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# Being Honors Worthy: Lessons in Supporting Transfer Students

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## Being Honors Worthy: Lessons in Supporting Transfer Students

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**Abstract:** In the ever-growing discussion of how to build and support honors programs that reflect the diverse communities our institutions serve, the recruitment of transfer students has only recently been identified as a key avenue to enacting more equitable programs. Reflecting on four years of recruiting, enrolling, and graduating transfer students in the University Honors Program at the University of California, Davis, we push the conversation beyond how to welcome transfer students in honors to how to meaningfully support them. We present the initial findings of our ongoing self-assessment to stimulate discussion about the unique challenges and opportunities transfer students experience in honors as well as how administrators and practitioners can rethink how our program structures and processes help our transfer students achieve success or hinder them from doing so. Drawing on descriptive statistics and focus groups, we found that, while transfer students in honors outperformed non-honors transfer students with similar backgrounds in terms of GPA and engagement with undergraduate research, many still struggled with not feeling, as one student described, “honors worthy.” Our preliminary findings suggest that concerns over belonging in honors can be mitigated by a cohort model that provides a sense of community, by a restructuring of the GPA requirements to cushion “transfer shock,” and, critically, by mentorship from administrators and faculty. Given the pool of diverse potential honors students currently in the community college pipeline and the recognition within NCHC that diverse cohorts best prepare students to engage meaningfully with the world around them, now is the time to increase the admissions of transfer students into honors programs. Lessons from early adopters such as UC Davis can help initial programming meet students’ needs and cultivate their talents.

**Keywords:** transfer students, diversity, honors, mentoring, research institution

Last year, Patrick Bahls authored “Opening Doors: Facilitating Transfer Students’ Participation in Honors” in this journal. He carefully documented, using websites as sources, what efforts are currently underway to target and welcome transfer students into honors program cohorts. Most of his focus is on the recruitment side: evaluating admissions criteria, articulation agreements, and website language. He concludes that while transfer students should be an important element of program diversity, few honors programs are recruiting them. At the University of California (UC), Davis, we agree with Bahls and would like to contribute another element to the National Collegiate Honors Council’s welcome attention to inclusion of transfer students in honors by discussing how we can support them after they have been recruited. Bahls encourages honors programs to assess whether their curriculum design and requirements for good standing are welcoming to transfer students. Pushing further, we add a focus on community building, undergraduate research, and mentorship. We describe structures that can help transfer students thrive after they have been accepted in honors and how to avoid impediments that we may inadvertently place in their way.

Such questions should be of interest to many honors educators since, as Bahls documented, a great deal of discussion during the last decade in NCHC has focused on the value of diversifying our programs and on the specific approaches to admissions, curriculum, and co-curricular matters that best equip honors graduates to engage successfully with diverse cultures and environments. *Setting the Table for Diversity* (Coleman and Kotinek) in 2010 highlighted the work being done to move from an assumed white-majority student and faculty honors community to one that is diverse, inclusive, and equitable in terms of race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and first-generation college attendance. That volume represents an early effort to convince honors programs across the country to diversify, with particular attention to curricula. The volume signaled a time for “doing something” to recognize diversity within all honors programs. Author Lisa L. Coleman recalled a colleague saying, “everyone, all programs, could do *something* to improve their performance vis-à-vis diversity” (12). Eight years later, NCHC’s published collections on the topic continued to stress curricular diversity while also including a strong push toward diversifying the student body in terms of low-income and historically underrepresented groups.

Following closely on Coleman, Kotinek, and Oda’s 2017 *Occupy Honors Education*, Naomi Yavneh Klos asked how honors programs generally could be places of access, equity, and excellence. For Yavneh Klos, diversity

in honors works on two fronts. First, curricular: enabling students in honors to “learn how to use their gifts to develop an understanding of the world in its complexities” and emerge as graduates who have “the ability to listen to and engage with divergent opinions” (4). Second, demographic: defining eligibility as a broad subset of academic talents across all student socio-economic bands constituting a cohort. Bahls connected the dots between these aims and the often-overlooked prospective honors students that come from community college systems. If we are serious about diversifying our programs, Bahls contended, we would provide a front-and-center space for community college students, who represent a higher percentage of underrepresented backgrounds, limited incomes, and first-generation backgrounds as well as a wider range of ages and previous life experiences.

The value of community college students in diversifying honors was on our minds in 2013 when we restructured the honors offerings at UC Davis to create the single University Honors Program (UHP). The UHP was a reconfiguration of two previous programs. The first, Integrated Studies, was founded in 1969 as a residential, first-year living-learning community with a series of interdisciplinary, issues-focused seminars. The program’s first cohorts consisted primarily of academically strong students seeking unique ways to augment their studies in the face of increasingly large class sizes and siloed majors. Eventually, Integrated Studies came to be viewed as a recruiting venue for Regents Scholars, the most prestigious scholarship in the UC system, which led to its next iteration, the Integrated Studies Honors Program. In 1996, a grass roots group of faculty initiated the Davis Honors Challenge, an open-application program also for academically talented students but one less reliant on the traditional metrics of high school performance and standardized tests used to select Regents Scholars. With its more egalitarian mission, the Honors Challenge Program also had an application-based admission process for students entering as sophomores as well as for transfer students. While the Integrated Studies and Davis Honors programs shared some similar components, the open-application program of Honors Challenge was more focused on facilitating research and service projects with faculty after the first year so that its entering transfer students could “plug in” to the service learning and research project-based parts of its curriculum along with continuing third-year students in the program.

