Equity and Inclusion in Honors:
A Case Study of Admissions Changes

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Abstract: Creative levers for change often emerge in times of institutional uncertainty. As higher education continues to confront institutional racism, honors programs can exercise their power to increase diversity and educational outcomes for excluded and marginalized students, as well as influence related university-level policy. This case study chronicles dramatic changes to admissions policies and programmatic offerings in honors between 2020-2023. Changes in admissions practices markedly diversified the student body, moving it from a 60% white population to 60% minority population in just three years. Conversations around race and racism were initiated, inculcating a culture of inclusion rather than elitist exceptionalism. As activism and accountability coalesced, authors observe changes in student culture and a period of pushback from university administration. A student-faculty coalition formed to ultimately ensure change. This study shows that changing diversity and inclusion policies in honors is possible and worthwhile, while also challenging, complex, and perpetually incomplete. The authors' narrative provides guidance for others contemplating similar changes, positing that honors education is worth defending if it remains a place where the soul of the educational mission is preserved, defended, and made available to all who genuinely desire to participate in it.

Keywords: higher education—honors programs & colleges; educational equalization; enrollment management; inclusive education; Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles (CA) – Honors Program

BACKGROUND

Institutions of higher education must address inequities stemming from systemic and institutionalized racism, particularly within the United States, where historic connections to slavery have perpetuated stark, racially divided differences in income, generational wealth, and higher education opportunities and outcomes (Bhopal, 2017; Patton, 2016; Yarrison, 2019). The enduring legacy of slavery, segregation, settler-colonialism, and institutionalized racism contributes to lower admission rates, limited access to premier educational opportunities, and less favorable outcomes for members of groups who have been historically excluded and marginalized in higher education. These include graduation rates, job placement, and prospects for post-baccalaureate study (Paulsen & St. John, 2002; St. John et al., 2005). Scholars have demonstrated that higher education frequently perpetuates colonial racism by expecting students to conform to white, Western notions of academic behavior, standards of excellence, and markers of success (Darder, 2015; Russo, 2019, Chapter 3; Scott, 2017).

This lack of equity can be exacerbated within collegiate honors programs, which often embed a layer of exclusion and elitism within an already exclusive and elitist institution, and which are, on average, even less diverse than most undergraduate institutions (Cognard-Black & Spisak, 2019). Yet, collegiate honors programs are often uniquely suited to help address some issues in higher education related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and access (DEIA). Of course, honors programs vary in structure and autonomy. They often have significant control, however, over their own curriculum, recruitment, and admissions practices. This means that honors programs have the power to affect inequities in creative ways. For instance, with regard to recruitment and admissions, honors programs may be able to

- Aggressively seek to attract and admit more racially diverse applicants. Even if the university population has little diversity, honors programs can seek to attract applicant pools that are proportionally more diverse.

- Recognize that traditional markers for scholastic success (GPA, standardized test scores, technical writing skills) reinforce class and race biases while inaccurately predicting scholastic success (Cognard-Black & Spisak, 2021; Yarrison, 2021). Instead, programs can admit students on wholly (and holistically) different criteria, such

as multidisciplinary creativity, unique life experience, the ability to overcome challenges, or a desire to be a part of a group of students who loves learning (Guzy, 2018). Honors programs can, as Gazing Wolf (2022) puts it, "pursue the wisdom to see each other as whole beings" (139).

- Admit students who not only come from diverse backgrounds, but who have demonstrated that they value, champion, and advocate diversity and equity issues. Honors programs can consciously select activist students who will demand continuous improvement in admissions as well as better resources, more appropriate academic and behavioral disciplinary policies, and a holistic culture of inclusion.

- Use outcomes from their own recruitment and admissions practices to influence university-level policy and practice because honors programs are often pointed to by university administrators as exemplars of a university's mission.

On the other hand, honors programs face several unique challenges when it comes to access, inclusion, and equity within higher education. First, most honors programs have limited influence: they typically do not determine university-level recruitment or admissions; they cannot affect the documented under-identification of high-potential students from low income communities, racial and ethnic minority populations, and rural areas (Borland, 2004; Borland & Wright, 1994; Frasier, 1991); they interact with students too late to address differences in college preparation; and they often have insufficient scholarship funding to affect lower-income students' financial access to private institutions.

Second, honors programs are, by definition, exclusive and selective spaces within an already exclusive academic environment simply because they can only include some of the students in an institution (Cognard-Black & Spisak, 2021; Darder, 2015). This fact can explain why students from historically under-represented and marginalized groups report feeling disconnected, estranged, and stigmatized within honors programs (Singla et al., 2023).

Third, the argument has been made that honors programs should only admit students with the highest levels of traditionally defined academic aptitude. As Norm Weiner (2009) has argued, "It seems hardly a cause for alarm

that we want the best of our students in an honors program" (p. 21). Honors programs offer what the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) describes as "in-class and extracurricular activities that are measurably broader, deeper, or more complex than comparable learning experiences typically found at institutions of higher education" (National Collegiate Honors Council, 2013). This "rigorous" environment, it has been argued, may require students to have exceptional traditional academic skills to succeed, if it is presumed that the ability to learn in these broader, deeper, or more complex ways is indexed to traditional metrics of academic excellence-such as GPA, class-rank, or standardized test scores. There is opposition to this view within the NCHC literature (e.g., Frost, 2019; Guzy, 2018; Yarrison, 2019), but it is nonetheless common within honors communities (e.g., Rinn & Cobane, 2009; Spurrier, 2009; Weiner, 2009).

