

Honors Sells . . . But Who's Paying?

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If there's a new way
I'll be the first in line
But it better work this time
Peace sells . . . but who's buying?

—Megadeth, *Peace Sells*

In my technical writing courses, I assign résumés and application letters near the beginning of the semester so that students who are preparing to graduate or to search for co-ops and internships will have sufficient time to revise and polish their documents before sending them to prospective employers. Recently, during a peer critique session in which I was helping the students review each other's résumé drafts, I noticed that a student had listed a number of honors program activities and scholarships. She had not taken honors freshman composition with me, so I mentioned to her that I noticed she was in the honors program. Her immediate, rapid-fire, and completely unsolicited response took me by surprise: “Yeah, but the scholarship only lasts four years, and I have to do another year because I have to do a senior project for my major, and I don't want to do an honors thesis on top of that, so I won't be in the honors program anymore.”

Ouch.

STUDENTS ARE PAYING

While I understood the student's decision, my heart sank at the prospect of yet another student abandoning the honors program because the scholarship money ran out. Colleagues who are much wiser than I have previously debated the wisdom of tying scholarships to honors program participation, so I will not rehash that debate in this limited space. The fact is that my institution's honors program does use substantial scholarships to recruit and retain academically talented students in an increasingly competitive market. While most honors students with whom I have worked are genuinely interested in the academic rigor and the community-building social and service activities for which our program is known, many will also admit to having been attracted by

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the scholarship amounts. Throughout the years, a brazen few have confessed that they never intended to complete the thesis project or graduate from honors but rather simply wanted the four years of scholarship money.

High school students on the college prep track are going to greater lengths to become competitive applicants for honors programs and their attendant scholarships, especially in the face of escalating college costs. For instance, consider the fees they pay to take college entrance exams. In 2014, the SAT costs \$51, and the ACT costs \$36.50 without writing and \$52.50 with writing. A handful of my honors students have reported that they took the ACT only once, while some have taken it seven times or more, which means that those students have spent upwards of \$250 in hopes of raising even a single section score a point or two. When each point, however, can equal thousands of dollars at schools with scaffolded scholarship amounts tied to test scores, the investment more than pays off. Our school also allows students who score 27 or higher on the English section to place out of EH 101, which saves the student money; this is a separate checkbox on our honors program admission evaluation forms so that we know who will place directly into EH 105, the honors-only version of EH 102.

When discussing how the for-profit American Honors company markets itself to high school students and their financially beleaguered parents, Gary Bell states that “[t]heir advertising is highly sophisticated, if a little misleading. Their promises are profoundly attractive, even irresistible.” This description reminds me of similar rhetoric that the College Board uses to sell Advanced Placement to these same students and parents, as seen on their website:

As college costs grow each year, the prospect of continuing education becomes less and less of a reality for many high school students. By making it through an AP course and scoring successfully on the related AP Exam, you can save on college expenses. Currently more than 90 percent of colleges and universities across the country offer college credit, advanced placement, or both, for qualifying AP Exam scores. These credits can potentially save students and their families thousands of dollars in college tuition, fees and textbook costs, which can transform what once seemed unaffordable into something within reach.

The AP Exams cost \$89 each, \$8 of which stays at the school to aid with exam administration costs; some schools pay for all or part of the exam fee, and schools pay \$15 for an unused exam, while students who pay their own fees may petition for refunds if they do not take the exam. Students must take care, however, to research whether the colleges to which they are applying will accept certain scores in various disciplines for college credit and/or course exemptions.

HIGH SCHOOLS ARE PAYING

Over the past three decades, since the Reagan-Bush era Regular Education Initiative, secondary educators have faced the intertwining challenges of significant budget reductions, endless assessment through standardized testing, and the push toward full inclusion of special education students on both ends of the spectrum into the regular classroom. Many high schools have come to rely upon the Advanced Placement and/or International Baccalaureate programs to meet the needs of their academically motivated students. These programs are well-respected and provide a standardized curriculum that can prepare students and give them credit for college-level work. Such programs, of course, are not free. On their “How to Start an AP Course” webpage, the College Board itemizes start-up costs for courses of twenty-five students. For the English Language and Composition and English Literature and Composition courses, they estimate \$400–\$1,400 for professional development and \$1,500–\$1,800 for supplemental reading, for a total of \$1,900–\$3,200; this is relatively inexpensive compared to AP courses in the sciences such as biology (\$8,950–\$11,650) and chemistry (\$7,900–\$10,400). According to the website for the International Baccalaureate program, schools pay \$10,820 per year for the Diploma Programme; registration and exam fees are approximately \$600 per IB diploma, which the schools pay or share the costs with students, but students have told me that they paid \$500 for the diploma notation itself and then substantially more than that for the program in its entirety.