We imagined that the two programs, if brought together, could combine diversity, excellence, curricular rigor, and research engagement. We also sought to draw together the wide-ranging talents of our K–12 education pool

with its greater racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity than is found in our historically preferred feeder schools, even though doing so would likely result in a freshman class in which students were less evenly prepared than would otherwise be the case (Teranishi and Briscoe 592). The first class of UHP students launched in 2014 with three entry points: first-year students upon admission, second-year via an on-campus application process, and transfer students. Of the entering transfer students, 33% were awarded academic-based scholarships, a figure that was slightly lower than the 43% of direct-from-high-school first-year students who received funding. The 2014 transfer students were not the first honors transfers on our campus. What was new, however, was their arrival in a single cohort, recruited from community colleges, that stayed together. Like the UHP first-year students, they opted into honors and formed a community with common coursework and individual research experiences. To denote their full participation as UHP students, they were oriented and graduated together with their fresh-from-high-school program peers. This University Honors Program, with some modifications, continues today.

UC Davis, by design and circumstance, is on the leading edge of the movement to increase the number of transfer students in honors. For that reason, the focus here will not be on all available means for achieving diversity that we have pursued in the UHP but specifically on transfer students. What follows is a preliminary assessment of our experience and our efforts to recruit and retain transfer students, which remain a work in progress. We want more of our students to stay eligible by meeting the GPA minimum. We want to do a better job at recruiting students. We still need to figure out just how much to emphasize research experiences for this cohort. Nonetheless, we believe that the initial findings in our research demonstrate that the UHP's focus on transfer students is succeeding in diversifying our community and improving support for students. We believe that our experience can help other honors programs, particularly at research universities, continue to achieve true diversity of people and thought. Like Bahls, we have found that honors programs must provide visible entry portals for transfer students and a clear curriculum that recognizes the distinct requirements for transfer students and their aims within our institutions. We also contend that honors programs must provide connections between transfer students and faculty who can open doors to research and success within and beyond the institution. At the same time, we must try to prevent transfer students from feeling that they do not belong at our institutions, a feeling that unfortunately the word "honors" can amplify if we fail to define it as transfer-inclusive.

One note of clarification may be helpful at the outset. Readers may wonder why we do not recruit transfer students for the UHP exclusively from honors programs at community colleges. We are, in fact, strengthening our relationship with several regional community colleges that have honors programs. In the last year, especially, we have made presentations to their students, hosted them for informational events on our campus, and increased the number of students we invite from these programs. However, because not every community college we recruit from across California has an honors program, and because the courses in the programs that do exist are not standardized, we cannot fully integrate honors from our community college feeders into honors in the UHP at this time. As honors programs in community colleges become more common across the state and curricular articulations become better defined, we anticipate finding stronger connections between community college honors and UC Davis honors, thus enabling a four-year honors experience for all UHP students, transfer and non-transfer.

## **UC DAVIS UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM (UHP)**

### **Why Focus on Transfer Students?**

Inclusion of transfer students was part of our earliest plans for developing a new honors program, in part because doing so makes sense in our UC context. Consider, for example, that we began working on the new honors program in 2013, the same year the UC Office of the President produced a report urging all UC campuses to do more to recruit and graduate transfer students. Although the UC system had long been a leader in transfer enrollments because of clear articulations across the state between itself and California's 114-campus community college system, UC's new President, Janet Napolitano, wanted us to do more. The report asked us to "recommit to enrolling at least 33% transfers both systemwide and by campus" ("Preparing California" 7). Provided as justification for this agenda were data on the high numbers of limited-income and first-generation students currently in the community college system, 55% and 52%, respectively ("Enhancing" 1). Given the alignment between this system-wide goal and our desire in the UHP to create access and further socio-economic mobility for the next generation of Californians, it made sense that transfer students would be a key component of our revamped honors program.

Given the transfer-positive culture in California, ours is not a story relevant only to honors programs in our state. Across the country there has been

growth in the percentage of community college students who intend to transfer to universities to complete their four-year degrees. One study from the late 1980s found that only one third of “all entering community college students referred to earning a baccalaureate degree as their primary aspiration” (Bah-ruth and Venditti 12). A recent study found that number to be much higher now, with 81% desiring a four-year degree when they began community college (Giancola and Kahlenberg, qtd. in Glynn 1). Still, there is a difference between what students intend and what actually happens. The same study found that within six years only 33% of these students had actually transferred to a four-year institution (Glynn 1).

Not only are the goals of community college students changing, but so is their makeup. According to a 2017 study, at the same time that university-aspiring students are increasing in number, the percentage of “students of color” and individuals who are “first-generation and low-income” is also increasing (Bragg 268). If we want our four-year institutions to attract the most talented and diverse students to tackle society’s problems, we need to help bridge the divide between the kinds of students who are academically capable and motivated in community college and those who ultimately complete four-year degrees. The argument is strong, given these conditions, that diverse honors programs should have points of access at year one and also at year three. Further, the value of including transfer students is not merely to diversify our cohorts and to accelerate the degree-seeking of talented under-represented students but may also be to support their self-efficacy. As David M. Jones reminds us in *Occupy Honors Education*, “honors programs at public universities have often served as a cost-effective way for underserved first-generation students to gain the benefits of high-impact pedagogies such as undergraduate research, smaller class sizes, and the like” (35). Thus, accepting transfer students from community colleges into the honors programs of four-year colleges and universities not only benefits those institutions by helping them attract stronger students but also benefits the transfer students by furnishing them with a stronger four-year degree than they might otherwise have attained.

