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AUTHOR Cohen, Larry L.
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ABSTRACT

An examination is provided of the limitations and the characteristics of community college honors programs. Introductory comments point to the potential of honors programs as one of the few opportunities for mid-career community college faculty desiring growth within a traditional institutional framework, while characterizing most existing programs as tiny, woefully underfunded, and of minimal impact on students and faculty. Next, specific reasons cited in the literature for starting honors programs are listed, and the emphasis on such words as "quality," "outstanding," "superior," and "scholarship" in these definitions is highlighted. After pointing to the lack of empirical data documenting the effects of honors programs on recruitment, retention and public image, the paper reviews efforts to maintain high admissions standards in these programs and the instructional modes available, including the course-centered program, the single-track or prescribed curriculum program, the core-oriented program, the individualized honors program, and the comprehensive program. Factors limiting the size of honors program enrollment are next addressed, followed by a summary of the rewards for faculty initiative provided by honors programs. This summary stresses that: (1) honors programs can be conducted at a minimal level at little cost; (2) because honors programs rely heavily on faculty initiative, the individual can make a difference; (3) faculty are afforded close contact with students and ideas; (4) claims regarding the benefits of honors programs are unlikely to be challenged by research-minded administrators in the immediate future; and (5) honors programs bring community colleges back to their initial promise of educational opportunity for all. (LAL)

IV.

HONORS PROGRAMS IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE:

REALITY AND PROMISE

Larry L. Cohen
English Department
Middlesex County College

If they are seen in the context of realistic expectations, honors programs offer one of the few opportunities for mid-career community college faculty desiring growth within a traditional institutional framework. However, in order to assess this opportunity fairly, it is necessary to become familiar with both the limitations and the variety of options that characterize such programs.

Initial exposure to honors efforts at community colleges through implicit i ndings in the literature and explicit "war stories" of program coordinators can be discouraging. Until recently, honors programs at many community colleges seem to have borne many of the hallmarks of newly arrived immigrant groups-- barely tolerated by the mainstream culture, poor, misunderstood, a threat to other groups' meager share of an inadequate pie. The perversion of the comprehensive mission of the community college into a narrow obsession with career training and serving the least able has hardly provided a healthy environment for honors program implementation. With a few exceptions such as Miami-Dade's and Maricopa's comprehensive honors projects, most efforts at two-year colleges have been tiny, woefully underfunded, and of minimal impact on students or faculty. A recent article on the honors student in the AACJC Journal unconsciouly underscores the alienation between honors programs

and the larger two-year college community in its very title: "The Honors Program Student: Atypical Profile."

It is perhaps significant that this article is only one of a handful dealing with programs for the academically gifted student in the Journal, which serves as the two-year colleges' primary professional forum. Among these, most helpful in its comprehensiveness is Jack Friedlander's "Honors Programs in Community Colleges, in the Journal's February, 1983 issue. Friedlander, a staff associate at the Center for the Study of Community Colleges in Los Angeles, has delineated the beginnings and modes of operation of several exemplary two-year honors programs in his study of six districts (Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, Maricopa, Miami-Dade, and St. Louis.) Friedlander found that the honors program is nearly always a recent phenomenon, and that his respondents were "remarkably similar" in their observations that their honors program came out of a realization that "until recently, their college had concentrated its efforts on helping the whole range of students with special needs except for one group-- the academically advanced student."

The specific reasons cited for starting honors programs were striking in their contrast to the "academic populist" rhetoric fashionable in the 1960's and 1970's:

1. An increasing number of students who are attending community colleges can benefit from honors courses and programs
2. Honors programs are part of collegewide efforts to strengthen the quality of their academic programs, particularly in the area of general education
3. Honors programs can assist community college educators in their efforts to attract and retain outstanding students and faculty
4. These programs can enhance the public image of the institution as a place where superior scholarship is honored and encouraged

The rhetoric is salutary-- quality, outstanding, superior, scholarship-- but what of the reality? How have these and other institutions translated such ambitious goals into successful programs?

Unfortunately, there appears to be little empirical data that documents the positive effects of honors program implementation on recruitment, retention, or public image. Even the most detailed study of honors programs, Honors in the Two-Year College, published by the National Collegiate Honors Council, the National Council of Instructional Administrators, and the Community College Humanities (1983)

remains silent on questions concerning the effectiveness of honors in these areas. Perhaps observers are reluctant to subject so new a phenomenon to close scrutiny, or perhaps they have found it difficult to measure the efficacy of honors programs as institutional adrenalin, but it appears that some sort of detailed, dispassionate evaluation of representative honors programs is needed.