Fourth, admissions decisions—which are the focus of this paper—can influence student demographics, but demographics are only a part of increasing DEIA in honors education. Students' academic backgrounds are only partly determined by race, and their lived experiences within higher education are only partly determined by the racial diversity of their cohort. Deeper institutional inequities also affect whether students can afford to attend, and whether they feel included, supported, and valued once they do (Singla et al., 2023). Often, these issues exist beyond the control of a small program.

Given these opportunities and challenges, what is the role of honors programs in correcting inequities of inclusion and access perpetuated by the presence of systemic racism within higher education? As a previous issue of this journal explored (Forum, 2023), periods of institutional or broader regime change can create real challenges to honors programs, but they can also open opportunities for programmatic innovation, revitalization, and radical reimagination. Analogously, in recent years, COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter have caused widespread paradigm shifts to nearly every aspect of higher education, including how we think about admissions, curriculum, and programming within honors programs.

Given this landscape, we propose that honors programs can and should leverage their unique capabilities and positionality within the university to create opportunities for historically excluded populations. Our goal in this paper is to convey our experiences with this mission during our tenure as honors program leaders from 2020-2023 in order to share outcomes, evidence, and lessons to others considering a similar mission.

PREFATORY NOTES ON THE STORY WE TELL

Between 2020–2023, the University Honors Program at Loyola Marymount University (LMU) underwent a series of changes to its admissions policies and programing with the explicit aims of increasing racial and ethnic diversity, overcoming racial and ethnic barriers to access, and creating a more inclusive honors culture. Throughout this period, in the regular course of our jobs, honors leadership collected data for our own internal progress-tracking purposes on both the process and the effects of these changes. These data sources included web-based surveys, formal town hall meetings, informal focus groups, and hallway and classroom conversations. We collected these data not with statistical analysis or causal inference in mind, but rather to help us better understand student sentiment and program culture. Therefore, the data gathered during this period are messy—they are both quantitative and qualitative, experiential and anecdotal, and at times subjective while, at other moments, more objective. The information and instruments we rely on in this paper are difficult to share directly, and in most cases impossible to reproduce verbatim. Therefore, the inferences we draw from these data are limited but not unfounded. In an ideal world, we would have foreseen our changes resulting in an academic study, and we would have designed our data collection with different intentions. Instead, we have drawn on our own subjective accounts (verified with institutional data where feasible) of how changes in our honors program's admissions practices caused notable demographic changes in the program and supported a cultural shift within our student cohort.

Three additional prefatory notes are in order: first, we aim to tell an authentic, transparent story. This may strike some readers as uncomfortable at times since we may publicly state things that are normally confined to private conversations. As Mossimo Rondolino (2023) recently observed in this journal, however, transparency is invaluable in fostering community and collaboration. "Ultimately," he argues, "this [transparent] approach in and for honors arises from a vision for open, activist engagement as a moral necessity" (30). We believe this to be true not only within but among honors programs.

Second, retelling this story will suggest that our honors program prior to the case study period was insufficiently diverse, inclusive, and antiracist—which of course it was. However, this is not to suggest that program leaders prior to this period did not recognize this, or that they did not work to correct it; in fact, decades of program leaders have worked fervently and made

significant strides in this area. We also do not want to suggest that we had any special talents or knowledge that previous leaders lacked; indeed, most of what we did is simply follow the best practices frequently reported in this journal (e.g., Cognard-Black & Spisak, 2021; Smith & Zagurski, 2013). In other words, we did not simply wander in and "solve" the problem. As this story reveals, we capitalized on several broad trends that converged in unique ways and under conditions that could not have been predicted. It is also not to suggest that all our program's problems have been solved; it remains insufficiently diverse, inclusive, and antiracist, and correcting this situation will take not years, but decades of sustained effort. Moreover, we understand genuine and meaningful justice not as an end-state or distributive outcome that can be reached numerically or statistically (see Young, 1990). Rather, justice is a radically open-ended project, which cannot ever be a matter of "success": it is one of building relations between persons (Dilts, 2017).

Finally, retelling this story transparently involves describing administrative pushback that we experienced. As we tell any part of this story, our goal is not to disparage anyone or suggest nefarious intent on anyone's part. We believe that everyone meant well for the students and the institution and acted in good faith to the best of their ability despite their being constraints and demands. The lessons here are about power structures and conflicting administrative incentives within a complex institution, not the failings of individuals. Nevertheless, an important part of this story, as we understand it, is that we were met with pushback not because we failed to increase the descriptive and substantive diversity of our honors program, but rather, in meaningful ways, because we succeeded—and our success ran counter to other university-level administrative objectives.

BACKGROUND AND REPORTING STRUCTURE

The case study context was the University Honors Program at Loyola Marymount University, a private Jesuit and Marymount university located in Los Angeles, California, which is itself a diverse metropolitan region. As of 2020, the roughly 6,500 undergraduate students were 45% white, 21% Hispanic/Latinx, 11% Asian, and 7% Black/African American, with the remainder mixed race or nonresident/international. Student four-year retention at the university averaged roughly 80% over the last decade (Loyola Marymount University, 2024). LMU has a stated mission for "the encouragement of learning," "the education of the whole person," and "the service of faith and

the promotion of justice" (Loyola Marymount University, n.d.). In its most recent strategic plan, the university has committed to "uphold anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion in all that we do," including a specific commitment to "increase the diversity of our LMU students," and to "make our organizational climate and culture more anti-racist, diverse, equitable, and inclusive at all levels through systemic analysis of structures and practices" (Loyola Marymount University, 2021). This mission is reflected in the university honors program's mission directly; in particular, the program leadership has tried to place anti-racism and inclusivity at the center of its activities.