## **How the UHP Supports Transfer Students**

UC Davis has supported transfer students as they entered the honors program by providing structures that connect them to mentors and scaffold their learning throughout their degree progress. Tailoring the honors experience to transfer students starts with understanding some of the key differences

between first-year admits and transfers. UHP first-year admits experience an immersive program on a number of fronts. They live together in a common residence hall; they take UHP courses that meet general education and graduation requirements; and they take part in a number of co-curricular events. In contrast, transfer students do not inhabit a living learning community because few have indicated that would be an option they desire. Many transfer students in the UHP report that family responsibilities and work schedules affect their ability to participate in opportunities to attend UHP-sponsored social events. Shared course experiences among cohorts of transfer students thus become critical; accordingly, each incoming cohort takes a mandatory seminar in the fall, which, while not required for their major, provides a transfer community experience, and the units count toward their degree.

The required seminar for transfer students has two primary goals: building their initial confidence as they make the transition from community college to a four-year institution and helping them fully achieve their particular learning goals at UC Davis. The class meets once a week for two hours over a ten-week quarter and is team-taught by the UHP academic advisor and Assistant Director, author Heidi van Beek, and a faculty member who is also the Vice Provost and Dean for Undergraduate Education (VPDUE) with administrative responsibility for UHP, author Carolyn Thomas. Sessions are divided into two parts. In the first, students read and discuss a book that explores the history and culture of American universities. In the second, students learn about and discuss resources available on campus to help them achieve their academic and personal goals.

The course has evolved over the years we have taught it, particularly in its now clear division between the element led by the VPDUE and the element led by the academic advisor. We have also better calibrated the assignments in the course to build the skills our students have indicated to be of particular value to them in their first quarter, which include writing response papers, doing research with a partner on one campus resource and presenting it to the class, and meeting with a professor in their department to learn how research works. In-class presentations now are focused on information new transfer students can use: data comparing freshman- and transfer-entry student academic performance (led by the Center for Educational Effectiveness), resources on mental health and work-life balance (led by the Student Health and Counseling Center), and tips for students across disciplines on how they can get involved in research (led by a faculty panel). Our syllabus reflects our desire to help UHP transfer students form a community with each other,

better understand a research university, build their oral and written communication skills, and network with faculty in connections that lead to learning opportunities and open doors. We have also featured the course on our website program description and provided a more substantial overview of it on our preview day in order to achieve the “transparency” (Bahls 77) that helps students with diverse academic preparations understand the value of honors ahead of time instead of waiting until fall quarter to ask or find out.

The importance of mentorship is strongly emphasized to UHP transfer students from the beginning. When they arrive, each student is assigned to the VPDUE as a mentee. This assignment is meant to be temporary, serving as a bridge between the mentorship that students likely had in community college and the mentorship we want them to have from UC faculty in their areas of study. During the required seminar, two sessions are reserved for one-on-one meetings between each student and the VPDUE. Here the aim is for students to have done some background research on the faculty who teach in their department and reflected on their own interests so that a discussion can take place about a possible match between student and professor. An aim of the UHP is to solidify that mentorship match by the end of the first year.

The purpose of this approach is to meet students where they are, recognizing that some students will need additional support from these initial advising sessions to secure a mentorship connection. Thus, during some one-on-one sessions, students inform the VPDUE that they have already located a faculty member they want to work for and made the connection themselves. During others, the two look online together to do that research and think through the possibilities. During still others, students who hesitate to reach out to faculty directly instead help craft an email that the VPDUE sends to particular professors who are of interest, sharing some information about the students and asking if the faculty members would be willing to meet with them. This process helps put the class on equal footing in terms of mentorship. Students who are intimidated receive support; students who have a hard time pairing their interests with faculty research receive a bridge between the two; and students who have already initiated their faculty mentor search receive affirmation for the work they are doing.

The end of the course marks a transition in advising and curriculum. While students are encouraged to continue to meet with their UHP advisors once a quarter, they are also encouraged to connect to their departmental academic advisors. While the VPDUE continues to be available for mentorship, students are encouraged to begin meeting regularly with a faculty mentor

in their area of study. The remainder of their first year, they are focused on the requirements for their major along with two additional UHP activities selected from a list of nine, including study abroad, leadership training, a project management course, a faculty-mentored independent study, an internship, or a community service project. During their second and final year in the program they focus on their “Signature Work.” Typically, they work with a faculty member to conceptualize and complete a thesis or design project. If their GPA has dropped below 3.5, the minimum requirement for an honors thesis in many departments, yet remains above the 3.25 required for program eligibility, they can work with faculty through the UHP to complete an alternative thesis or design project. Through all of these decisions, they are supported by their UHP advisor, who co-taught their initial seminar, to define their own goals and pursue them with success.

In teaching the course, we observed that students feel supported; learn logistical and strategic information to approach their studies with success; and frequently begin the work of discerning their areas of interest and considering research. After the course, students continue to meet with the UHP advisor, van Beek, as they undertake a third-year research or community-service experience and move into a fourth-year Signature Work. They also meet, as they choose, with Thomas, the VPDUE, for informal mentoring. We track students who experience academic difficulty and reach out to support them, and ultimately we attend their successful graduation at the joint UHP spring ceremony. Still, our observations cannot reveal whether the program has achieved its chief aim: to enable transfer students more fully to integrate into the research university so that they experience an enhanced degree of academic success and personal growth through program participation. After four years of seeing the appearance of student success, we wanted to look methodically across quantitative and qualitative data to see what we might be missing.

