

Who Benefits from Honors: An Empirical Analysis of Honors and Non-Honors Students' Backgrounds, Academic Attitudes, and Behaviors

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INTRODUCTION

Supporters of university honors programs argue that these programs benefit the university and entire student body while critics argue that honors programs reproduce socioeconomic and racial privileges. In an attempt to address these issues, we have used quantitative survey data to compare the background characteristics, behaviors, and attitudes of honors and non-honors students at a medium-sized public university in the Southeast. Our findings indicate racial and gender differences between the two groups but similarities in economic backgrounds. We have also found that honors students differ significantly from their non-honors peers in academic and behavioral measures. We believe that our findings support the argument that honors programs bring benefits to the entire educational system rather than simply creating a privileged class of students and that honors programs are thus worthy of the financial resources that institutions commit to them.

Honors programs often require sizeable financial support in order to provide the advantages of small classes, specialized advising, scholarships, residential communities, physical space, and faculty time (Campbell 95). Acquiring and maintaining adequate resources can be challenging given that many colleges and universities are facing budget cuts and balancing the needs of multiple programs. Some scholars have argued that honors programs deserve to be a budget priority because of the value they offer to the institution and to both honors and non-honors students (Cosgrove). At the institutional level, honors programs help to attract donors and increase institutional prestige by

WHO BENEFITS FROM HONORS

increasing recruitment of high-achieving faculty and students (Campbell). Compared to non-honors students, honors students tend to have higher GPAs (Cosgrove; Rinn; Shushok), have higher retention and graduation rates, and be more satisfied with college (Campbell). Finally, honors students take about 75% of their coursework with the general population of students, so some scholars assert that non-honors students' education is enhanced through exposure to honors students, who tend to be more intellectually engaged in both the classroom and in their departments (Clauss).

Despite the value that honors programs provide, scholars have criticized these programs for reproducing class inequalities. Just as students are stratified by two-year and four-year colleges (Goldrick-Rab and Kinsley), honors programs have been charged with segregating a small number of privileged honors students from their less privileged non-honors peers, all within the same institution (Bulakowski and Townsend; Campbell; Sperber). Some argue that this segregation comes at the expense of need-based funding for the general undergraduate population (Achterberg; Clauss; Kaczvinsky) although scholars do not seem to have questioned whether donations to honors programs have come at the expense of general donations that could benefit all students.

Two other issues, in addition to unequal funding for honors and non-honors educational opportunities, are racial/ethnic bias and unequal quality of education. Honors programs tend to select students based on standardized test scores, a measure that has been found to be biased against racial and ethnic minorities and groups with lower socioeconomic status (Pehlke; Santelices and Wilson). Furthermore, Barfels and Delucchi qualitatively examined honors programs and non-honors academic tracks at a private liberal arts college and found distinct differences in curriculum, teaching, and assignments, with greater opportunities for honors students to develop higher level thinking skills. Mihelich, Storrs, and Pellett found that over two-thirds of the honors students interviewed at a university in the western United States viewed themselves as "academically elite and deserving of academic privileges" (102) while acknowledging their cultural capital advantages.

The question remains whether honors students are bringing something inherently unique to the table, thus improving the academic milieu of all college students, or simply reproducing class inequality within a privileged tracking system for college students. After reviewing the literature comparing honors and non-honors students and discussing recent research on academic attitudinal and behavioral measures (academic entitlement, cheating, academic ethic, and students' investigation of professors before taking a class), we will introduce and discuss our survey data to examine whether honors and non-honors students have different academic attitudes and behaviors. Significant

differences on these measures would seem to justify the argument that honors students improve the academic milieu for all students while a lack of differences would suggest that the benefits of honors programs are limited.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Most research comparing honors and non-honors students focuses on their differences after program entry. Research on honors students is often based on comparisons between honors students (Noldon and Sedlacek; Siegle et al.) and various groups of students with similar test scores (Cosgrove; Rinn; Shushok). Previous research in this area has focused most heavily on comparison of GPAs, with honors students tending to earn higher grades. The literature also compares honors students with non-honors students from the general student population (Kaczvinsky; Long and Lange; Siefert et al.). Findings suggest that honors students are more likely than non-honors students to be grade conscious, to prepare for class, and be viewed by faculty as high-maintenance (Long and Lange). Students enrolled in honors programs are slightly more likely than non-honors students to report using good educational practices, including a higher academic effort and more academic interactions with peers (Seifert et al.).

