

## Honors and the Completion Agenda: Identifying and Duplicating Student Success

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For better or worse, longitudinal studies that track student persistence each semester serve as the primary measurement of an institution's success or, as the findings are often received at many of the country's community colleges, an institution's failure. These studies take place at the institutional and state-wide levels as well as nationally through grant-based organizations such as Complete College America. At the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC), where I have served as a faculty member and honors program director for the past eight years, these studies consistently reveal low college-wide retention and graduation rates. According to Maryland's state-wide longitudinal approach, even after discarding the statistics of students who attempt fewer than eighteen credits, barely two of five CCBC degree-seeking students graduate or transfer within four years (CCBC, "accountability report"). Accordingly, discussion of success rates often strikes a tone somewhere between apologetic and mournful.

An occasional collective lapse into hopelessness is not without just cause. In my non-honors courses, the underprepared and overburdened are often

the norm. Each semester, seemingly capable students in my standard classroom drop out to care for family members or make ends meet, disengage with coursework after a bad grade, or simply fall behind in their readings and fail to catch up. When I return to my office in the honors center though, I, like honors directors at community colleges across the United States, work with the highly motivated and attentive rather than the apathetic and disengaged. Routinely, I observe students in the honors center celebrating a hard-earned “A,” reveling in a newly awarded scholarship, or cherishing a transfer acceptance.

The contrast of these experiences is remarkable but not necessarily based on readily apparent differences between honors and non-honors students. Often these two groups of students do not seem all that different from one another. At CCBC, students are accepted to the honors program based on a holistic application process. On the campus at which I serve as honors director, most internal applicants opt out of submitting high school transcripts or SAT scores, so the Honors Committee judges their applications on the merits of their writing and their current college transcripts. This policy opens the program to students who might have been mediocre high school students. Some have completed high school through a GED program, and others have had stop-out periods, breaks in their matriculation. They may have taken courses at CCBC twenty-two years earlier, transferred laterally from another two-year college, or reverse-transferred from a university. In other words, many of today’s honors success stories at CCBC were yesterday’s dropouts and underachievers.

One goal of my research has been to find ways of offering an honors education to a wider range of CCBC’s general population—particularly the majority of its population that needs some form of developmental training—in order to make honors a scalable program that can assist the college in increasing its success rates, most notably transfer and graduation rates. Fundamental to this goal is the belief that recruiting honors students from the developmental population—over 80% of CCBC’s incoming students place into developmental education—can have a pluralizing effect on honors diversity as well as increasing enrollment and graduation rates. A secondary goal has been to counterbalance the often grim longitudinal data on the progress (or lack thereof) of community college developmental students. By identifying commonalities among students who began their coursework in developmental education and later became members of the honors program, I hope to recommend policies that can help a larger subset of community college students gain access to honors and thrive there.

## METHODOLOGY

### Setting

Because this study focuses on student feedback, the college context is important. CCBC is a large suburban institution that serves a diverse population with increasing developmental needs. CCBC has an established honors program founded by Rae Rosenthal in 1988. While Rosenthal has established a large, successful program on one of CCBC's three major campuses, honors is still finding its footing on two additional campuses as well as several satellite campuses that have been added in recent years. Approximately forty sections of honors courses run college-wide each semester, a small portion of the college's total offerings. In 2013, college-wide honors program membership included 1.6% of the approximately 24,000-student credit division (CCBC, "Who are CCBC students?").

### Population

The population for my research was CCBC honors students who began their studies in developmental education. The CCBC Honors Program maintains records for all program members that include data provided by students in their application packets as well as transcripts updated each semester. I audited these records in February 2012, reviewing each student's transcript to determine his or her placement in English, reading, and math. According to this audit, 60% (189 of 315) of CCBC honors students began their studies with at least one developmental course requirement. Developmental coursework is defined for this study as any sub-100-level course in reading, English, or math that students place into through the College Board's Accuplacer test. This rate of 60% was lower than the 81% of the college's general population placed into developmental coursework (CCBC, "accountability report"). These percentages account for neither the number of developmental courses in reading, writing, and/or mathematics that students were required to take nor the level at which they placed. To measure these factors, I compiled the names of each developmental course and listed them in the fourth column of the table below along with details about each of the twenty-nine students who participated in focus groups and/or interviews.

