

# Mission-Driven and For-Profit: Not Mutually Exclusive

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**R**ussell was one of the first students to join the American Honors Program. He was one of four children raised by a single mother in rural Idaho. After working hard in high school, graduating with statewide honors, and being awarded as the physics student of the year, he lacked the money to pay for college and had no role models to help him apply for scholarships. He moved instead to Kolkata, India, to volunteer at Mother Teresa's Home of the Dying and Destitute. After serving there for five years, he returned home and found a job as a janitor at the nearby four-year college while he attended Spokane Falls Community College. His intention was to transfer to the local four-year college upon completion of his associate's degree, what he perceived to be the only affordable path to a bachelor's degree.

While at SFCC, he learned about its partnership with American Honors and joined the inaugural class. Through the program's one-to-one mentoring and transfer advising, Russell learned how to highlight his rich life experience and to leverage his powerful story and strong academic performance in a rigorous honors program in applying to elite universities. He ended up being accepted to Vanderbilt, Cornell, Tufts, the University of Washington, and Georgetown. He now attends Georgetown on a generous scholarship and works for the Peace Corps office in Washington, DC.

Helping to facilitate stories like Russell's for thousands of first-generation college students is what motivates us at American Honors (AH) and what brought our five current community college partners to AH in the first place, keeping them motivated each day. Our staff includes academics, more than a handful of Teach for America veterans, and academic policy experts, all of whom joined AH in order to expand opportunities they saw underserved in traditional academia.

To provide further context, I joined AH as Director of Academic Affairs and the Teaching and Learning Center after ten years in academia, including six years leading honors programs. Having been with AH for the last five of its twenty-four months since its inception, I have seen more inspirational stories such as Russell's than I had during the previous five years, and I have never

been surrounded by colleagues so mission-driven and dedicated to the success of our students.

I opened this essay with these personal stories to counteract some serious misconceptions in Gary Bell's essay "Honors for Sale." The first and most fundamental problem I see in Bell's essay is the assumption that privatization and a "single-minded pursuit of the dollar" are inherently linked and inseparable. Bell provides several examples of for-profit companies taking shortcuts with disastrous results, but there are many other examples of mission-driven for-profits that employ this funding model as a sustainable way to promote the greater good. Companies such as Newman's Own, Tom's Shoes, Murex Corporation, Brothers' Keeper, and Revolution Foods are but a few examples from a long list and provide ample evidence that for-profit companies need not be villainous entities betrothed to the greed-first philosophy of Gordon Gecko in *Wall Street*.

Chris Romer, President of American Honors, is a former state legislator who focused on social justice and education policy issues during his time in the Colorado State House. Through his close work with Colorado's higher education institutions, creation of several 501(c)(3)'s, and advocacy on behalf of education-oriented non-profits, he learned that, although these groups had the best intentions, they were dependent on grants and variable state funding to achieve their ends. After witnessing admirable non-profits fail to continue their mission after their funding ran out, Romer realized that, in order to increase educational access on a large scale for tens of thousands of underserved but highly qualified students, a different funding model would be necessary. In short, at AH, "for-profit" is a funding model, not a philosophy (Meyer).

Having argued that for-profit status does not necessarily equate "profitization and the unalloyed pursuit of money," as Bell suggests, I need to explain what AH *does* do. Fundamentally, we partner with two-year colleges to provide resources to create an honors program where none existed or to enhance and grow an existing honors program. These resources are applied in three main areas:

1. providing instructional design professionals and a state-of-the-art technology platform to work with faculty to enhance courses and broaden access;
2. providing additional advising/coaching personnel to mentor students, address college success skills, and offer extensive one-on-one transfer assistance; and
3. enhancing the college's marketing and recruiting to increase enrollment.

## INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN

American Honors does not dictate any academic policies or require the adoption of any course materials. Instead, we provide resources to the faculty of our college partners to allow them to enhance and improve their academic program. In particular, we advocate a “flipped classroom” approach, in which a bulk of a course’s content is delivered asynchronously, usually through a learning management system (LMS), in order to free up classroom time for discussion, class activities, and other high-impact engagement practices. Some practitioners have argued that this approach creates improved learning outcomes (Straumsheim), and it might be especially effective when working with the highly motivated population of students usually found in honors programs.

In order to flip a classroom, however, a faculty member needs to spend substantial time redeveloping the course and creating effective asynchronous materials. While many colleges have instructional design professionals on staff, they are often spread so thin that most faculty members have only fleeting opportunities to benefit from their expertise, which is crucial to understanding the full range of educational tools available in an online setting. In contrast, AH works with our partner schools to provide release time for developing an honors course in the flipped model and then assigns one of our instructional designers to work one-on-one with the faculty member throughout the academic term, usually meeting virtually for one to three hours per week. Throughout the process, the faculty member is in control of the process and makes all curricular decisions, with the instructional designer offering technical and best-practices advice.