ACADEMIC ENTITLEMENT, CHEATING, ACADEMIC ETHIC, AND SELECTIVITY OF PROFESSORS

In recent years, academic entitlement in higher education has become a growing area of study (Chowning and Campbell; Miller; Twenge). Greenberger et al. defined academic entitlement as “[student] expectations of high rewards for modest effort, expectations of special consideration and accommodation by teachers when it comes to grades, and impatience and anger when their expectations and perceived needs are not met” (1194). In this emerging area of study, little research has explored academic entitlement in honors students; however, existing research draws attention to its role in higher education. Kopp et al. point out that academic entitlement is associated with the “‘customer-like approach’ to recruit students [and that] it carries over into students’ academics and interactions with professors” (107). Findings from Delucchi and Korgen provide support for the student-as-consumer argument; they found that over forty percent of the students they surveyed “believe their payment of tuition ‘entitles’ them to a degree” (104).

Academic entitlement research has also examined demographic differences including race, socioeconomic status, and most frequently gender. Greenberger et al. and Ciani, Summers, and Easter found that men were more likely than women to perceive themselves as academically entitled (337). However, Achacoso found women were more likely than men to subscribe to

beliefs about academic entitlement (97, 103). On the other hand, Chowning and Campbell determined there were no gender differences regarding academic entitlement, although men were more likely to be narcissistic and not assume personal responsibility for learning (986). Greenberger et al. found that Asians were more likely than whites to perceive themselves as academically entitled and that parents' educational level was not significantly related to academic entitlement. They also found that students who perceived themselves as academically entitled were more likely to engage in cheating behaviors.

Research has shown that cheating is pervasive on college campuses. Yardley et al. conducted a study of cheating based on a survey of college alumni. They found that 81.7% of the sample reported engaging in some type of cheating during their undergraduate years. Martin, Rao, and Sloan examined plagiarism among 158 graduate and undergraduate students in a university in the western United States. Using online software, they found that 61% of the sample had plagiarized at least part of an extra-credit opportunity.

Pino and Smith reported that students who possessed a strong academic ethic were less likely to engage in acts of academic dishonesty and more likely to be engaged at high levels in "educationally purposeful activities" (Hu and Kuh 569). The academic ethic is "learned behavior," and students with this ethic "place their studies above leisure activities; study on a daily or near-daily basis; and study in a disciplined, intense, and sober fashion" (Rau and Durand 23). Students with an academic ethic are not easily distracted or bored when studying or in class, are not easily talked out of studying, put academic work above their social lives, and study on a regular basis; they would also take an interesting class even if the instructor is known to be a tough grader or requires a large amount of work (Smith and Pino) and would probably be less likely to investigate professors prior to registering for a course.

Websites such as RateMyProfessors.com (RMP.com) have made it much easier to research professor characteristics. Research in this area is limited; however, Bleske-Rechek and Michels provide some insights; they compared students who use RMP with those who do not and found that they had similar characteristics, including GPAs. This work needs to be expanded to see which students actively seek out instructors that fit their desires.

DATA AND METHODS

The online survey of students enrolled in the Georgia Southern University Honors Program was conducted using surveymonkey.com. Admission requirements for incoming honors freshmen included: (1) SAT score of at least 1200 (math and critical reading only)/ACT score of 27 or higher, (2) high school GPA of 3.5 or higher in college preparatory classes, and (3) a record of academic and co-curricular achievement and community involvement. Admission

requirements for the honors program for students currently enrolled in the university as well as for transfer students included: (1) at least a 3.3 cumulative grade point average and (2) a record of academic achievement. During the 2011–12 academic year, the program enrolled 408 students of whom 63% were female, 37% male, 80% white, and 20% non-white. All honors students were sent an email from the honors director with a link to the survey on January 23, 2012. Two hundred and thirty, or 56%, of the students completed the survey containing 27 questions, which consisted of basic demographic questions and a series of questions on academic behaviors and attitudes. This sample was 31.3% male, 68.7% female, 84.3% white, 9.6% black, and 6.1% other minority. Compared to the population of honors students as a whole, the respondents were more female and white.