Name	GPA	Credits	Dev Ed Credits	Gender	Age	Race	Focus Group	Interview
Mike	3.46	78	MATH 081, 082, 083; ENGL 052	Male	24	White	x	
Jennifer	3.77	118	MATH 083	Female	28	White	x	
Dave	2.76	49	MATH 082, 083	Male	33	White	x	
Kelly	3.68	50	MATH 083	Female	20	White	x	
Mark	3.14	82	RDG 052	Female	22	Black	x	x
Penny	3.82	52	ENGL 052; RDG 052; MATH 081, 082	Female	48	White	x	x
Sarah	3.83	42	MATH 082, 083	Female	51	White	x	
June	3.42	57	MATH 083	Female	20	Black	x	
Gus	3.95	110	MATH 082, 083	Male	43	Hispanic/Latino	x	
Gerard	3.88	80	MATH 081, 082, 083	Male	22	White	x	
Renee	N/A	83	MATH 083	Female	21	Black	x	

Abigail	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Female	N/A	Black	x
Tonya	3.4	68	MATH 082, 083	Female	23	Female	Black	Black	x
John	3.46	49	MATH 083	Male	22	Male	White	White	x
Lauren	3.43	55	MATH 083	Female	24	Female	Black	Black	x
Hannah	3.36	66	MATH 083	Female	20	Female	White	White	x
Rose	4	19	MATH 081, 082	Female	54	Female	White	White	x
Shannon	2.76	42	MATH 082, 083	Female	19	Female	White	White	x
Monica	3.88	60	MATH 083	Female	20	Female	Asian	Asian	x
Rachel	3.21	58	MATH 082, 083	Female	24	Female	White	White	x
Tiffany	3.19	106	ENGL 052; MATH 081, 082, 083	Female	29	Female	White	White	x
Anthony	4	30	MATH 081,082, 083	Male	28	Male	White	White	x
Alice	4	44	MATH 081, 082, 083	Female	24	Female	White	White	x
Mary	3.61	53	MATH 081, 082, 083	Female	36	Female	White	White	x

Whitney	3.66	57	ENGL 052	Female	57	Black	x	
Grace	3.31	44	MATH 083	Female	41	Black	x	
Vanessa	3.7	57	MATH 081, 082, 083	Female	31	White	x	
Buffy	4	19	MATH 081, 082, 083	Female	46	Black	x	x
Devon	3.2	67	Math 082, 083	Male	23	Black		x

## Sampling Procedure and Sample Set

In the intensity sampling methods I used for this study, the data draws from a subset of the honors population that closely resembles the general population at CCBC. Roulston defines intensity sampling as a method that seeks research participants based on “phenomena of interest” (82). For my study, these phenomena included lengthy or regular stop-out periods in formal post-secondary education and completion of multiple developmental courses and self-identification as members of a race underrepresented in success data. I identified students’ educational history and racial background using CCBC software. Students participating in this research took an average of 1.9 developmental courses. While the college-wide black/African American population, the largest non-white population at CCBC, represented 38% of the credit division, my sample set included 34%. According to internal surveys, the honors program is only 18% black/African American, so the sample set resembled the college as a whole more than the honors program, creating the potential for policy recommendations designed to diversify honors.

## Focus-Group Design

To identify potential reasons for student-participants’ success at the community college, I created a focus-group script designed to generate dialogue among all members of the group. Focus-group sessions lasted between 45 minutes and 75 minutes. Probing was reserved for the interviews that followed the focus groups.

The original script included questions based on each category of Tinto’s Theory of Departure, which identified eight reasons for withdrawal from college: intention, commitment, adjustment, difficulty, congruence, isolation, obligations, and finances (80). Since participants were persisting at the community college (some have since graduated or transferred), script questions asked students the means by which they have avoided each of these causes for withdrawal. The resulting discussions provided rich data as students conversed about their experiences through the structured prompts without my interruption.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred in three major stages, which helped me cope with a large volume of data, categorize the initial set of codes, and place the data in time-order sequence. First, I manually coded the data using an open-coding

approach. Open coding allowed me to review over 175 pages of data in search of themes and patterns (Neuman 442) and resulted in nearly three pages of codes. Next, I searched for patterns in the data, narrowing the extensive list of codes to five themes: escape, newness/discovery, ownership/responsibility, growth/health, and balance. The codes were then placed into a time-order sequence that created the overarching theme of college as a journey that I found in the discussions. The journey theme can be found in the modified seven-part focus-group script, included as an Appendix, which prompts participants to discuss their starting location, the course they charted, their impediments to their progress, their outlook, their early progress, the ways they created a sustainable journey, and the assistance they received from travel guides. This script was designed as a reusable model for future research.