## LAYING OUT THE APPROACH

Our research team developed a multi-method approach toward internal assessment. Led by the VPDUE, the team included UHP leadership as well as a graduate student researcher. The project aim was to understand how institutional structures—for which they were responsible at different levels within the university hierarchy—support or hamper efforts to recruit, retain, and graduate UHP cohorts that reflect the diversity of California’s communities. In an early research team meeting, one member questioned what might be

behind the imposter syndrome reported by many transfer students in honors: whether it originates with the students themselves or is imposed on them by the institution, i.e., whether the experience of being dislocated originates in our students or in the structures we provide them. By critically examining the rules and support structures for which they are responsible, the research team members found themselves in a unique position that comes with both opportunities and challenges. On the positive side, we could act on findings and make changes as a result of the research. At the same time, we had to retain an openness to findings, especially unflattering ones, in order to maintain validity and rigor.

Presented here are the findings from our initial phase of research, which was designed to gather preliminary data to shape future research questions. This initial phase captured a snapshot of the macrorends in the UHP for the past five years through descriptive statistics and then fleshed them out with insights from students through a small set of focus groups. (Next phases of research will continue with longitudinal tracking of the descriptive statistics, surveys of incoming students, annual focus groups, and ongoing semi-structured interviews.) The goal of the initial phases was twofold: first, to establish a baseline of how the UHP was doing in its efforts to recruit and retain transfer students, especially from historically underrepresented groups; and second, to hear from students themselves what they valued about UHP and what they found challenging or disheartening.

The descriptive statistics derive from data collected by UC Davis's Undergraduate Education. Our research team disaggregated data on program demographics by three categories: underrepresented minorities (African Americans, American Indian/Alaska Native, Chicana/Latinix, and Pacific Islander); first-generation students (neither parent has received a four-year degree); and students of limited income (defined as Pell Grant eligible). Additionally, we looked at the GPAs of transfer students through a recent internal evaluation (Tan 3) and at overall engagement with research through the internal tracking records of UHP administrators.

The focus groups included nine of 55 active UHP students. Conducted in May 2018, the focus groups were led by the graduate student assistant for the project, the only researcher not involved in teaching or administering the UHP, in order to maintain student confidentiality. Seven participants were completing their first year (third quarter) at UC Davis while two were completing their final year. Four of the participants identified as first-generation; three of the four also identified as an underrepresented minority. One of the

nine students identified as limited-income. Students were asked about the value and challenges of participating in the honors program and about their experiences from their time applying to UC Davis through the present. In a “journey map” exercise, students reflected on their most salient memories in honors by writing their high and low points on post-its, which were then affixed to a group map. Students then shared their contributions, often self-identifying collective experiences in subsequent discussions.

The research team developed an iterative process for data analysis, alternating between individual analysis and team debriefings. Research team members individually identified key findings in the descriptive statistics and key threads (codes) from the focus groups, then brought them to group discussions. After the group collectively agreed on preliminary findings, individual team members returned to the dashboard and focus group transcripts to identify data that complicated, corroborated, and/or conflicted with the preliminary findings and then re-grouped again. Throughout the process, team members shared and reflected on how and if the emerging findings corresponded to their own experiences as administrators, advisors, and instructors in the UHP. The process provided opportunities to unpack surprising findings as a team and critically reflect on them together, identifying new opportunities within the research as well as developing responses to programmatic challenges as they were identified.

## **FINDINGS I: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS**

### **Student Population**

Our aim with the University Honors Program from the beginning has been to recruit a diverse group of students who closely reflect the composition of the university’s overall student body. Tables 1 and 2 show the side-by-side comparison of UHP transfer students relative to the total transfer population at UC Davis. In the first two years, the UHP enrolled a lower percentage of transfer students who identified as underrepresented, limited-income, and/or first-generation students than the university did overall. At this point, classes consisted nearly exclusively of prestigious Regents Scholarship holders selected by a process determined outside of any direct UHP influence; UHP was more the recipient than the selector of the honors transfer classes. By the 2016 recruiting year, the program was intentionally working with admissions to identify the highest-achieving transfer students outside the

prestigious scholarship applicants and made offers to students who already had selected UC Davis in their tagged transfers. These recruits included a more diverse range of majors as well as a larger percentage of students who identified as underrepresented, first-generation, and/or limited income than those selected for the Regents Scholarship. In addition to the Regents Scholars yield, these students were offered seats in the UHP. Direct outreach to candidates by the UHP Associate and Assistant Directors was also incorporated into the recruitment approach. An immediate result was that the UHP's transfer cohort was nearly 10% higher in underrepresented students than what was found at UC Davis generally and was close to mirroring the general student population of limited-income students. A 12% gap in number remained between first-generation UHP students and first-generation UC Davis students generally.

### **Academic Performance**

Transfer students, when they move from community college to a four-year institution, frequently struggle to maintain the same GPA that they carried in community college. Exploring GPAs for community college transfer students who entered the UHP with those who did not suggests that transfer students in the UHP were better able to maintain high GPAs, especially in the first quarter, than were their non-UHP peers. Between 2014 and 2017, a total of 110 UHP transfer students entered the program with an average incoming GPA of 3.97 for Regents Scholars and 3.93 for others. When compared to students transferring to UC Davis but not into UHP, all with an incoming GPA of at least 3.5, we see both groups with lower overall GPAs after the first quarter at UC Davis as compared to their incoming GPAs from community college. Yet the UHP-participating transfer students have a smaller drop in GPA (roughly .2 for UHP and .36+ for non-UHP). The gap between the two GPA "drops" is likely even higher because 3.5 functions as the floor for the non-UHP group. Since many students in the over 4,000 strong 3.5+ cohort entered with GPAs closer to 4.0 than 3.5, the dip in individual GPA within the cohort is frequently greater than .36.