A year and a half earlier, during the second week of the 2010 spring semester, a similar survey was administered at the same institution. During the 2009–2010 academic year, 50.9% of students were female, 49.1% were male, 70.1% were white, and 29.9% were minority. Students were enrolled in three sections of an introductory core curriculum course consisting of mostly freshmen and sophomores and three sections of a one-hour required core course consisting mostly of juniors and seniors; all students were surveyed in class. The 513 students who returned questionnaires were 42.9% male, 57.1% female, 67.9% white, and 32.1% non-white. The survey sample was more female and slightly more non-white than the overall honors population.

The dependent variables in the two studies included academic entitlement, student investigation of professors prior to registering for a class, academic ethic, and cheating. Table 1 shows the individual items that made up each index, the individual item factor loadings, the index and item means and standard deviations, and the reliability coefficients for the index.

Academic entitlement was assessed with a 15-item scale with responses from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree” (Greenberger et al.). Using a factor analysis with a varimax rotation we found three indexes, explaining 58.23% of the variance, with eigenvalues greater than 1: evaluative entitlement (41.84% explained variance), behavioral entitlement (8.92% explained variance), and behavioral expectations (7.47% explained variance). The evaluative entitlement index ($\alpha = .86$) contains seven items that reflect students’ beliefs that trying hard and completing work entitle them to higher grades. The behavioral entitlement index ($\alpha = .78$) contains five items reflecting the students’ beliefs that professors should be available for students at the convenience of the student. Finally, the behavioral expectations index ($\alpha = .71$) includes three items reflecting how students feel when professors do not get back to students quickly or miss appointments.

WHO BENEFITS FROM HONORS

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics—Dependent Variables

	Factor Loading	Mean (SD) or N (%)
Investigate Instructors ($\alpha = .76$)		2.96 (1.11)
a. Ask close friends about the instructor.	.830	3.53 (1.35)
b. Look at on-line ratings of instructors (e.g., Rate my Professor).	.725	3.63 (1.59)
c. Ask majors about the instructor.	.793	2.58 (1.52)
d. Ask your academic advisor about the instructor.	.706	2.10 (1.37)
Cheat		1.66 (1.23)
Evaluative Entitlement ($\alpha = .86$)		3.29 (1.28)
a. If I have explained to my professor that I am trying hard, I think he/she should give me some consideration with respect to my course grade.	.646	4.48 (1.81)
b. If I have completed most of the reading for a class, I deserve a B in that course.	.784	3.58 (1.77)
c. If I have attended most classes for a course, I deserve at least a grade of B.	.799	3.51 (1.81)
d. Teachers often give me lower grades than I deserve on paper assignments.	.636	3.07 (1.73)
e. Teachers often give me lower grades than I deserve on exams.	.611	2.72 (1.62)
f. A professor should be willing to lend me his/her course notes if I ask for them.	.465	3.01 (1.81)
g. If I'm not happy with my grade from last semester, the professor should allow me to do an additional assignment.	.613	2.66 (1.66)
Behavioral Entitlement ($\alpha = .78$)		2.40 (1.21)
a. Professors who won't let me take an exam at a different time because of my personal plans (e.g. vacation or other trip that is important to me) are too strict.	.523	2.88 (1.85)
b. Professors have no right to be annoyed with me if I tend to come late to class or tend to leave early.	.714	2.18 (1.70)

BRIMEYER, SCHUETHS, AND SMITH

c. A professor should not be annoyed with me if I receive an important call during class.	.626	2.64 (1.78)
d. A professor should be willing to meet with me at a time that works best for me, even if inconvenient for the professor.	.671	2.24 (1.44)
e. A professor should let me arrange to turn in an assignment late if the due date interferes with my vacation plans.	.760	2.06 (1.49)
Behavioral Expectations ($\alpha = .71$)		
a. I feel I have been poorly treated if a professor cancels an appointment with me on the same day as we were supposed to meet.	.769	4.17 (1.90)
b. I would think poorly of a professor who didn't respond the same day to an email I sent.	.681	3.20 (1.72)
c. I would think poorly of a professor who didn't respond quickly to a phone message I left him or her.	.687	2.90 (1.69)
External Locus of Control ($\alpha = .88$)		
a. I can easily be talked out of studying	.680	3.92 (1.94)
b. I often end up daydreaming when I study	.830	4.59 (1.83)
c. I am easily distracted when studying	.818	4.51 (1.90)
d. I am often bored in class	.677	4.70 (1.81)
e. I often end up daydreaming when I am in class	.834	4.41 (1.81)
Learning Perspective ($\alpha = .81$)		
a. I work at increasing my vocabulary by looking up new words in the dictionary.	.730	3.43 (1.98)
b. I will take an interesting course even though I may not receive a good grade.	.779	3.96 (1.92)
c. I seek out courses that involve a lot of reading, writing, and independent thought.	.740	3.22 (1.86)
d. It is very important for me to work on improving my intellectual skills even if this does not bring direct improvements in my academic performance.	.677	4.93 (1.67)