The university honors program spans the university's five colleges (liberal arts, science and engineering, communications and fine arts, business, and film and television) and accepts students from any major. In recent years, each honors cohort has ranged from 50 to 70 students, representing roughly 3% of the university student body. Over the case study period, retention in honors over a student's four years averaged 78%, and honors student retention at the university averaged 98%.

Figure 1. LMU Honors Program and Office of Admissions: Reporting Structure During the Case Study Period
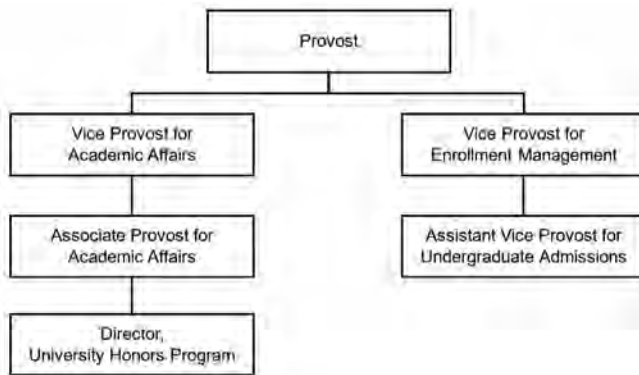
Organizationally, the honors program was overseen by a tenured faculty director and tenured faculty associate director (who, in transparency, are the authors, referred to herein as "we," "us," or "honors leadership"), as well as an additional faculty advisor. The program was advised by a faculty senate-appointed faculty advisory council and a student-elected student advisory council. As of May 2023, the director reported to the associate provost for academic affairs, who reported to the vice provost for academic affairs, who

reported to the provost (see Figure 1). It is worth pointing out that this structure stands in contrast to the recommendations of the NCHC that the honors director should report directly to the chief academic officer of the institution ("NCHC Shared Principles and Practices of Honors Education," (2022) and the earlier "Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program" (2008)).

Also relevant is the reporting structure of the university's Office of Admissions. The assistant vice provost for undergraduate admissions (henceforth, the "admissions director") oversaw the undergraduate admissions process, including the selection of university-level scholarship recipients and several other decisions that impacted honors program admissions. The admissions director reported to the vice provost for enrollment management, who reported to the provost.
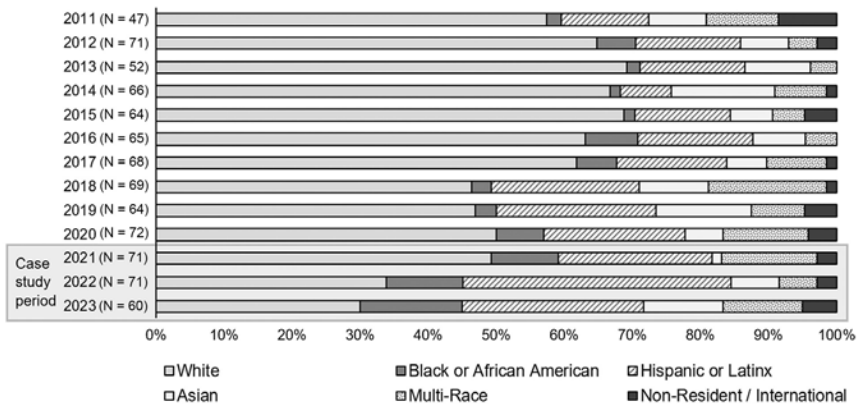
HONORS ADMISSIONS

Prior to the case study period, first-year students were admitted to the honors program in one of three ways: university-level scholarship recipients (who could receive either full-ride or half-ride financial aid) were guaranteed admission to the honors program as a perk of their scholarship package. These scholarship recipients made up roughly 60% of each cohort. These scholarships were merit-based and need-blind. The recipients of these scholarships were determined by the admissions director without input from honors leadership. Conversations with the admissions director revealed that scholarship selections were based primarily on quantitative indicators such as high school grade point average (GPA), standardized test scores (SAT and ACT), and class rank. Select students were also invited to apply via a letter sent by the admissions office. Again, these students were selected without input from honors leadership, and again, subsequent conversations revealed that selections were based primarily on the same quantitative indicators (GPA, standardized test scores, and class rank). Finally, any student who found the honors program website could submit an application made available there. Experience suggested that this pathway was rare, yielding only a handful of applicants each year.

The honors program application existed as an additional requirement and was not a part of the university's normal application packet. The honors application materials consisted of a cover letter, test scores and GPA, several short essays, a longer essay based on several prompt options, optional supplemental portfolio materials, and a letter of recommendation. These student

applications were read by both the honors faculty advisory committee and the honors faculty leadership team. Historically, advisory committee members were instructed to judge applications rigorously on metrics like writing mechanics, GPA, and interdisciplinarity. Faculty application readers were also asked to judge how applicants saw connections between traditional disciplinary fields.

Prior to the case study period, the honors program was markedly less racially diverse than the university at large, which was itself far less diverse than the surrounding city. Honors program demographics from 2011–2023 are shown in Figure 2. Admissions changes affected the 2021–2023 Cohorts.

Figure 2. Honors Race and Ethnicity Demographics by Cohort, 2011–2023

The final cohort admitted prior to the case study period admissions changes was 2020. For the decade prior to the case study period, the honors program student population averaged 60% white, 4% Black, 17% Hispanic or Latinx, 9% Asian, and 8% Multi-Race. By comparison, these figures for the university were 45% white, 7% Black, 21% Hispanic or Latinx, 11% Asian, and 8% Multi-race (see Figure 3). Parity was closer in terms of sex-assigned-at-birth, with 58% of the honors cohort identifying as female compared to 55% of the broader university population. Conversations with prior honors leadership revealed that efforts to increase diversity within honors began in earnest in 2016, with changes to application review and pressure on the admissions office to increase the diversity of scholarship recipients. Based on the demographic statistics, these changes appear to have started bearing fruit in 2018, particularly among Hispanic/Latinx and Multi-Race students.