The percentages change in the second quarter, however. Here the UHP transfer students experience a greater dip in GPA from the previous to the current quarter than their non-UHP transfer peers. Given that the transfer seminar occurs in the fall but not in subsequent quarters and given that this is the only difference in the fall academic schedule for UHP transfer students, the transfer seminar may be important in helping participants succeed

academically. On the other hand, the transfer seminar itself is graded and, while only two units, the “A” that students often earn may be the key factor in the first-quarter GPA boost. More investigation here is needed.

## **Undergraduate Research Engagement**

Participation in the UHP has also resulted in robust research engagement among transfer students. Nationally, 26% of all undergraduate students completed research with faculty by their senior year at R1 universities such as UC Davis whereas only 15% of transfer students who started elsewhere completed research with faculty (National Survey of Student Engagement 13). Students are more likely to engage in research if they start their research in their first two years, and transfer students often struggle to catch up (Haeger et al. 17). At UC Davis, we have observed that students typically require time to learn about faculty research, and many students have to ask several faculty members if they can assist with research before being given the chance to do so. Students who began at UC Davis and are now juniors, for example, have had two previous years to learn about the campus, to understand faculty research, and to ask and ask again for research possibilities. Transfer students just entering from community college have not had that opportunity. As a result, if they want to do research before graduation, they have to work harder and faster to catch up to their non-transfer peers. Nevertheless, UHP transfer students, exceed by a significant percentage—38% (“Facts ”)—the overall statistics for research engagement for all UC Davis students, a percentage that accounts for both straight-from-high school entering students and transfer-entry students. To date, all transfer students in UHP who have completed their Signature Work did so through faculty-mentored research projects. Therefore, completion of Signature Work, as tracked through internal records, stands as a useful proxy for participation in undergraduate research. Among transfer students entering in the 2014 and 2015 cohorts, 55% completed mentored research projects. Currently, the 2016 entering cohort (with some members still completing degrees) is on a path to reach 85% with completed research projects.

Another marker of what we might term a research-positive culture within the UHP emerged in the qualitative focus group data. Students frequently mentioned the research they were undertaking or planned to undertake before graduation. Participant B asked, “If someone doesn’t want to do research, would the honors program benefit them?” prompting nods from other students. The comment suggests that a primary benefit that students feel they derive from the program is support to pursue research for those who

desire it. While more research of our own would be required to determine the impact of student research on UHP transfer student success, studies show that opportunities for student research are indeed associated with positive student

**TABLE 1. ADMISSIONS COUNT BY PERCENTAGE OF TRANSFER STUDENTS IN UHP WHO IDENTIFIED AS UNDERREPRESENTED MINORITY, LIMITED-INCOME, AND/OR FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE EDUCATED**

Year	Underrepresented Minorities	Limited Income	First Generation
2014–2015	18%	21%	36%
2015–2016	19%	14%	33%
2016–2017	36%	24%	40%
2017–2018	29%	19%	39%

**TABLE 2. ADMISSIONS COUNT BY PERCENTAGE OF ALL TRANSFER STUDENTS AT UC DAVIS WHO IDENTIFIED AS UNDERREPRESENTED MINORITY, LIMITED-INCOME, AND/OR FIRST GENERATION**

Year	Underrepresented Minorities	Limited Income	First Generation
2014–2015	26%	26%	50%
2015–2016	24%	27%	50%
2016–2017	27%	27%	52%
2017–2018	30%	24%	50%

**TABLE 3. FIRST AND SECOND TERM GPA FOR UHP TRANSFER VS NON-HONORS TRANSFER STUDENTS ENTERING UC DAVIS WITH A 3.5+ GPA FROM THEIR COMMUNITY COLLEGE (ALL STUDENTS ENTERING BETWEEN 2014 AND 2017)**

Admit Level	UHP Classification	Average First Term GPA	Average Second Term GPA	Size
Transfer	Honors	3.75	3.57	110
	Non-Honors	3.14	3.10	4769

**TABLE 4. UHP TRANSFER STUDENTS COMPLETING RESEARCH THROUGH SIGNATURE WORK**

Cohort Year	Graduated	Completed Signature Work	Percentage
2014	33	18	55%
2015	20	11	55%
2016	20	15*	75%

\*two more in progress

outcomes. In addition to encouraging independent initiative and refinement of one's interests, research experience increases the connection students have to faculty mentors and therefore can be considered an important high-impact practice. Further, studies have suggested that while undergraduate research benefits all students (Seymour et al. 493), it specifically supports retention of students at greatest risk of not completing their degrees (Gregerman et al. 55), a group that is well-represented among UHP transfers.

This data snapshot suggests that the UHP's transfer program may be succeeding where it has put the greatest effort: helping students adapt to the pacing of the quarter system so they overcome the GPA dip associated with "transfer shock" (Scott et al. 304) and helping them develop mentored relationships with faculty engaged in the creation of knowledge.

## **FINDINGS II: FOCUS GROUPS**

### **Mismatch between Being in Honors and Belonging**

The key thread that emerged from the small focus groups conducted in the spring of 2018 related to whether transfer students in the UHP felt they belonged in honors at UC Davis. Many reported experiencing imposter syndrome, compounded by being both a transfer student to a prestigious university and a member of its honors program. While the interviewer seeded the term "imposter syndrome" into one focus group, the students fixed on it as a topic of intense discussion. Two participants expressed concern that the phenomenon may be further compounded for students of historically underrepresented backgrounds. For many such students, this concern was heightened by fear that they would not maintain a certain GPA and could, therefore, lose their place in honors and lose the Regents Scholarship. Anxieties and questions of belonging, however, were mitigated by two key factors: mentorship from powerful allies and a cohort model that helped them further develop a sense of belonging.