WHO BENEFITS FROM HONORS

e. I prefer to take intellectually demanding courses even when few students earn A's in them.	.827	3.81 (1.83)
GPA Perspective ($\alpha = .79$)		3.59 (1.43)
a. I avoid teachers who are tough graders.	.731	4.20 (1.85)
b. It is a smart move to drop a course if the teacher turns out to be a tough grader.	.790	3.43 (1.76)
c. I would rather learn little in a course and get an A than learn a lot and get a C.	.628	4.21 (1.97)
d. It is wise to drop a class if there is a lot of work to do, even if the class seems interesting.	.770	2.52 (1.67)

To assess if students investigate their professors prior to registering for class, the survey included four questions shown in Table 1. The students responded to the items on a 5-point scale from never (1) to always (5). A factor analysis revealed a single factor with a cronbach's alpha of .76, which explained 58.54% of the variance.

Academic ethic was assessed with a scale consisting of 15 items that were factor analyzed, and three indexes, explaining 62.88% of the variance, with eigenvalues exceeding 1 were found. The three indexes are (1) GPA Perspective ($\alpha = .79$; 8.00% of variance explained), which indicates the extent to which students focus on their grades more than on actual learning; (2) Learning Perspective ($\alpha = .81$; 20.07% of variance explained), which indicates the extent to which students are interested in learning regardless of grades; and (3) Locus of Control ($\alpha = .88$; 34.81% of variance explained), which indicates the extent to which students can be easily distracted from studying and from being productive.

For the fourth dependent variable in the study (frequency of student cheating), the questionnaire provided a careful definition of academic dishonesty before asking students to assess their own:

Academic dishonesty includes actions such as cheating on tests (copying off of another person, having another person take a test for you, or bringing notes into a test when you should not have, etc.), cheating on assignments (using another student's assignment or paper as if it were your own, buying papers, faking lab, statistical, or other assignment data, etc.), or plagiarizing papers ("making up" sources for bibliographic citations, copying directly or paraphrasing work that is not your own in a paper and failing to cite it, etc.). **How many times during a typical**

semester, have you engaged in any of these or other actions that would be considered academic dishonesty?

Students were given six options: never; only a few times in my academic career; 1–2 per semester; 3–5 per semester; 6–10 per semester; or 11+ times per semester. The mean for the measure was 1.66 with a standard deviation of 1.23.

Control variables for the study included gender, race, year in college, parents' education, and family income. Students were asked to indicate whether they were male or female, their year in college, and their race/ethnicity by circling all options that applied from the following list: white, black, Hispanic, Asian or Pacific Islander, Native American, and other. Students reported both their mother's/female guardian's and father's/male guardian's education level on a scale from less than high school to doctorate or professional degree. Finally, to measure family income, students were told that "the typical family income in the state is \$49,000. Please indicate what your family's income was when you were 18, compared to the typical family in the state by circling the appropriate X." The ratings were coded on a seven-point scale with a bottom X (1) labeled "\$20,000 or less," the middle X (4) labeled "\$49,000," and the top X (7) labeled "\$100,000 or more."

RESULTS

The first research question examined if honors students come from more privileged backgrounds than those who were not in the honors program. The top part of Table 2 shows the gender and racial differences between the entire student population and the honors students. The honors students are 11% more female (63%–52%) and 14.5% more white (80%–65.5%) than the total population. The bottom half of Table 2 shows results of the students' responses about parental education and family income. Honors students' fathers had significantly higher levels of education (4.14) than did fathers of non-honors students (3.92), but there was virtually no difference in mothers' education level (4.09 and 4.02). Non-honors students reported that their family incomes (5.36) were significantly higher than the honors students' family incomes (4.71).