I have taught honors composition since 1992, and I can attest to the fact that a student’s ability to identify an isolated grammatical error on a standardized test and then bubble in a letter on a SCANTRON form does not equate to that student’s ability to identify the same grammatical error buried within her own five-page essay. I have also taught students who have completed AP and IB coursework and who have scored 36 on the English section of the ACT but who have earned C grades and below on papers because their writing lacked balanced argumentation, stylistic maturity, and grammatical and mechanical correctness. These students can become frustrated and resistant when they find authentic college-level instruction far more challenging than the prepackaged high school course content that was supposed to earn them college credit. Recently, one student declared loudly to the entire class, “I got a 36 on the English section of the ACT, so I don’t know why I’m even in this class, but if I get another B on a paper, I’m going to cry!” Students argue that those well-known national programs sold them on the idea that they had already been doing college-level work, but they gradually come to the realization that doing the work well (i.e., earning an A) was not guaranteed.

ADMINISTRATIONS ARE PAYING

As Bell argues, academics tend to consider our profession as a vocation in the true sense of being called to provide a service to society, and talk of profit motives is unseemly. (I am reminded of the old Bugs Bunny cartoon in which he admonishes Baby Face Finster “not to play with the dirty money.”) Our vocational nobility should not be an excuse, though, to turn a blind eye to the financial aspects involved in providing honors education. In this post-recession era, when some honors programs have faced budgetary extinction, my program was fortunate enough to face a different dilemma when upper administration gave a mandate to “grow the program” and double the size of incoming freshman classes. The university foundation provided additional scholarship money not only to accommodate the extra students but also to increase the individual scholarship amounts so that honors program scholarships would be higher than non-honors presidential scholarships.

The buck stopped at the students, though. Our program director position is still not a full-time appointment, the administrative assistant is only assigned half-time to the honors program, and the assistant program director is granted one course release. Department chairs and faculty have been working hard to meet the increased demand for honors courses in order to accommodate all of the additional students, deciding whether courses are taught on-load, overload, or not at all. Some enrollment caps have also been raised, jeopardizing the small class size that is an essential feature of honors education. Students nearing graduation are struggling to find faculty mentors for their thesis projects, particularly in popular STEM majors in which already overburdened faculty are juggling their teaching and research responsibilities with graduate students and multiple honors undergraduates. Granted, academic units everywhere have faced steep budget cuts, and we have all learned to do more with less, but the line is thin between being dedicated to quality honors education—which many people undertake in addition to their discipline-specific duties for no extra remuneration—and being taken advantage of.

ARE WE PAYING?

All stakeholders in honors education—students, families, teachers, and administrators—face steeper financial challenges than they did ten years ago. Characteristics of honors education that we value at both the high school and college levels, such as small class size and independent research, are time consuming and expensive to provide and to assess. In composition pedagogy, for instance, teachers can advocate the use of student portfolios as a more authentic assessment of a student’s writing and critical thinking skills and their development over time, but these projects take a herculean effort to evaluate in comparison to a standardized, machine-graded exam, especially as class

sizes increase and resources decrease. In addition, when Jerry Herron states in “Notes toward an Excellent Marxist-Elitist Honors Admissions Policy” that the best predictor of student success in his program is the simple formula GPA x ACT, and when we screen specifically for AP courses and exams, IB diplomas, and certain ACT or SAT test scores during our application processes (as we all do), we have to take some share of the responsibility for subsidizing the regimentation machine in honors education at the high school level.

If we readily buy into the standardization of high school honors curricula provided through the AP and IB programs and the test prep for the ACT and SAT, what makes us think that a prepackaged college-level honors curriculum such as American Honors will be far behind? As postsecondary educators, we rally around the traditions of intellectual and professional freedom, and we treasure the principles of honors education that promote individualized study, but when we review applicants’ qualifications, we seek out those who have the most lengthy AP course lists and the highest test scores, the standardized nature of which is in direct opposition to development of the individual. Through our honors program admissions processes and our scholarship application standards, we have conditioned high school students and their parents to accept paying for homogenized high school honors education as the norm; they are far more ready than we are to accept paying for a preprogrammed college-level honors education. Similarly, if honors is as much of a loss-leader as Bell claims, then administrators, too, might be more willing to farm out honors to an external contractor rather than to cut an honors program altogether and risk losing the academically talented students who make the school look good. College programs are rapidly becoming as cash-strapped and micromanaged as high schools, and when the difficult financial decisions have to be made by our schools and our students, for-profit programs such as American Honors may, unfortunately, begin to look like viable alternatives. While I am adamantly opposed to such standardization, I have to wonder, with all of the ways in which we promote the systemization of high school honors education, why we are surprised to see it arrive at the college level.

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