Students expressed their anxiety over whether they belonged in the honors program at UC Davis from several perspectives. Capturing the crux of the imposter syndrome unique to transfer students from two-year institutions, Participant E shared this concern: "I knew I was community college smart, I didn't know if I was UC smart." The statement prompted universal nods of agreement in the focus group. Transferring not just into UC but into the honors program added a second layer. Participant G expressed doubts about

being “honors worthy.” In two separate focus groups, participants suggested a third form of imposter syndrome specific to students from historically underrepresented backgrounds. One of the participants, who self-identified as an underrepresented minority, wondered how many other students who identified as underrepresented minorities declined the invitation to join honors because of concerns that they would not be competitive enough. In a different focus group, this suggestion was corroborated when Participant F, who also self-identified as an underrepresented minority, shared their story of deciding whether to accept the invitation to UHP. The student did not tell anyone or accept right away out of a fear there would “be a bunch of smart people who are way smarter than me blowing me out of the water.” Such feelings affected students’ adjustment to the new academic environment generally and to UC Davis and the honors program specifically.

### **The 3.5 GPA Cliff**

Worries over one’s ability to perform at a UC honors level also had potential material consequences. As Participant E noted, “if my grades tank, [. . .] I might lose my scholarship and not get to stay here anymore.” At the time these students were admitted, all UHP students needed to maintain a 3.5 cumulative GPA in order to stay eligible for the program. In addition, for the eight of nine who had received the Regents Scholarship, valued at \$7,500 per year, a 3.25 GPA was required to stay eligible for funding. For those of us who run the UHP, the focus groups were the first time we realized the negative impact our minimum GPA requirement had on many of our transfer students. Eight of the nine participants reported that their first quarter at UC Davis was the first time they had struggled to maintain their grades. Unlike other Regents Scholars in their third year at UC Davis in the UHP, the transfer students did not have a cushion for their GPA from their previous years of study. These conditions contributed to near-universal low points for transfer students throughout the fall quarter, with several sharing that they experienced the onset or uptick of depression and/or anxiety during this period. They seemed unaware that once they were accepted, they were not actually under the threat of being removed from the program at the end of the fall quarter if their GPA dipped below the cutoff. Their anxiety was the result of a mismatch in the program communication that has since been corrected. The program was inadvertently holding honors students to a higher standard than that of the campus’s most prestigious scholarship. Some of us failed to see the discrepancy as a large problem: we knew that if students failed to hit it, they

would still keep their scholarship and we could support them to get back on track in honors. What we failed to realize was that, for students, the focus was not on the exception that could be made for them but on the sense of failure they internalized by not maintaining a 3.5 when likely they had done so at community college every quarter. The GPA requirement was for them a cliff which they could fall off, a fall that could both hurt them and affirm that they were not good enough for honors. Clearly there was a disconnect in the program's message regarding higher standards and scholarship requirements.

### **The Common Course and Discovery that No One Is Superhuman**

Communication between the honors administration and transfer students seems to have been particularly strong in the First-Year Seminar taken by all UHP transfer students in the fall. Capped at nineteen students, these two courses divided the overall cohort into two identical class sections. During each weekly meeting, students sat at one of four table groups with two to three of their peers and engaged in a combination of small group discussion, larger class discussion, and presentations. Focus group participants reported that connecting with their peers through the First-Year Seminar course was particularly beneficial. First, it helped make “a huge school smaller and feel more intimate” according to Participant G. For majors in the biological sciences at UC Davis, for example, the third-year curriculum can feature no class with fewer than 100 students. English majors, on the other hand, might have fewer than 50 students in their classes. The shared honors seminar served as an equalizer across colleges and majors, enabling all students to have an intimate learning space where the facilitators know their names and they come to know each other. Second, for many participants the course facilitated friendships that bridged across disciplines and sprung from shared experiences: Participant B commented, “we study together and we also are able to talk about where are you on finding your mentor [. . .] It's just nice to have people that are going through the same thing.” UHP transfer students can go from knowing no one in the group that first fall to rooming together as close friends by their senior year. Further, focus group participants felt that the common course helped them break preconceived notions that their contemporaries in the program were somehow better students than they were. Instead of feeling threatened by or competitive with their classmates, they found that through talking to each other over the course of the ten weeks that not all other UHP students are “super human,” as Participant J put it.

## The Value of a Powerful Mentor

The overwhelming majority of focus group participants identified the mentorship provided by instructors and administrators of the UHP as critical to their academic success, sense of belonging, and emotional wellbeing as they transitioned into and out of UC Davis. A majority of participants also reported that they had sought advising from UHP instructors and administrators and that, in the words of Participant B, the advising they received “exceeded expectations” by being both useful and emotionally attuned. The stature of honors mentors within the hierarchy of the campus also played a positive role. As Participant B reported, “it just kind of helps to know that someone this high up is actually invested in your success. Right? Like, being a Dean.” Mentors in high places were prized in part for their ability to open doors to research and work opportunities by directly connecting students with faculty and other administrators. Facilitating access was not their only value, however. Having someone in a highly visible role on a new and large campus recognized the students’ potential:

I remember Dean Thomas just said flat-out, ‘you belong here. [. . .] You made it here.’ That means something. And it doesn’t mean any less that you went to a community college first. And I feel like that makes a difference. To hear those words said to you point blank, they have power to them and they make a difference. And there is still I think some sense of that, just because people can act a certain way toward you if they find out that you’re a transfer. (Participant C)

Mentors affirmed that students had the right to be at UC Davis and, specifically, in the UHP. In turn, participants also reported that they saw not only their cohorts but also faculty and administrators as, in the words of Participant F, “just people” whom the students could approach and talk to, deepening their sense of belonging.