## **FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

After coding each focus group and follow-up interview conducted for this study, I placed the data into time-order sequence, allowing me to create a composite of the journeys the students undertook, from their decision to attend college through their sophomore year. I discovered two factors that had an overwhelming influence on the research participants' decision to apply to the honors program and more generally on their academic self-image: faculty members' personal recommendations for the honors program and casual, unofficial assistance and advice from peers. These experiences were most effective in recruiting students—at least those who participated in my study—into the honors program during their first semester, when students develop their outlook on college and their place within it. My reform recommendations are thus designed to increase both faculty recommendations for honors and honors student interactions with non-honors peers during the crucial first semester of matriculation.

My research findings along with the resulting recommendations hold broad implications for honors programs at open admissions institutions and indeed for all honors programs looking to grow and diversify through fostering the success of the nontraditional student. Implementing the reforms and strategies identified through this research can be one component of an honors program's effort to increase diversity, and it can also contribute to the federal college completion agenda by helping students chart courses to completion that include honors credits. The success-based, qualitative methodology used for this project can also be duplicated in other honors-based studies oriented toward growth and diversity.



My research suggests several strategies to replace the small, boutique-model honors program with a scalable, diversely populated one applicable to many types of honors programs at community colleges. The term “honors” is broad, covering all programs and colleges that self-identify as such. At a selective institution, a scalable honors program might include 10% of the student body, but community college honors programs may find themselves oversaturated if they seek to emulate programs at selective universities. At a community college, some students who are a part of the credit division are only stopping in briefly to brush up on skills or take single courses required for bachelor’s or master’s programs; others are pursuing majors in vocational programs, such as health care, with strict requirements that potentially preclude participation in honors. Thus, a scalable honors program at a community college may be closer to 5% of the general population.

A 5% goal may seem modest, yet the expansion of a community college honors program to this size could yield formidable improvements in community college completion rates. At CCBC, for example, in the fall of 2013, when 1.6% of the college’s population was in the honors program, the college had just over 24,000 credit-seeking students (CCBC, “Who are CCBC students?”). To increase membership to 5% of the credit division, the program would have had to take on more than 800 new students (totaling nearly 1,200). These gains would hardly have been modest.

Students in honors programs have perks such as smaller classes, excellent faculty, additional advisement, transfer visits, conference opportunities, social events, and designated study space, in addition to the intangible benefits of joining a group of motivated peers. The additional advisement from honors administrators and the motivational effect of honors classes can alter the trajectory of students’ college careers. At CCBC, for example, completion rates are much higher for honors program members than for the general population. A study of CCBC honors students who began their matriculation at CCBC in the fall of 2006 indicated an 84% graduation/transfer rate compared to a graduation/transfer rate of 43% for the general population. During the same time period, 63% of honors students earned a degree from CCBC during the four-year window compared to only 25% of the general population (CCBC, “accountability report”).

At least some of the CCBC Honors Program’s higher graduation rate (more akin to the graduation rate at a selective four-year institution than a community college) can be attributed to test scores, financial backing, and academic self-confidence that are among the highest at the college. Students

who do well on standardized tests and most likely come from financially secure households tend to have the most academic self-confidence and are therefore more likely to apply to honors. But many community college honors students, like those who participated in this study, are at first glance unlikely honors candidates. Low test scores might have placed these students into developmental classes, creating a lengthier path to a degree. Often these students were not high-scoring new college enrollees that the honors program recruited but instead grew from developmental learners into honors students. Increasing the size of the honors program through reforms that help develop or build such students rather than simply finding them can help the college reach its goal of increased completion. At the two-year college, developing honors students should be a major component of a multi-faceted approach to increased completion.