A TIME OF UNCERTAINTY AND OPPORTUNITY

The case study period began in summer 2020, which coincided with several macro and institutional trends. First, the world was in the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic. The university, like many across the world, was fully remote. Like many institutions, the university experienced significant staffing shortages in key areas of operations, which, coupled with online communication and general uncertainty about institutional policies, created an environment of decreased oversight and increased department and program autonomy. This autonomy turned out to be important to the prospects of the honors program's case study initiatives. Second, university administrators opted to make standardized test reporting optional for first-year applicants, which meant that we could not rely on this information for admissions decisions. Third, two key changes marked the beginning of the case study period: the appointment of a new admissions director and the appointment of a new honors director. Finally, senior university administrators made public commitments to anti-racism in response to the largest mass uprisings in the United States for racial justice in decades following the murder of George Floyd.

CASE STUDY

We began our leadership tenure by setting the explicit goal to make the honors program actively inclusive and anti-racist. Our first priority was to increase the racial and ethnic diversity of the honors student body, particularly among Black and Hispanic/Latinx students, traditionally the most underrepresented groups in honors programs (Cognard-Black & Spisak, 2019). We began with an intense and earnest period of self-reflection about how the program was complicit in institutional racism. This inquiry consisted of looking at student demographic data, admissions practices, programming, diversity of honors faculty, treatment of diversity in course content and honors policies, and perhaps most importantly, student perceptions of—and lived experience within—the program. Taken as a whole, our interpretation of these data revealed many important findings that we categorize into three themes:

Race, racism, equity, and access within the honors program

- We heard students describe honors as an exclusive space for wealthy white students. The fact that student perception did not match official

demographics made this finding even more important. Clearly something about the program created a discrepancy between statistics and lived experience.

- Discussions with students offered a possible explanation for this discrepancy: that students who identified as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), although technically present in the program, did not feel welcome in the community and did not show up to events, and consequently were perceived to be absent. Relatedly, we heard from BIPOC students who described heightened imposter syndrome within the honors community, and were, therefore, less likely to speak up or show up. Again, this situation led to their perceived absence. This finding is consistent across the research published by NCHC (e.g., Davis, 2018; Singla et al., 2023; Yarrison, 2019).

- We noticed that Black students were disproportionately more likely to drop honors at some point during their four years than white students.

- We heard students voice concerns that honors perpetuated settler colonialism in its curricula and faculty selection, in its event topics and speaker selections, and among its community standards for conduct. Among these complaints were a perceived lack of honors faculty of color, little representation of non-European authors and concepts in honors classes, and pedagogy that favors and reinforces Western notions of intelligence, teaching, learning, and evaluation. For instance, students reported that they believed honors classes overemphasized the Western "canon" while ignoring knowledge from BIPOC thinkers, and they criticized the fact that honors used traditional, potentially biased measures of success such as GPA in determining good academic standing.

- Students expressed a desire for more anti-racist activism from program leadership (and also committed to activism from their own ranks).

Exclusivity, elitism, and a hierarchy within the honors student body

- Students perceived the honors program to be for students who were "smart" as defined by metrics like GPA and test scores. Some students saw this trait as positive, while others actively tried to hide

their membership in honors to their peers. This behavior corroborates Singla, et al. (2023), who note that the honors label can create a stigma that prevents students from integrating into the wider campus community.

- Many students opposed the exclusive nature of the honors program. They were particularly concerned about who was invited to be a part of the program and on what basis they were selected.

- Students perceived a schism within the student body, differentiated by students who had to apply to the program vis-a-vis students who were admitted as part of a scholarship. This scholar vs. applicant schism seemed to mirror that of first-year vs. transfer students described at other institutions (e.g., Singla et al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2019), and led to significant intracohort resentment.

Student priorities, incentives, and commitment to honors mission and values

- Many students reported to us that either they themselves or their peers were uncommitted to the program's values, goals, and community standards. For instance, students complained about the standards for good standing, such as the requirement to attend extracurricular intellectual events, claiming they distracted from their other collegiate priorities; meanwhile, other students lamented that these very same events were poorly attended by their peers.

- We noticed many students were unable to articulate either the values of the program or the value of the program to them. Many viewed it as simply a "badge of honor," a continuation of their high school honors track, or just a path to priority class registration. In short, many students were in the honors program for (what we considered to be) the "wrong reasons."

- Overwhelmingly, we saw that the students who poorly understood the program, who valued the extrinsic benefits of the program, and who complained about the program's requirements were also scholarship recipients. It appeared that students who were both selected by the office of admissions (rather than honors program faculty) and who were handed their admission (rather than having to thoughtfully apply) were less likely to buy into its intellectual mission, values, and community.

These findings were alarming; however, they all pointed, at least partly, to a common cause: the honors program admissions process. Synthesizing these myriad surveys, observations, and conversations, honors leadership theorized that if the admissions process could be overhauled, we could start to solve many of these issues. Thus began our three-year process to redesign honors admissions and track how it affected both the demographics and the student experience in honors.

