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Socioeconomic Equity in Honors Education: Increasing Numbers of First-Generation and Low-Income Students

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Many honors administrators can cite the numbers and percentages of students of color and statistics on the male to female ratio. Public institutions might cite in-state to out-of-state comparisons. For most, however, socioeconomic status is low on their list, if there at all, even though it is an important measure of diversity. First-generation college students, neither of whose parents has a baccalaureate degree, make up 58% of college enrollments (Redford & Hoyer). Students with a Pell Grant, which qualifies them as having a low-income background, compose 33% of the American higher education population (Baum et al.). Approximately 24% of college students are both first-generation and low-income (Engle & Tinto). In honors, first-generation college students make up 28.6% of honors college and program enrollments (National Collegiate Honors Council's Admissions, Retention, and Completion Survey).

Research from the third (2012) follow-up to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Longitudinal Study of 2002 has provided more specific details about first-generation college students. The NCES found that 24% of college students come from families where neither parent has any college experience while an additional 34% are from families where parents may have some college experience but no bachelor's degree. The final 42% of students have at least one parent with a bachelor's degree (Redford & Hoyer). Most research has reached the consensus that a first-generation college student (FGCS) is a student for whom neither parent has a bachelor's degree (Davis). Using this definition, 58% of college students can be considered first-generation.

No one definition of a low-income college student is sufficient given the variation depending on the location. A student may be considered low-income if attending a private institution in a location with a high cost of living but reasonably well-off at a public institution in a low cost-of-living area. Most institutions use Pell Grant eligibility as a proxy for income levels, but this is an imperfect metric. Not all students file the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) for a variety of reasons, such as having uncertain immigrant status or having a family member who is an undocumented immigrant. Other students are unable to file the FAFSA because their parents refuse to share financial or tax information with them out of embarrassment or fear of being audited. The NCES estimates that approximately 20% of students do not file the FAFSA, but it is impossible to tell who may have qualified for a Pell Grant.

In the 2015–2016 academic year, 7.6 million students received $39.1 billion in Pell Grants, or 33% of all undergraduate students (Baum et al.). In 2011–2012, 38% of undergraduates under the age of 24 received a Pell Grant (Baum). The maximum Pell Grant award covered approximately 60% of tuition and fees at the average public institution in 2016–2017 (Baum et al.).

Students from both first-generation and low-income student populations are also more likely to be older; be female; have a disability; be of a minority ethnicity; be non-native English speakers; and have dependent children (Engle & Tinto). First-generation and low-income students may also include students with other types of diverse background experiences.

Although recruiting such students may require greater effort, the social justice payoff is well worth the time. Providing these students with the opportunity for an honors education allows them the opportunity to move into careers with higher income expectation and greater social mobility.

First-generation college students have made a first step for their families and can serve as guides for future family members. The difference in earnings for low-income students can be immense over a lifetime. Education can be a lifeline into a new standard of living for students coming from a background of poverty. Honors educators should not simply teach justice in the classroom but lead the way in filling their classrooms with students from all backgrounds. Both in the classroom and outside it, honors can change these students' lives and offer them insights and opportunities beyond anything they have imagined.

The first problem to overcome is knowing which students are first-generation or come from a low-income household. Often the data already exist somewhere in the complex computer information system, but reports must be created to present this information in a usable format. Data from the FAFSA can identify who is Pell-eligible or who is at the local threshold for poverty. Admissions questionnaires can be adapted to ask about parents' or guardians' highest level of education.

Once we have the data, we need to adjust our practices, beginning with the admissions cycle. Admissions representatives and recruiters should reach out to first-generation and low-income college students, who may not think that honors is for them, and encourage them to apply. Each institution will have different needs, but the admissions unit can often help.

Honors programs and colleges have a wide variety of admissions requirements and processes, from time-intensive holistic review (Smith & Zagurski) to computer-automated decisions, a model used at my current institution until ten years ago. When decisions are based primarily on standardized test scores, many first-generation and/or low-income students may be excluded. Smith and Zagurski found that setting a minimum ACT score for admission "resulted in limited diversity of the honors student population" (58).