There is data, however, on the practice if not the outcome of honors program operation, much of which suggests a genuine attempt to live up to the rhetoric of Friedlander's respondents. In a departure from common two-year college practice, these programs have flexible but genuine academic entrance criteria. Typically, according to Friedlander, admission into honors requires an ACT score of 25 or a combined SAT score of 1100, a cumulative grade point average in high school or college of about 3.5 on a 4-point scale, demonstration of special talents and abilities, and interviews with members of the college's honors committee. These criteria are, parenthetically, more or less congruent with those incorporated into Ocean County College's and Gloucester County College's honors programs. The compilers of Honors in the Two-Year College report a similar pattern of admission criteria nationally.

Once admitted, students will find a number of options

under the rubric honors, depending on the commitment, philosophy, or politics of the individual institution. These include, according to Honors in the Two-Year College, the following modes:

-- the course-centered program
-- the single-track or prescribed curriculum program
-- the core-oriented program
-- the individualized honors program
-- the comprehensive program

In the course-centered program, honors sections of selected courses are the major-- and sometimes only-- program component. This option permits the participation of students whose talents are unevenly distributed, and may be especially useful in facilitating involvement on the part of foreign-background students with some vestigial language difficulty. Most course-centered programs seem to focus on either enriched traditional liberal arts courses or on interdisciplinary courses. While this helps to obtain the minimum enrollment needed to run certain humanities courses, such an approach tends to exclude the vocational-technical student.

Course-centered programs are inexpensive and administratively easy to initiate, but may also result in a fragmented effort in which non-participating departments resent the

attraction of students away from already thinly-subscribed courses. In examining institutional models, one might in fact suspect that the presence of a course-centered program after several years of honors operation suggests a weak commitment on the part of the institution.

The single-track or prescribed curriculum program (such as offered at the County College of Morris) offers a university-parallel-oriented package that is highly structured, yet permits a variety of options within its structure. At Morris, for example, the program is given a special dimension through a second-year 12-credit Honors Seminars sequence which focuses on the history of ideas and on literary masterpieces, and is designed to provide a holistic vision of the development of Western consciousness. Obviously, a single-track program, even if it enrolls only a small number of students, will require more administrative and advisement energy than will a course-centered approach.

An even greater institutional commitment is usually required by the core-oriented program, which emphasizes the need for interaction among honors students within a required group of courses that share a common theme and an an interdisciplinary approach. These programs are characterized by close cooperative relationships among participating faculty, and by a strong focus on a particular

unifying theme, such as the Community College of Philadelphia's concern with Western intellectual history. The core-oriented program also lends itself to differing pedagogical approaches, of which Philadelphia offers an excellent example. According to the program's directors, Dennis McGrath and Marty Spear, many community college faculty use the opportunity to design individual honors courses as an outlet for their idiosyncratic notions of the ideal curriculum, which leads to fragmentation and neglects the relationship between honors and the general education curriculum. McGrath and Spear have circumvented this tendency by making their core-oriented honors curriculum emphasize the cognitive and attitudinal skills that students will need for success in academic and professional life. By focusing on students' cognitive styles and de-emphasizing content, they have removed subject matter from center stage. This, in turn, has helped remove content from the arena of faculty conflict over what is to be taught, and from being so dominant that concerns over what they term "low-level information transfer" become paramount.

The Philadelphia program, taught by a team of 6 or 7 faculty, emphasizes writing across the curriculum, and includes weekly 2-hour seminars as well as conventional lectures during its operating year.

Attractive as core-oriented programs may seem, however, they may create a problem for some students, who might dislike the unifying theme or may not want a strong history or humanities background, as McGrath and Spear recently admitted in discussing their program at an NCHC conference. For example, the imposition of Western intellectual history at a heavily minority-oriented campus may be politically unwise, worthy as its educational objectives might be.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is the individualized honors program such as is found at Corning Community College, in which independent study under a faculty mentor is coupled with an interdisciplinary forum so that students can share their interests and insights. This model seems particularly adaptable to colleges interested in making only a limited initial commitment to honors without compromising quality, and to those at which "contract grading" is already in place as a methodology. Even those campuses with only an established practice of offering independent study courses, such as Middlesex, could easily adapt to individualized honors. Another advantage is this mode's easy adaptability to the needs of older, part-time evening students who are locked out of full-time honors options, or vocational-technical students who face the same problem.