ADMISSIONS REDESIGN FOR EQUITY AND ACCESS

The NCHC has helpfully created a blueprint for equitable and inclusive honors admissions in their position paper *Honors Enrollment Management: Toward a Theory and Practice of Inclusion* (National Collegiate Honors Council, 2020). This paper has guided admissions changes in several honors programs already (e.g., Ellison, 2023), and it was the foundation for our redesign. NCHC outlines eight principles for inclusive honors admissions:

1. Frame honors in inclusive ways so that all students can see themselves in the program's language.

2. Market and advertise honors to all potential students rather than a select few.

3. Reimagine "invitation only" pathways into honors to include an open application process.

4. Develop holistic honors admission practices that include test-optional, test-flexible, or test-blind approaches.

5. Develop transfer-in options that provide seamless transition from one program to another.

6. Foster relationships with community and campus partners.

7. Eliminate barriers to entrance in honors programs and colleges (application fees, enrollment fees, minimum entrance requirements).

8. Eliminate barriers to continued participation in honors programs and colleges.

We sought to capture each of these principles as fully as possible.

First, we eliminated negative screens. Instead, we invited everyone to apply. Shortly after submitting their university application, *all* university applicants received an email from the honors director with a description of the program, the qualities we sought in honors students, and a link to more information and the application. This was undoubtedly the most important change since it opened the "top of the funnel" as wide as possible, no longer privileging this information to students with high GPAs and test scores. Because honors leadership had no way to contact applicants before they enrolled at the university, this change was made possible only through the help and cooperation of the recently appointed admissions director, who agreed to facilitate this change. As we will detail later, this collaboration was primarily possible because of the increased autonomy we enjoyed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Next, we overhauled the marketing materials. Specifically, we changed the honors website and outreach materials to eliminate exclusive or classist language of "academic achievement," "excellence," being "gifted," as well as to deemphasize grades and test scores. Instead, they emphasized curiosity (the primary quality we focused on during the three-year case study period), potential, and an earnest desire to be a part of a community who wants to get the most out of their intellectual university experience. Additionally, the website clarified the expectations for members of the honors community. The goal in these materials was not to "market" the program but to create an honest picture so that students could better self-select in or out. Interested readers can see the result of this overhaul at an archived version of the Prospective Students page of the honors website (LMU University Honors Program, 2022b).

We made the application process fairer. We originally wanted to eliminate guaranteed admission for university scholarship recipients; however, the office of admissions blocked our efforts here. Nonetheless, in collaboration with the admissions director, we were able to eliminate automatic admission. Scholarship recipients were still guaranteed admission to the honors program but only after submitting a thoughtful application. Additionally, we negotiated the ability to veto cursory or deficient applications.

We simplified and streamlined the honors application. The honors application was built into the same platform used for university admissions, which lowered the application barrier to entry. We also asked about—and signaled for—the qualities we actually wanted in our applicants. The application materials were redesigned to ask directly about the features we were looking for in the cohort—for instance, the main essay asked students to

engage in a "curious journey" on Wikipedia and then reflect on the nature of their own curiosity. The "curious journey" consisted of a two-part essay prompt, asking students to first open the Wikipedia entry for the term "insight," and spend 30 minutes (self-timed) following links according to their own interest. We then asked them to briefly describe where their curiosity had led them, writing a short answer that reported what links they had followed. This short answer question was intended to prime them for a longer open-ended essay asking applicants to analyze their own experience of curiosity: "What is the nature of your curiosity? That is, what kind of a thing is curiosity?" They were invited to draw upon their curious journey (or not), but more importantly, we encouraged them to think not just descriptively, but critically about how their experiences of curiosity connected with how they understood the term. We also included optional open-ended questions on both race/ethnicity and gender rather than using checkboxes. In short, we designed the application materials as a signal of honors' values of intellectual and self-reflective curiosity to help students better self-select.

We eliminated or reduced biased metrics. The honors application was test-blind, even though the university was test-optional. Additionally, at the beginning of each application cycle, honors application reviewers attended a training where we shared both the form and contents of the application, as well as impressed upon readers our explicit goals for diversity (discussed above). In contrast to previous periods, application reviewers were instructed to deemphasize grades and classical writing mechanics. Instead, they were asked to evaluate knowledge of and fit with the honors community, demonstrated curiosity, and multidisciplinary interest. Reviewers were asked to comment on applicants' ability to overcome adversity and on equity issues in the applicant's high school experience. Each application was read by two readers who could not see the other's comments. In the final selection, the leadership team read each application again and holistically evaluated the application, the two readers' comments, and the demographics of the emerging cohort to intentionally create an incoming class that was dramatically more diverse.

PROGRAM CHANGES

The NCHC position paper goes further than just admissions changes. Principle #8 suggests that admissions changes are not meaningful unless the program itself is also inclusive and equitable. Along with admissions process changes, we focused core features of the program on issues of race, racism,

and equity. For instance, during the case study period, nearly all honors extracurricular intellectual events were focused on these issues, including lectures from local and invited racial justice scholars, faculty and student panels focused on racial equity and justice, and multiple student-led town halls in response to the murder of George Floyd. This emphasis both signaled the program's commitment to these ideals and created an atmosphere of earnest conversation around race and racism within the student body. Additionally, we emphasized loudly and often (e.g., during the director's annual convocation lecture and group advising sessions as well as on the honors program website) that honors students were not a group of academically elite students; rather, what distinguished them was their shared interest in building a community committed to the principles of liberal education.

We also recruited faculty from departments that had typically been underrepresented in honors courses, such as Asian American Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, and Theater Arts. In our selection, we looked for faculty who employed a diversity of non-standard topics, reading lists, and pedagogy. For instance, we offered more courses that focused on Eastern philosophy and theology; that featured Black, Indigenous, queer, and feminist authors over traditionally canonized writers; and that incorporated experiential learning and novel assessment methods such as "ungrading" (Blum, 2020).