## DISCUSSION:

### MITIGATING RISK, MAXIMIZING SUPPORT FOR HONORS TRANSFER STUDENTS

One of the reasons we sought to undertake this research was to discover how we might use evidence from our students to improve the experience of future students. As Jones has argued, in order for honors to move toward

“inclusive excellence . . . honors leaders need an extraordinary willingness to give and receive constructive feedback,” especially as it relates to improving “diversity-related outcomes” (56). Recognizing that the feedback gathered in this study is limited by the early nature of the findings, we are eager to undertake this work in order to listen and learn so we can improve the success of our recruitment and support of transfer students in the UHP. We have already made substantial changes to the program based on our research. First, we have shifted our admissions process to augment the Regents Scholars pool selected by campus entities outside the UHP, partnering with admissions to identify students who have outstanding community college academic records and also who are broadly representative of the UC Davis incoming transfer class. However, even with all our efforts to ensure the admission of an honors-ready cohort of community college transfers, the moment they learn of their acceptance to the UHP may come as a disorienting surprise, with the subsequent likely response from some of them of “why me?” We try to address this issue on the UHP website: when students visit the site, they find a drop-down menu asking if they are first-year or transfer students. If they select “transfer students,” they are connected to stories of other transfer students, many from diverse backgrounds. Further, Eddy A. Ruiz, Associate Director of the UHP, along with Assistant Director van Beek, reach out to every admitted transfer student. We are also working toward providing scholarship funding to all incoming transfer students as opposed to the two-tiered system we currently have wherein only some students receive financial support; we hope that this will provide yet another signal to our UHP transfer students that UC Davis recognizes their exceptional academic record and that it will ultimately boost their confidence.

To better serve our transfer students, we have also changed the GPA requirement. After learning that the 3.5 cumulative floor was causing stress, we also noticed that while students did occasionally drop below that mark, they rarely fell far below it when they received adequate support. Thus, we have revised our GPA policy, shifting the required minimum from 3.5 to 3.25. The new policy has caused us to become more conscientious about our students. We have instituted an appeals process for those who fall between a 3.24 and 3.0 that grants transfers a full quarter to regain a 3.25 GPA by the end of fall quarter their second year and thereby their honors eligibility. Our hope is that offering this opportunity rather than observing an inflexible cutoff will enable students to discuss whether a major they may be struggling with is the best choice and to recognize any personal or academic concerns that may

be barriers while still maintaining a path to complete their Signature Work. While this policy is too new for us to assess its impact on grade anxiety, we are hopeful that it will better align our program's policy with its aim: to admit talented and diverse students who have had varying levels of academic preparation and who can, by the time they graduate, create pathways that have positive impacts on the world.

Another reason we undertook this research was to share our experiences with others in the honors community in the hope that more honors programs, particularly at research universities with common transfer paths, will choose to admit transfer cohorts. With this hope in mind, let us step back briefly into the literature on transfer students to consider what barriers they face when admitted to our institutions and to determine whether our program has mitigated some or all of them.

Literature on the transfer experience discusses the difficulty many transfer students coming from community college face adjusting to four-year institutions. For some, the difficulty is linked to a difference in scale. One 2014 study that looked at transfer students who had come from different community colleges attested that "students accustomed to a smaller more intimate campus found the physical geography and scale of the university system complex and challenging" (Allen et al. 361). When community college student transfers were asked to describe what was difficult in their new institution compared to their previous one, they responded with adjectives associated with size and organization like "bureaucratic, chaotic, and confusing," and many also mentioned the challenge of needing to know things and finding that "information and direction were not easily obtained" (Allen et al. 361). A more recent study titled "The Community College Penalty?" (Lichtenberger and Dietrich) refers to three separate elements that can contribute to what the authors see as "the stress and difficulty of the social adjustment" (25) when students shift between institutions. The first element is "latecomer" (Handel 2011) status. Entering a four-year institution in their junior year, transfer students are walking into a world where many of their fellow juniors have already had two years on the campus to form social relationships and to begin distinguishing themselves academically. A second element is that bridge programs typically do not include transfer students or do not include them proportionally to first-year students so that the regular support that might be there to help lower-income or underrepresented students adjust to expectations and academic pacing is not typically available for transfers. Last are "pull factors" for transfer students, such as family responsibilities, living arrangements,

and outside campus employment, which, if they are not mitigated, may prevent transfer students from being on campus enough during their first year to create social networks and engage in academically enriching activities in the way that freshmen frequently can (Lichtenberger and Dietrich 25). These elements, taken together, constitute what has commonly been referred to as “transfer shock,” the “psychological, academic, and environmental challenges” (Allen et al. 354) that lead to feelings of alienation, isolation, and anonymity and that frequently correlate with a decline in GPA for students moving from a community college to a four-year institution.

The UHP transfer pathway seeks to mitigate “transfer shock.” Our transfer students are placed into two small cohorts determined by the first-year seminars they take in fall quarter, where they have a chance to make connections with other students that could be difficult were they only in large classes with students they could not easily identify as incoming transfers. In some cases, the seminar leads to new friendships that enable social bonding. In others, it merely demystifies a student’s sense that other students are “super-human.” Participation in the course and the relationships that develop out of it may also help mitigate any “late comer status” issues (Bahr et al. 479, qtd. in Lichtenberger and Dietrich 25).