Table 3 shows the comparison of the dependent variables between the honors and non-honors students. For each of the comparisons of the dependent variables the background characteristics of gender, race, parents' education levels, family income, and year in school were controlled for using ordinary least squares regression. Each of the academic ethic measures showed a significant difference between the honors and non-honors students. Non-honors students (4.75) reported a higher external locus of control (e.g., they were more easily distracted in classes and when studying) than honors students (3.71). Non-honors students also reported a higher score (3.91 to 2.89) on the

WHO BENEFITS FROM HONORS

Table 2. Background Comparisons

	Honors	Non-Honors
Gender ^a		
Male	37%	48%
Female	63%	52%
Race ^a		
White	80%	65.5%
Non-White	20%	34.5%
N	408	20,000
Father's Education*	4.14 (1.22)	3.92 (1.39)
Mother's Education	4.09 (1.23)	4.02 (1.23)
Family Income*	4.71 (2.00)	5.36 (1.84)
N	230	513

a—taken from University Fact Book

*P<.05

Table 3. Comparison of Honors and Non-Honors Students on Dependent Variables Controlling for Background Characteristics (Race, Sex, Year in School, Family Income, Parents' Education)

Variable	Honors Students Mean (SD)	Non-Honors Mean (SD)
External Locus of Control*	3.71 (1.61)	4.75 (1.36)
Learning Perspective*	4.20 (1.62)	3.72 (1.26)
GPA Perspective*	2.89 (1.37)	3.91 (1.35)
Investigate Professors*	2.82 (1.18)	3.02 (1.07)
Evaluative Entitlement*	2.71 (1.30)	3.55 (1.18)
Behavioral Entitlement*	1.95 (1.07)	2.60 (1.21)
Behavioral Expectations*	2.95 (1.45)	3.63 (1.33)
Cheat*	1.21 (0.63)	1.87 (1.38)

*p < .05

GPA perspective indicating that non-honors students were more concerned with grades than the honors students. The honors students scored higher on the learning perspective (4.20 to 3.72), indicating they were more concerned with what they learned in classes than non-honors students. Additionally, honors students reported they investigated their professors (2.82 to 3.02) and cheat (1.21 to 1.87) less often than non-honors students.

Finally, the honors students reported that they felt less academically entitled than the non-honors students did. Honors students were significantly less likely to feel evaluative entitlement (2.71 to 3.55), i.e., less likely to believe that minimal effort should translate to high grades; less behaviorally entitled (2.71 to 3.55), i.e., less likely to believe that faculty should be available at the student's convenience; and less likely to have behavioral expectations (2.95 to 3.63), i.e., less likely to have negative feelings toward faculty who miss appointments or do not contact students promptly enough.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of our research was to examine whether honors students come from more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds and whether they have different academic attitudes and behaviors than the general population of students. Our analysis found some background differences between honors and non-honors students. Honors students were more female and white than the general population and had more educated fathers but were not financially better off than their non-honors peers. While the program may be reproducing racial stratification, it does not seem to be reproducing economic stratification, which may be a result of conducting the study at a regional state university rather than a private or flagship state institution. Honors programs at more prestigious schools may attract more affluent second-generation college students while honors students at less prestigious schools may be more like the population of college students in general. Future research is needed to compare not just honors and non-honors students but honors students across different institutions.

The second part of the research project focused on the differences between honors and non-honors students' attitudes and behaviors. This study found that the honors students in the program did have significantly different attitudes and behaviors, supporting the claim that they may act as role models, but the nature of this particular study does not allow for a strong conclusion about that possibility. The university has roughly 20,000 students and 400 honors students. While the honors students may act as role models, one might question how many other students they really influence. Future research should examine if and how honors students interact with other students. For example, research could examine the social networks of honors students to see if

they include a large proportion of non-honors students and if these relationships lead to positive outcomes for both the honors and non-honors students. Researchers could also take structural factors into account to examine differences in behavior, examining whether honors students actively engage with faculty and other students in larger classes or limit such behavior to smaller honors classes. Also, although we found that honors students are less likely to commit acts of academic dishonesty than are non-honors students, this finding could be a function of either higher moral standards or of smaller classes and fewer opportunities for cheating.

Universities have made large commitments to honors programs with the argument that these programs bring positive outcomes. This study suggests that the benefits are potentially broad, but it is limited to a single university. Questions that have emerged from our research warrant study among a much larger and more diverse group of honors programs if we wish to demonstrate that honors education adds value to an institution rather than perpetuating class differences. We hope that scholars will continue to examine honors programs critically in order to determine exactly who benefits.

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WHO BENEFITS FROM HONORS

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