The College Board's 2016 College-Bound Seniors Total Group Report indicates that mean scores increased in tandem with the students' household income and parental education levels. First-generation and lower-income students scored, on average, much lower than their more socioeconomically advantaged peers. Students from the lowest level of parental education, less than high school graduation, scored almost 300 points lower on average cumulatively across the three test sections than students who had a parent with a bachelor's degree and more than 400 points lower than students who had a parent with a graduate degree. The discrepancy between income levels was also stark, with an over 400-point difference across the three sections

between students from households earning less than $20,000 and those earning more than $200,000.

A review of the last hundred years of admissions tests found that "family income and parents' education, for example, are correlated both with SAT scores and also with college outcomes, so that much of the apparent predictive power of the SAT actually reflects the 'proxy' effects of socioeconomic status" (Atkinson & Geiser 3). Reliance on ACT or SAT scores in admissions decisions can thus be detrimental to those students from first-generation or low-income backgrounds who are statistically less likely to receive high scores.

Admissions decisions should take into account the challenges that such students may also face in their daily life. First-generation or low-income students may be working, or they may have familial caregiver roles to allow their parents time to work. These tasks are often large time commitments that can limit students' time to spend on classwork or test preparation. Programs that help prepare students to excel on the ACT or the SAT are also often very expensive and may take place on weekends or in the evening when first-generation or low-income students may have other obligations. The tests themselves are costly to a low-income student, and test waivers, if a student knows to apply and is eligible, cover only two test sessions.

Admissions decision makers should also consider employment and family obligations when reviewing résumés. Students who work after school do not have the opportunity to participate in as many extracurricular activities or join as many organizations. Their community service or volunteer activities may pale in comparison to their more advantaged peers as their focus is on their economic realities rather than developing an impressive résumé.

First-generation college students typically do not have parents who can remind them of the importance of a varied and well-rounded résumé, and they may not be getting that advice from an overburdened and overextended high school guidance counselor. Low-income students may lack the financial resources to participate in expensive activities such as sports, fine arts, or travel, and they may not be able to commit time away from paid activities for extracurricular options. We also cannot assume that all students have the transportation options to participate in activities; they rarely own a car, and often their parents must work or live too far from school to pick them up. If they lack transportation other than the school bus, they typically cannot stay after school to participate in club meetings.

An admissions process that takes into account a student's background—including all the variables that can affect their test scores, grade point average,

class rank, and résumé—should result in more first-generation and low-income college students receiving an invitation to join an honors program or college. Once admitted, these students then need recruiters and honors staff who are available to answer questions and help encourage enrollment. Current honors students who are themselves first-generation or low-income may be able to ease fears about fitting in or handling the academic expectations.

Once students have made it to campus and are enrolled in honors, then the challenge switches to providing a supportive yet challenging environment. This support should be initiated from the very beginning since research has shown that these students are at higher risk of leaving the institution before their second year (Adelman). A thoughtful, cohesive honors curriculum, an engaged honors community, academic advising and mentoring, and support from honors faculty and staff can provide an academic home for these diverse students, a place where they can go to find answers to questions they may not yet know they have.

I know how important education is in breaking the cycle of poverty because I have been there. I grew up as a low-income, first-generation college student in the foothills of North Carolina. My father, a single parent, worked in the furniture manufacturing industry as this field was mostly moving production overseas. Neither of my parents graduated from high school. Most adults worked in furniture or textile plants in labor-intensive and tiring positions. When the plants went on reduced operations, we struggled to make ends meet. I knew that education was my only way out of factory work. Today, most of those factories are closed, and most people work in retail or service positions, many for near-minimum wage. I attended college and then graduate school, staying in school far past the point where my relatives understood my reasoning. I am sure they gave up all hope of my eventual graduation, though it did come in (much) time. Today, I have the privilege of working with honors students as a professional thanks to the education I sought and the many faculty and staff members who helped me along the way.

By expanding admissions processes to carefully consider students from first-generation and low-income backgrounds, honors programs and colleges not only increase the diversity of their programs and add richness and depth to their classes, but they also make a significant difference in the individual lives of the students who enroll. Reviewing applications takes more time, but it pays dividends to honors as well as, most importantly, to individual students.

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