The UHP also helps students navigate the bureaucracy and confusion of our large, research-intensive campus. While each student has an advisor in their home department and likely has attended the general campus orientation for transfer students, focus group participants frequently cited the advising they received from the UHP as particularly valuable. In the UHP, students are always able to drop in or make an appointment to talk with their advisor—the same person who co-teaches their First-Year Seminar course and who specializes in the questions transfer students ask and the issues they face. Further, a number of elements of the transfer program address the “pull factors” that can keep students from fully participating in university life. A special orientation held over the summer is built around transfer students’ work and family schedules. The social event for incoming transfers is held during class time at the home of the Vice Provost and Dean so that all students can participate and feel appreciated by someone with a large role on campus. Group projects in the course are planned far in advance so that family and work obligations can be circumvented. Finally, during one-one-one sessions scheduled during class time, students talk about academic and personal concerns with the co-instructing advisor and about research/mentorship plans with the co-instructing VPDUE. All of these planned arrangements draw students into

activities we associate with first-year success like peer connection, social engagement, staff and faculty mentorship, and research engagement.

At the same time, the very fact that these students are participating in an “honors program” can itself be a barrier to success. “I knew I was community college smart” powerfully expresses the insecurity that transfer students often feel as they enter our four-year, high-prestige institutions. Keeping in mind the context of community college, from which only one-third of the students transfer to four-year institutions and only 15% ever earn a bachelor’s degree within six years, transfer students have reason to feel unsure if their skill sets will transfer (Fink and Jenkins 295). They have stood out academically in an environment where the competition for academic accolades was lower. In contrast to graduating with honors from a community college, an honors invitation from a four-year institution to someone attending a community college may be understood as a statement more of potential than of proven success.

As Badenhausen has argued, “The term ‘honors’ by itself carries an enormous amount of baggage around questions of privilege, elitism, and separateness” (11). As a result, we need to “interrogate the way we narratively frame honors experiences” to make them “as inclusive as possible” (Badenhausen 9). Citing admissions practices that invite students to share their volunteering or their club leadership experiences while in high school as part of honors selection, for instance, privileges students who did not need to work to earn money after school or take care of younger siblings. The same is true for placing great weight on SAT/ACT scores, which correlate strongly with the income and education level of a students’ parents. When in the UHP we tell potential transfer admits that they are invited into honors because of their previous academic success, we are telling a story that assumes that students’ confidence in their community college performance will translate into confidence at our institutions. As it turns out, many students transferring from community colleges need to experience success at a four-year institution before they can believe such success is transferable. The story also assumes that the students we invite can, without assistance, see themselves as honors people, an assumption we ought not indulge given the elitism many associate with the term “honors.” Inadvertently, we may be falling into the trap Badenhausen identifies by discussing “honors and the stories we tell about it” in a way that “signal[s] to underrepresented students that they do not belong” (9–10).

This signaling may be why students in the focus groups reported being, at first, uncertain about saying yes to the invitation to join honors. Indeed,

our average yield rate over the program's first five years is only about 48% among the 40 students we invite annually to participate, and the take rate for underrepresented minorities and limited-income and first-generation transfer students is lower still at 41%, 43%, and 40% respectively. Reflecting on this research area, the team has sought to improve the honors website communication to newly admitted students in order to stress content and community over the title "honors" and has begun the practice of calling students directly with similar messaging. In the future, we may seek to further enhance peer-to-peer recruitment efforts by pairing students with similar backgrounds and encouraging them to connect with each other through recruitment conversations.

## **CONCLUSION:**

### **SYNCING OUR PROGRAMS TO TRANSFER STUDENTS**

As honors programs across the country continue to explore ways to diversify the talented students they admit and to support their efforts to achieve success, they should look to transfer students—in part because of the sheer numbers of community college students who aspire to receive four-year degrees and the mismatch between those who desire such an outcome and those who actually achieve it. We know that honors programs enable high-touch environments, even within large institutions, and that the cohort model of community building and classroom instruction, combined with faculty mentorship, provides a powerful multiplier for student success on our campuses. The argument that honors programs should consider transfer students is further strengthened when we consider the increasingly diverse pool of talented potential honors students currently in our community college system. If we want to bring together students who have varied life experiences and who can learn from each other as a community, creating a first-year and transfer path into our honors programs is a very good idea.

Yet our experience at UC Davis reveals that it is not enough to bring transfer students into honors; we also have to bring our programs into sync with what our transfer students need. In order to create a true transfer-friendly honors program, we need to go beyond academic support and community building and even research experiences, as meaningful as these are. We also need to pay close attention to mentorship, particularly from individuals who can open doors for students within our institutions. Thus, faculty can play an important role. By connecting to faculty mentors, transfer students catch up

to their first-year-entry peers. Perhaps they have missed the first two years of university course exploration and faculty relationship building, but with dedicated point-of-entry faculty mentorship, they can still fully engage, even at a large research institution. Further, faculty can communicate to transfer students that they belong. The simple act of telling transfer students that you have selected them to work with you, that you see their strengths, and that you are sometimes insecure and uncertain as well can create a foundation of confidence in a student on which risks can be taken and successes launched. We need to build this sense of belonging into all elements of our programs if we want our transfer students to feel at home. From our websites to our admissions messages to our questioning of the word “honors” and all it signifies, we need to talk more about what we aspire to become and whom we serve as an honors community than about how we qualify honors people, thus making sure that we are, in the end, “honors worthy.”

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