### **Partnering with Developmental Education**

The first recommendation based on my research is an honors application process that accommodates the educational requisites of nontraditional students. Honors programs can gain earlier access to a diverse, highly motivated subset of students through partnerships with developmental education. Since honors courses at many community colleges are general education courses, which students take early in their credit-level matriculation, students who have thrived in developmental courses before progressing to the general education level may have already accumulated thirty or more credits towards their degree before a faculty member, staff member, or peer can recommend honors to them. My research indicated that encouragement from these sources, especially from faculty members, weighs heavily in former developmental students' decisions to apply to honors. However, by the time students at a community college earn thirty credits, they see few honors courses that will fulfill their requirements and thus little reason to apply to the program.

The mindset that students in developmental education are not honors-worthy should become obsolete in institutions where as much as 80% of the student body needs developmental education. Letting go of this notion is not simply a capitulation to the realities of our educational crisis or a lowering of expectations in an effort to expand. The best returning students, rusty in taking questionably designed standardized tests, often start off in developmental education. They bring rich life experiences with them that can broaden class discussions and collaborations. On the campus where I work, located in a former steel town that has been economically depressed since most blue-

collar employment disappeared decades ago, returning students who have suffered from the realities of an unforgiving job market are typically the most determined, most thoughtful, and most thorough students in their classes.

Recruiting these students requires reforms that allow honors administrators to identify them sooner and encourage them to self-identify as honors candidates before they advance too far in their credit requirements. Several measures can aid in this process, like providing recruitment materials in all developmental gateway classes that lead directly to entry-level credit courses. A single presentation or brochure only provides an introduction to honors. Students are more likely to apply for honors if they are singled out by their instructor and recommended to the program, which provides a tremendous boost in confidence and quiets the fears of rejection that often keep nontraditional students from applying.

Once students learn about honors and feel motivated to apply, the barriers to their acceptance must also be removed. Students with old and often middling or poor high school records have no way to qualify for honors programs with GPA requirements. A modified application that waives the GPA requirement for students in their final semester of developmental education if they have both stellar recommendations and exemplary writing samples could open the doors of honors to a new population. To ensure that these students continue to perform at a high level, honors programs can first admit a small cohort to study their progress or can accept these students as probationary members, privy to all the rights and privileges of honors but with their honors status contingent on excellence in their first semester of honors coursework.

## **Partnering With Introduction to College Programs**

In addition to new partnerships with developmental education, partnerships with Introduction to College courses can promote awareness of honors programs and help identify potential new students. Community college orientation courses are designed to increase completion by introducing new students to the standards and expectations of college coursework. These courses, often completed during a student's first semester, can serve as a first exposure to honors through strategies similar to those recommended for partnerships with developmental education.

Nationally, college orientation courses exist in a variety of forms. At CCBC, all degree-seeking students are required to take Academic Development (ACDV) 101: Transitioning to College. The course aims to "familiarize

students with CCBC and foster the development of decision-making skills and learning strategies that link to student success in higher education” (CCBC, “Common course outline”). Six participants in my research pointed to ACDV when discussing methods for increasing honors program awareness. Currently at CCBC, honors and ACDV have had some cross-programmatic involvement, but this engagement between the two programs can be scaled up significantly. For the past several years, honors has offered a small number of honors ACDV courses and honors administrators have presented at ACDV training sessions to promote the program to new instructors. Still, some research participants reported that honors did not have a presence in their ACDV class. The point, regardless of the institution, is that neither honors sections of general orientation courses nor presentations to instructors will ensure that new students get exposed to honors.

Honors programs at all two-year institutions with required orientation courses should work closely with the administrators and instructors in these programs to incorporate honors recruitment into the curriculum for all college orientation sections. As in partnerships with developmental education, representation in orientation programs could increase the size of honors programs substantially by directing students to honors in their first semester, when they still have several general education courses to take. If orientation instructors are each given detailed information about the program, they are more likely to recommend honors to their students during their first semester, and, since orientation courses offer students extensive advisement, they can steer more students toward honors courses. Often, enrollment in a single honors course is less intimidating than joining the program for the nontraditional student, who may not feel prepared to apply for full honors membership.

If each orientation instructor/advisor is asked to recommend honors courses for his or her best students, the results could have a significant effect on honors enrollment. Currently, at CCBC, the cornerstone of ACDV is a course matrix assignment that allows students to create their enrollment plans for each semester through graduation. Honors courses are not regularly promoted through this assignment even though a few instructors tout the benefits of honors. Recommending honors courses during this stage of advisement not only helps identify potential honors students during the early matriculation period but helps build student confidence. As a college-wide requirement, orientation courses are the perfect setting for introducing honors programs and are crucial to scalable growth.