Another important change was to the first-year honors colloquium, taken in the first semester by every incoming honors student and taught by the honors director. Aside from being a venue to further inculcate values of curiosity and community, the curriculum was designed to close the preparation gap between students arriving with varying high school experiences. Specifically, the curriculum included intensive, individualized instruction on how to read deeply, think carefully, and write clearly at the level expected by honors faculty.

Finally, we made several changes designed to eliminate barriers to continued participation based on financial access and extracurricular commitments. For instance, we moved the honors freshmen "living-learning community" out of a newer dorm building that carried a $1,300 annual surcharge and into a building with a base-level on-campus housing cost. Additionally, we redirected scholarship funds to go to students with high financial need rather than high academic performance. We also rewrote the honors academic good standing policy, eliminating a simple GPA-based cutoff in favor of a holistic review based on the Jesuit examen.

RESULTS

The results of the case study changes will be discussed in three parts: the initial results, the period of institutional pushback, and our overall three-year results.

Years 1 and 2—Initial Progress

The initial results were dramatic. Honors program applications roughly doubled (from around 200 per year to 350–450, out of roughly 9,000 students admitted to the university). The proportion of applications from Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students remained the same as prior years (30%), but a larger application pool meant there were more applicants of color to consider. The resulting cohort demographics for this period are shown in years 2021 and 2022 in Figure 2.

We faced two specific challenges in these initial years that show up in the demographic data. First, moving the application to the university application portal meant navigating a new data reporting system. Unfortunately, in 2021 we misinterpreted the racial data as we were creating the final cohort (specifically, we mistakenly believed that the Hispanic/Latino ethnicity category was included within the "white" racial category, as is done on the U.S. Census; in fact, it was separate. This led us to believe we admitted more Hispanic/Latin students than we really had). This was a regrettable error that highlights both the complexity of race and ethnicity reporting and the need for accurate real-time data in honors enrollment management. As a result, although the 2021 cohort included proportionally more Black/African American students than previously, it did not reflect the scale of change that was possible given the diversity of the applicant pool.

Second, even though we attracted and admitted more students of color, these students were less likely than white students to accept their admission to the honors program, and they were also more likely to "melt" over the summer. We had no control over students who decided not to attend the university, and, as we heard in conversations with some of these students, this decision was at least sometimes due to financial considerations—notably, in 2020 the office of admissions eliminated full-ride "merit" scholarships, instead increasing the number of half-ride scholarships. However, we were troubled that the majority of non-white students who decided to attend LMU chose not to accept their honors seat. Likely, these decisions were influenced by the same problems we described above—a fear of not fitting in. Additionally, students of color continued to leave honors at

a higher rate than white students. It seemed that even though more students of color were admitted, they still did not "see themselves" in the program.

Despite these challenges, the more pronounced demographic impact of the admissions changes appears with the 2022 cohort. This cohort included 66% minority students, the highest-yet proportion of Black/African American students, as well as more Hispanic/Latinx students than white students, marking this as the first-time that honors at LMU was a majority-minority program overall.

Perhaps more importantly, the student culture began to notably change with both the 2021 and 2022 cohorts. In our estimation, these cohorts seemed more engaged with both each other and with global issues; they were more outspoken about issues of race and racism; and they were more critical of the institution and the program. More than statistical demographic changes, these cultural changes showed that our admissions process was selecting for different qualities than it previously had.

Even though university scholarship recipients were still guaranteed admission to honors upon completing an application, the proportion of scholarship recipients in the program dropped from 60% to 30% in the case study period. This change indicated that a substantial portion of scholarship recipients were not sufficiently interested in honors to fill out an application. Requiring applicants to put in some effort demands that they think about where to spend that effort. Screening out these students made room for roughly ten more students per cohort who genuinely valued what the honors community offered and who wanted to contribute to its success.

Year 3—Administrative Pushback

The changes in the honors cohorts during 2021–2022 were significant enough to attract the attention of top university administrators. At the beginning of the 2023 application cycle, the admissions director informed the honors director that, in contrast to the previous two years, the office of admissions would not send honors invitations to all LMU applicants, but rather a select few determined by GPA, test scores, and "fit with university mission" (as determined by the Office of Admissions, and never defined for us). In essence, things were going to go back to the way they were prior to our case study changes.

This decision was made unilaterally by the vice provost for enrollment management. When honors leadership learned of this decision, we appealed to the associate provost for undergraduate education. Our position was that the admissions changes were DEIA initiatives rooted in best practices from

NCHC, proven to be effective over the first two years of their implementation, and in line with LMU's stated DEIA priorities. Reversing effective DEIA initiatives, the honors leadership team argued, was antithetical to the principles of anti-racism to which the institution had committed itself. The associate provost took our concerns to the vice provost for undergraduate education, who then relayed them to the provost.

Enrollment management's stated rationale for reversing the successful DEIA initiative in honors was a fear that if students were invited to apply to honors and were subsequently rejected, the rejection would sour them on the university as a whole; as a result, they may choose to attend elsewhere. Because LMU is a tuition-driven institution, losing potential students is a serious concern. No data or evidence, however, was presented to honors leadership that showed that this fear had materialized in the previous two years.