For those colleges large enough to have multi-campus facilities, the comprehensive program, utilizing two or

more of the above options, may be appropriate. Maricopa Community College in Phoenix, with 9 campuses and 9 program variations, may be the ultimate example of this approach. However, given the smaller size and historical development of New Jersey's community colleges, a comprehensive approach seems too ambitious for the state at this time.

Once enrolled, students in the programs outlined above generally must meet maintenance criteria. For example, Frederick Community College (Frederick, Texas) requires a 3.5 major GPA and a 3.2 overall GPA for the honors degree; typical of most programs appears to be at least a cumulative GPA of from 3.25 to 3.5. At least one college has given additional grade points for honors courses to compensate for students' fears that participating in an honors program will lower their cumulative average.

At this juncture it should be noted that the admission and maintenance standards outlined above, given the average community college environment and its minimal resource allocatio. to forstering academic excellence, will usually result in small numbers of honor enrollees. For example, a study by Piland and Gould (1981) found that enrollment in honors programs ranged from 10 to 100. These numbers are significant on two counts for those contemplating honors implementation. First, it is unlikely that honors courses will "drain" students away from any large number of regular courses. Second, it is equally unlikely that honors offerings will, in themselves, act as a major stimulant to enrollment.

A second factor limiting the size of honors programs is the unwillingness of most two-year schools to commit the administrative and faculty resources necessary for effective operation of larger programs. Many four-year honors programs are staffed by a full-time director (Rutgers is one local example) but few two-year colleges will do so. Instead, a dedicated faculty member is give one or two courses' released time and, together with a faculty committee, operates the program on an ad hoc basis, with little money for first-rate guest lecturers or recruitment advertising. The supplemental enrichment activities that round out any honors programs, such as special colloquia, field trips, films, or social events, are a particular challenge under such circumstances. Indeed, if administrative support is sufficiently absent, the program may simply wither away, as has reportedly occurred at Mercer.

However, if at least minimal administrative support is present, some sort of honors program can be established in most two-year colleges, petty details, petty jealousies, and the absence of petty cash notwithstanding. But why, then, should a mid-career faculty member take on the very demanding exertions most such enterprises will require? Not to save the institution, for the research has not demonstrated that this will work as a "quick fix." Perhaps to save oneself. Most mid-career faculty are increasingly

immobilized by a vanished job market, a dearth of administrative or lateral promotion opportunities at the home campus, and limited room for curricular adventures. Involvement in an honors program offers a rare opportunity for keeping intellectually fresh and avoiding "stale-out." The rewards for faculty initiative in this area are self-evident but worth repeating:

1. Honors programs can, if necessary, be conducted at a minimal level-- a course or two-- at so little cost to the institution that little objection can be made to implementation on purely economic grounds. One's "expensive" mid-career salary does not act as an impediment.
2. Because honors programs are small and rely heavily on faculty initiative for their success, the individual can still make a difference-- and the results of leadership are highly visible, yea, even unto the quantifiable.
3. The rewards of success are further sweetened by contact with students and ideas at a level approximating the secret fantasies of most community college faculty.
4. No one has yet adequately evaluated the success of honors programs in terms of their institutional

impacts on enrollment, image, and the like. Therefore, one's claims for the value of honors to the institution's well-being are unlikely to be challenged by research-minded administrative types for years to come.

5. One can have the satisfaction of knowing that one has inched the community college back to the initial promise of educational opportunity for all embraced by the concept of the comprehensive institution.

Given the apparently sustained swing toward the traditional and conservative in American life, with its withdrawal of commitment to strongly egalitarian postures, the time may be especially ripe for an expansion of honors programming at two-year schools. If one accepts the limitations of a two-year college setting, involvement in an honors program can, in providing the benefits outlined above, revitalize one's non-honors teaching and related activities. If enough faculty commit themselves to strengthening honors activities on their campuses, the day may come when an honors seminar will rival the latest in high-technology laboratories as a "showpiece" for visitors.