## **Institutionalizing Honors Student Recommendations**

Another way to grow honors is to include all of an institution's instructors in the hunt for potential honors students. In calling for stronger partnerships with developmental education and college orientation courses, I have noted the important role of faculty in encouraging students to try honors courses and/or informally recommending students to the program. Institutionalizing the recommendation process can also dramatically increase diversity. Students who have had long breaks from their formal education, who are economically disadvantaged, and/or who have been marginalized in K–12 socialization are less likely to view themselves as honors students than their younger, affluent, and white counterparts (Ogbu; Zweig). For these students, applying to an honors program can seem like a futile as well as intimidating venture. At CCBC, this harsh reality is reflected in data from a 2012 study that indicate the honors program to be younger, whiter, and more affluent than the college's general population. The cycle of age, race, and socioeconomic discrimination is thus reproduced further when potential honors students visit the program and see that it consists of mostly young white faces, reinforcing in nontraditional students the notion that they are not honors material.

Faculty recommendations go a long way in countering the cycle of homogeneity in honors program membership not just by informing students of the honors program but by increasing their confidence through the suggestion that they are, in fact, honors-worthy. Many students at community colleges need someone else to believe in them before they can self-identify as honors students. The participants in my research repeatedly indicated that a single recommendation encouraged them to apply for honors.

A college-wide approach to faculty recommendations ensures that more students receive the recommendations they deserve. At CCBC, the honors administrator solicits recommendations from faculty members and then sends letters to students telling them they have been recommended. This letter notifies the student that a faculty member believes he or she is capable of honors-level coursework. Informal recommendations also occur face-to-face. Some instructors, including those who teach developmental courses, consistently recommend their best students. One research participant reported that both her English 101 and her Math 083 instructors recommended her to the program: "That's when I got active about joining honors," she noted.

In addition to, or instead of, sending an email and awaiting faculty response, the college can invite students to "get active" about joining honors through other strategies:

- A list circulated at departmental or division meetings that requests honors recommendations from each faculty member.
- Memos sent by senior administration that require faculty response (faculty may check “I do not feel I have any honors students in this class” if they do not have names to submit).
- An honors-designated “A” grade, which I will call “A(H),” which would not change a student’s GPA but would indicate that a faculty member believes the student performed at an honors level and generate that notice to honors programs, who could then solicit the student to apply.

The final strategy is the most complex as it would require changes to an institution’s grading submission software. However, if implemented, this reform would create an automatic system for recommendations by all faculty members in all divisions.

These reforms, as well as those of the previous sections, require a great deal of cooperation from administration and faculty outside the honors program. That kind of effort might not be forthcoming, so changes within the honors program itself are also essential.

### **From Visibility to Permeability: Increasing Honors Student Interaction with the General Population**

In addition to pinpointing faculty recommendations as their motivation to apply for honors, research participants pointed to peers who inspired this turning point in their academic journeys. I think of these peers as “travel guides,” a term broader than the more popular “mentor.” A mentor is one who offers guidance but it is more specifically “a close, trusted, and experienced counselor” (*Webster’s*). Some travel guides may be mentors, but others simply help elevate a student’s college experience with a single interaction or an interaction more limited than the mentor/mentee relationship. Successful students have many travel guides. Fourteen research participants reported interactions with student travel guides who had assisted or encouraged them at key points in their academic development. Honors students can and often do guide their fellow classmates, yet, as Kinghorn and Smith have observed, non-honors students may perceive honors program members as unlike them and thus unapproachable (17). To counter this perception, the recommendations in this section seek to increase the visibility and approachability of

honors by creating more honors students who can serve as travel guides, at the same time growing the honors program and increasing college completion.

Honors students often volunteer their time to assist classmates with advisement and tutoring. Honors administrators see this type of guidance occurring daily in honors centers, where experienced honors students are often more than willing to lend a moment or an hour to a classmate in need. One of my research participants described the way a fellow student in the honors center played a role that was pivotal to her progress in a developmental math course:

I actually went to one of the honors students . . . I was really struggling and [she] came over and she took time to meet me in between her classes and we sat down at the table and she helped me a lot. We only had like 45 minutes or so together, but it was still helpful. . . . She was really good.