The case was decided in a closed-door meeting from which honors leadership was barred, and in that meeting the provost ultimately supported the view of the vice provost for enrollment management: honors invitation letters would be limited to a select few incoming students. This closed-door meeting highlights the importance of the NCHC's recommendations that the honors director report directly to the chief academic officer. Not only was it problematic on principle to bar the director from a meeting that fundamentally affected the honors program, but it also created confusion and miscommunication that led to ineffective decision making and cost months of precious time during the admissions cycle. A direct reporting structure could have avoided significant conflict and wasted resources.

The provost's decision threatened to undo the changes to the honors program that were proven to be effective during the first two years of the case study. In our opinion, this decision contradicted the institution's public commitments to antiracism and violated NCHC's inclusive enrollment principles #2, #3, and #7. Basing honors invitations on GPA and test scores reinforces institutionalized racism and historical disadvantages suffered by students of color. It appeared that at the highest levels of university administration, the potential of losing students due to an honors rejection seemed to outweigh the injustice of gatekeeping honors invitations.

Reversing this decision became the top priority for honors leadership and many passionate honors faculty and students. These students pushed the school newspaper to publish an article about the case study admissions changes and the threat to overturn them (Benis, 2023). They also formed a grassroots coalition called The Equity Project, whose mission was to push both the program and the institution to fulfill their commitments with actions.

After months of pressure, these efforts led to follow-up meetings that included the provost, vice provost for enrollment management, honors leadership, honors faculty and the faculty advisory committee, the student advisory committee, and The Equity Project. Happily, the meeting ended with a "compromise" that letters would be sent to all admitted students, but they would not include the word "invitation." Semantics aside, every student would still be given information about the honors program and a direct link to apply. It was a critical victory for the future of diversity in our honors program.

There were three features of these meetings worth pointing out. First, there were multiple disagreements during these meetings that turned out to be miscommunications and misunderstandings of what we were trying to do. However, even after this confusion was cleared up, the vice provost for enrollment management reiterated their insistence on sending invitations only to select admitted students based primarily on traditional metrics. So, while much of the confusion would have been avoided with a direct reporting line between the honors director and the provost, it was also clear that there were competing interests between different units of the university.

Second, dozens of students showed up in support of honors' admissions changes—in meetings, in social media posts, in emails to the provost, and in townhalls. This student support made it more difficult for upper administrators to ignore the program's proven, effective, equity-based changes. Students can be the most powerful stakeholder group on any campus; in this case, the positive outcome was primarily attributable to student leaders, not faculty activists.

Third, the NCHC position paper, *Honors Enrollment Management*, was indispensable. Honors leadership disseminated the paper before the meetings, and our case was strengthened by the ability to point to an authoritative document and show that we were following best practices. Our program is indebted to the authors of the NCHC paper, and we encourage other programs to use it as a blueprint.

Overall Results

Despite these obstacles, our admissions changes endured for the 2023 cohort, which continued the trend of increased diversity in the program, shown in the last row of Figure 2. Overall, the changes during the case study period changed the demographics of the honors program at LMU in the following ways, also shown in Figure 3:

- After three years of the admissions changes, the honors program was the most diverse in its history, even though the pre-change 2020 cohort was still included in the active student body (2021–2023).

- Not only was the 2023 cohort by far the most diverse yet admitted to honors, the combined effect of the 2022 and 2023 cohorts was that the active student population was composed of 60% historically underrepresented students, up from 40% before the admissions changes.

- Black students represented 15% of the 2023 cohort, up from 4% before the admissions changes.

- Hispanic and Latinx students represented 27% of the 2023 cohort, up from 17% before the admissions changes.

- Multi-race students represented 12% of the 2023 cohort, up from 8% before the admissions changes.

Figure 3. Honors Program Race and Ethnicity Demographics Before and After the Case Study Period, with University-Wide Figures for Comparison
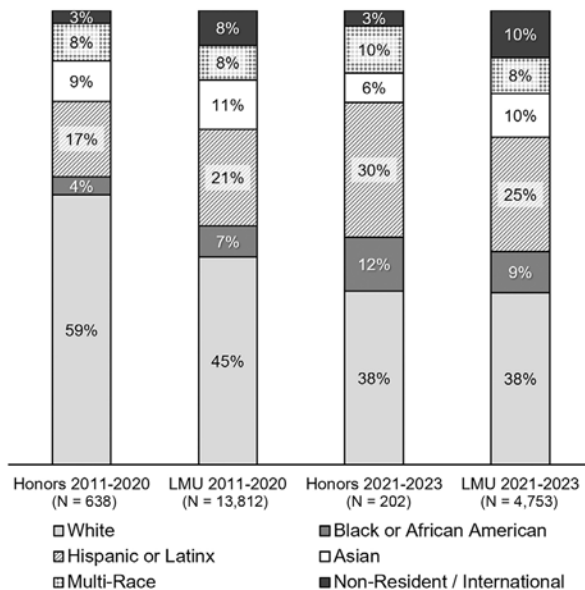
At the end of the case study period, the honors student advisory council was planning changes to the fall honors orientation program to front-load the community expectations for incoming students and model effective and respectful community engagement specifically, activities based on mutual aid projects and panels about having effective conversations on sensitive topics like race, racism, gender and sexuality, and class inequity. The fact that these initiatives were no longer top-down directives, but bottom-up expressions of the community's values is a testament to the changed student body and program culture.

OBSERVATIONS, LESSONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

We hope the outcomes of this case study will continue to develop in the years to come. So far, however, there are seven general conclusions we can draw from this experience.

Change is possible, and uncertain institutional circumstances can create strategic moments of possibility. One of the revelations from the institutional pushback in year 3 was that some of the changes to honors admissions actually ran counter to other administrative priorities. It became apparent that we were only able to implement the changes in the first place because the COVID-19 environment was confusing, making it possible for us to act without upper administrators noticing. By the time they had the bandwidth to check in, we had the track record, student support, and institutional capital to ensure our changes survived.