## ADVISING

For many two-year colleges, the student/advisor ratio can be eight hundred or a thousand to one, which is higher than that at most four-year programs despite the fact that students at two-year schools are more likely to be first-generation; while 40.6% of all students begin post-secondary education at a two-year school, 54.9% of first-generation students do (Chen 10). Simply stated, many of the students who need the most advising are in situations that provide the least. Even with all the hard work and skills of advisors at two-year institutions, the advisor/student ratios are so large that they do not allow regular contact with a majority of students. AH supplements the advising process by providing mentor coaches at a ratio between eighty and a hundred and fifty to one. They maintain weekly contact with each student and intervene when red flags from low attendance, low grades, or financial aid issues arise. They work with the two-year colleges to enhance or create college success seminars that focus on college success skills, transitioning into transfer advising as the

second year approaches. Access to our current network of thirty-five four-year partners, with whom we have arranged transfer agreements, helps our students consider a larger range of transfer options.

## RECRUITING

Given the fact that “a small minority of high-achieving, low-income students apply [to selective colleges and universities] in a manner that resembles that of their high-achieving counterparts from more affluent families” (Hoxby and Turner 1), significant room for growth exists in two-year honors programs. While large, robust honors programs do exist throughout the country, many other programs lack the resources for the necessary marketing and research necessary to rapidly scale up their programs, as has been shown in a study of honors programs in the Southern states (Owens and Travis). As tuition costs rise and a 2+2 approach, in which students do two years at a community college and two years at a four-year college, becomes increasingly attractive, our marketing team is partnering with two-year colleges to increase their marketing scope, focusing on identifying strong students both locally and globally who would most benefit from an engaging, rigorous two-year honors program before transferring to a four-year college. In this way we are able to enhance college enrollments in three ways: 1) growing the size of the honors program, 2) recruiting able students who are not quite ready for honors to join the community college and potentially transfer into honors after one semester, and 3) attracting international students—currently from fourteen countries—through our network of partners. International students not only bring new revenue but can greatly enrich the honors experience for domestic students, many of whom have never left their state.

The funding for AH comes not from the colleges but from the students, who pay either differential tuition or extra fees to support the program. These amounts vary depending on state funding formulas but average an additional \$2800 a year. This increase is usually low enough to keep the overall tuition close to the maximum Pell Grant amounts, so the neediest students are not excluded from these opportunities. For students considering four-year schools, the program represents a major cost savings, and in many cases our students have gone on to more prestigious four-year schools than they initially intended. Bell writes that these claims are overstated given the fact that four-year college costs include room and board while two-year schools do not. However, even without room and board the students still see a significant savings not just in earning the Associate’s degree but in enhanced scholarships once they transfer. Furthermore, many first-generation students can benefit from the transitional period experienced in a two-year honors program during

which they live at home, take small classes with a supportive peer group, and avoid the pitfalls of dorm life and its increasing cost.

Although I take issue with much of Bell's essay, he eloquently describes the increasing pressures that honors programs face, whether from shrinking state funding and the "loss-leader" model of honors education or simply from lack of a sympathetic administration. Good honors programs require resources: usually an administrative staff, smaller class sizes, and funds for educational experiences such as conference travel, undergraduate research, and other high-impact engagement activities. Given these resource challenges, many two-year colleges struggle to divert resources from other priorities to create or grow an honors program. The business model that American Honors uses avoids the pitfalls of unpredictable state funding or short-term grants, and it leverages private investment to provide the significant upfront funding needed to scale up a new honors program or augment an existing one.

The situation is common, although by no means universal, that two-year schools lack the resources necessary to create large-scale honors programs that can transform the college's image and drive enrollment growth. A number of two-year programs do consistently place their students in prestigious four-year schools, have a robust population, provide engaging and top-notch coursework, and present a wide array of co-curricular activities. These programs have no need to partner with AH, and we view them as great role models. Our goal is simply to expand this type of opportunity to thousands of more students.

The honors world includes a wide array of curricula, approaches, and models, and a public/private partnership such as ours is but one approach; it is proving to be useful to an increasing number of two-year programs, but it is not for everybody. During my previous tenure as an honors director, I appreciated both the diversity of programs and the community's open-minded embrace of all programs large, small, and in-between. This diversity of approaches has created a fertile ground for the sharing of ideas and, as a result, the betterment of honors education throughout the country. I believe that the American Honors approach adds to this variety and can further strengthen the community of faculty and administrators who are dedicated to serving our honors students.

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