Six research participants discussed receiving this type of unofficial guidance, which is especially important to nontraditional students who may be wary of college employees and established representatives of the academic culture (Ogbu; Zweig). Older research participants expressed a particular interest in finding tutoring and advisement from travel guides closer to their age. Such unofficial guidance allows students to gravitate towards members of the program with whom they are naturally comfortable.

Encouraging more honors students to serve as unofficial travel guides can be a thorny endeavor. Many programs experiment with mentorships that assign an upperclassman to an incoming student, but formalizing peer guidance can sharply reduce its effectiveness. One research participant noted that mentorship programs often strike students as impersonal and remarked about a student/faculty mentorship program, “The communication that I got was just one slip of paper in the mail saying, ‘If you want a mentor, fill it out blah blah blah.’” Conversely, participants reported a strong affinity for honors classmates with whom they had developed an organic relationship via the honors center. Honors center interactions often led to peer relationships that included both schoolwork and extracurricular activity, broadening a students’ social networks to include more classmates and increasing their time spent on campus and on schoolwork

Building a large support network of motivated peers is not easy at a two-year institution with no on-campus housing and a student body often scrambling to remain financially afloat. Students who do not make connections

with peers early in their journey are likely to diminish their time on campus and attempt to reach their destination through a minimalist approach to college life, but students who find and later act as unofficial travel guides receive the numerous benefits of a solid academic network of peers.

The first step in fostering unofficial interactions between honors and non-honors students is establishing program transparency and an open-door policy. The CCBC Honors Program operates with a very high level of visibility and transparency; its open-door procedures include invitations to all students for honors events, flyers promoting honors classes and activities across campus, social networking groups accessible to all, and a course enrollment policy that allows students to sample honors coursework without completing an honors application.

Open-door policies encourage students to explore honors, but a policy of permeability can help grow honors programs through actively recruiting students to use the honors center for studying. Honors programs can encourage their students to serve as unofficial travel guides through an inclusive approach to study groups, which research participants touted as opportunities to learn, develop self-confidence, and create meaningful college friendships. One research participant described the fellowship he developed with study partners:

The people that I'm in study groups with, I think I have a sense of camaraderie with them. Like, I went to a war and these guys were right beside me shoulder to shoulder because we faced the same stressors and the rigors of whatever class that it was and we survived it. And not only did we survive, we did well. . . . I have these groups of people on Facebook that just have a real special place in my heart because of these study groups.

For this student and others like him, study groups serve a paramount role in developing a sense of community; they yield greater gains than sessions with a paid tutor or mentor by giving students support for learning, a feeling of belonging, and a sense of self-sufficiency.

Study groups open to the general college population should take place in designated honors space to optimize the affiliation with honors, and honors students active in the program's leadership and event organizations can help promote study groups, but administrators must be careful to avoid a mandatory-voluntary approach that would require current honors students to host these groups. Administrators can incentivize student-led study groups in a



variety of other ways. Monetary compensation for study group leaders would be ideal, particularly in recruiting nontraditional students, but maintaining an informal mentorship program with compensation would require creativity. In the absence of monetary reward, refreshments usually incentivize student leaders and attendees while creating a program that is informal. Administrators can keep their distance and empower honors student leaders by having them designate willing honors members to lead study groups. Alternatively, honors faculty members can recruit group leaders according to their academic strengths and collaborate with the student success center to promote them. After an initial study group meeting, students can determine the frequency and times for future study groups independently. Through this approach, honors students become more active while administrative involvement (and the student resistance that accompanies it) remains at a minimum.

Student-led study groups can help honors programs move beyond an open-door policy toward an approach that renders the line between honors and non-honors students more permeable. If honors students serve the general population, the results can enhance student success, build student networks, and promote honors programs.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Further qualitative studies of honors students who began their studies in developmental education would contribute to a fuller understanding of this unique population. To that end, the focus-group script in the Appendix is a reusable model based on the “college as a journey” concept. This script was modified from my original focus-group script to include each portion of the college journey and is designed to allow administrators to consult with students through a structured research methodology. For this study, student-participants generously gave their time as participants in one-hour focus groups, the component of this research that yielded the most recommendations. In exchange, they received only token compensation in the form of \$25 per person. This low-cost means of giving students a voice could uncover possibilities for reforming various types of programs.