Change takes a long time. Our program still has a long way to go. Every internal student climate survey we conducted during the three-year period continued to show that students felt honors was white, elitist, and exclusionary—this was especially felt by students of color and members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Change is hard. Introducing change often reveals complex and sometimes competing needs and values within an institution. This situation makes for slow, often Sisyphean progress. We learned that people at many different levels will stand in the way of change for reasons that make sense to them. As we noted in the introduction, we believe everyone acted in good faith for the institution and the students. Yet, competing demands and binding constraints can lead to resistance, sometimes from unexpected groups. For instance, in each of our internal surveys we heard from small groups of students who resented our changes. To quote one respondent, "Honestly, I wish that honors would be more how it used to be in 2019 and earlier years.

It is explicitly called the 'Honors' Program, [so] this program should admit a majority of students based on academic performance" (LMU University Honors Program, 2022a). On the other hand, often our loudest critics were our activist students whose complaint was that we were not doing enough quickly enough.

Change is complex. Demographics are only one component to addressing equity and inclusion in honors. Yet, they do start moving things in the right direction. As Yarrison (2021) puts it, "Optics matter. Minority students will be more likely to see themselves as welcome if there are more of them" (16). Our experience showed that a demographic change was the first necessary step, but it needs to continue for years before we can be sure that a permanent culture shift has been achieved—or, at least, that a positive trajectory has been firmly established. Even at the end of the case study period, we continued to see students of color drop the program at a higher rate than white students, meaning each cohort became less diverse over time. Additionally, we still had significant internal issues like microaggressions and other conflicts stemming from racial ignorance, similar to those reported by Singla et al. (2023). We were encouraged, however, when we saw more internal self-correction of these behaviors within the new cohorts. Students tended not to sit idly by, but rather felt comfortable correcting their peers when they heard things that were not right. The Equity Project is a great example of what can manifest when increased demographic diversity is combined with admissions policies that select for passionate, activist student leaders. Following Young (1990), this dynamic reflects the fact that justice is not simply a matter of outcomes, but also of transparent processes and meaningful involvement in decision making.

Change is open-ended. Despite three years of intentional effort, Black students still only represent 11% of our case-study-era students, which merely matches the national NCHC average from 2015 (National Collegiate Honors Council, 2015). Indeed, LMU as an institution has also increased its diversity, and by one reading of the data, what the honors program achieved during this period was to move from being a notably non-diverse corner of the university to one that better represents the diversity of the institution. In any case, there is a long way to go.

Change is a relay race. At the end of the case study period, the entire honors leadership team reached the end of their contract terms for these positions and returned to the regular faculty, leaving the changes we started in others' hands. Those individuals are committed to carrying on those changes, but they, too, will term out in several years. For those of us in

programs without permanent staffed leadership, we must do our best to set up successive leaders for sustained success.

Change is personally rewarding. We will not sugarcoat the stress and emotional strain of the case study period. It was truly difficult. However, seeing the change that was possible begin to take shape, gain momentum, and self-perpetuate was truly worthwhile to those of us who took up this work.

One area in which we were unable to make significant headway was access. Part of accessing a program is knowing it exists, and our admissions changes made progress in that area. However, access writ large—financial, cultural, and in terms of belonging—is critically important to the success of the mission of honors education. As Yarrison (2019) argues, "what we call 'access' is really an issue of 'inhospitality'" (27); if honors programs admit more diverse students but do not alter the educational and cultural experience to nurture students' diverse needs, they ultimately change nothing. Changes in admission must be accompanied by changes to programming, course offerings, pedagogy, requirements for good standing, and standards of inclusivity among honors students and faculty.

We suggest to other honors leaders that taking up this work in their own institution is not only possible and rewarding, but critical to the preservation of values dear to honors education and higher education in general. Part of what makes working for systemic change within an institution a worthwhile task is that it can provide an experience of agency, autonomy, and self-determination. This work was focused on diversity and inclusion within honors, but it provided a means to discuss, carve out, and defend other values such as faculty governance, student collaboration, and intellectual autonomy. This work was worthwhile in and of itself.

Practically speaking, honors leaders should use the power they have to make change. As we learned through our experiment with radically changing our admissions process, it is likely that honors leaders have more levers for change than one might think. These levers are only as good, however, as the strength of the coalitions that one builds with faculty and other programs, and in the grassroots power of our students. Remembering that our constituents are students and faculty, not upper-level university administration, is vital. Students and faculty will support honors programs and changes to those programs when they are partners in the work of teaching and learning. This effort means being radically transparent with students in particular. In our case, transparency built trust, buy-in, and support that allowed us to resolve institutional conflicts with administrators. Treating students as

partners rather than customers is essential to this work. It feels good to be in this kind of relationship with those who have placed their trust in us.

Honors programs are worth defending—if they are worth defending. Honors programs tend to be a place where the values of the whole institution are played out in microcosm, and, in the process, they can reveal where the overall institution may have lost its way. If honors programs remain (or become) an elitist enclave within an institution, or if they are reduced to only a recruiting or fundraising tool, something has gone very wrong. Part of the tension that we felt as faculty entrusted with leadership of our honors program was that our program was seen by professional administrators as merely a useful adjunct to the institution rather than one of its beating hearts (or worse, it was not thought of at all). What fighting for racial justice and increased diversity as faculty and students in coalition did, in no small part, was solidify what honors at LMU is and can be: a powerful reminder that faculty and students, working together, **are** the university.

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