47%), and program facilities (46%) were "adequate." Many (57%) were least satisfied with faculty benefits such as released time or pay.

Areas of the honors program that honors directors felt required extensive change were marketing of the honors program (36%), honors faculty benefits and recognition (30%), and program curriculum and scope (26%). Adequate changes were recommended for program support by general faculty (55%) and program support by administration (52%). Approximately 52% of honors directors indicated few changes should be made to student selection criteria. The most effective features of the honors program were honors curriculum and class size (43%) and sense of community (20%). The greatest constraint on the honors program, as perceived by 34% of honors directors, consisted of honors program finances.

Of the 91 honors directors who responded, all agreed that students in the honors program benefit from participation in the program. Almost all (99%) agreed that honors classes are more intellectually stimulating and challenging to participating students than regular classes. Special

opportunities for social interactions were perceived to be a benefit to participating students by 94% of honors directors. Most (93%) honors directors agreed that the honors program benefits participating students by providing enhanced counseling, advising, and mentoring. Likewise, 93% agreed that guest lectures, research opportunities, and field trips benefited students who participated in the honors program.

All of the responding honors directors either agreed (28%) or strongly agreed (72%) that honors faculty benefit from the opportunity of teaching eager, bright students. Similarly, all either agreed (12%) or strongly agreed (88%) that the institution benefits from the presence of the honors program on campus. Almost all (98%) felt that participation in the honors program improved a student's chance for admission to graduate school or for obtaining employment. Over half (60%) agreed that scholarships for superior students should be awarded through the honors program rather than through the college's general scholarship program, with 31% of these directors indicating strong agreement, but 31% disagreed. An overwhelming 88% of honors directors agreed that honors program students should have special housing options.

Conclusions

Based on the findings in this study, small colleges clearly can support an honors program. Despite limited budgets and part-time personnel, honors programs strive for excellence. Honors programs create a community atmosphere within a large population, thus reducing the challenges many honors students encounter and aiding in their success. In general, honors programs are beneficial to students as well as faculty who participate in the honors program. The level of satisfaction experienced by faculty and students comes not from increased funding or dedicated facilities, but honors program success and sense of community.

Even though honors programs are perceived to be successful and beneficial, improvements are needed in marketing the programs, providing benefits and recognition of honors faculty, increasing the program budgets, and improving the curriculum. Honors programs would benefit from a commitment by the institution's administrators in providing sufficient faculty and staff, dedicated space, and an increased budget. Colleges and universities would also benefit from improved honors programs, which enhance the reputation of the institutions.

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