My study was founded on the belief that research targeting honors students who began their studies in developmental education at two-year colleges could significantly add to policy discussions as well as the collective knowledge base of honors administrators at community colleges. Further study of this subset of the population at different types of community

colleges—smaller vs. larger campuses, wealthy vs. more impoverished areas, and urban and suburban vs. rural regions—could increase our understanding of honors students who began their studies in developmental education. On campuses where this model of qualitative, success-based research takes place, regular performance reviews can help administrators understand the effects of program reforms implemented through research initiatives.

Analyses focused on different subsets of the honors population would also allow researchers to learn more about the habits of honors students. At the start of this project, I considered many possible populations for study. Because survey research consistently indicated that the honors program population at CCBC was generally out of step with the college's demographics, several populations were possible, including honors students who received Pell Grants, who were from underrepresented racial populations, and who were first-generation college students. Ultimately, I settled on honors students who began their studies in developmental education because this population represented such a large percentage of the college as a whole; with 60% of honors students at CCBC taking developmental courses, learning more about them seemed an obvious first step. Future studies that take a similar methodological approach but focus on different subsets of the honors population could add other insights into diversifying and growing honors programs.

The international student population in honors is one subset that merits further study. While three international students participated in this research, many international honors students at CCBC were excluded because the sampling method required that students had taken at least one developmental course in reading, writing, and/or mathematics. At CCBC, students who began their formal schooling in the United States after the seventh grade take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) rather than the Accuplacer test; they are then placed into classes for language learners, a system that feeds into credit-level courses in a system that runs parallel to developmental education. Because of these parallel sub-credit systems, international students are less likely to have taken developmental coursework. At the same time, honors programs attract many international students. A study focused on international students in two-year honors programs would offer insight into the ways non-native students view their college experiences, highlighting analyses of a diverse range of cultures and languages.

I am lucky to work at an institution that is forward-looking and receptive to reform. If the honors program at CCBC is able to enact any of the reforms I have recommended, I will use a mixed methods approach to tracking student

progress. For example, if honors can partner with developmental education to accept students directly from developmental gateway courses, these students will be tracked as a cohort. Their progress will be monitored for retention and GPA, which can then be compared to the retention rates and GPAs of the general college population and the honors program population. Further, their feedback will be solicited for qualitative measurement. All enacted reforms must be analyzed to determine their effectiveness in recruiting students, diversify honors, and aiding the college completion rate.

## **CONCLUSION: HONORS, DIVERSITY, AND COMPLETION**

These are tumultuous times for honors programs housed at community colleges, with three factors making this a pivotal era for honors programs housed in two-year colleges and open-admissions institutions: an ever-increasing percentage of incoming students placing into developmental education, the federal focus on completion data, and the ever-present threat of budget cuts. Honors programs at community colleges may take one of two divergent paths in order to maintain relevance in a climate of federal scrutiny and an evolving student body. One approach is to chase the top end of the long tail of incoming high school graduates, the ever-shrinking percentage of students who enter community colleges qualified for credit-level coursework. As part of a larger strategy to build a scalable honors program, courting such students is perfectly suitable. However, as the only new plan for increased enrollment in honors, this type of approach, if successful, could situate honors programs even further from the general population of community college students. The high school recruitment approach, enacted without concerted recruitment efforts for matriculated students, is likely to lead to an even greater split between honors students and their counterparts in the general population, especially with regard to age since the average community college student is a decade older than the newly minted high school graduate (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014).

Rather than chasing the would-be university student, the best action plan for honors programs at open-admissions institutions is to reposition themselves as agents of change. Many honors programs at community colleges already envision themselves this way, but they face an uphill battle if they plan to diversify the honors population. The CCBC Honors Program, like many honors programs and colleges housed at increasingly diverse two-year institutions, faces major demographic deficiencies in diversity as compared

to the college's general population. Honors students at CCBC are on average younger, whiter, and more affluent than their peers in the general college population. While much of this unfortunate phenomenon can be attributed to factors that occur before college, honors programs perpetuate these unbalanced demographics when smart, motivated, nontraditional students find too few students like them in the program, thus feeling that honors is not a good fit for students of color, continuing students, evening students, or working students. Administrators need to seek and implement reforms that can persuade more nontraditional and developmental students to join honors, and my research has indicated that such reforms include partnering with developmental education and college orientation programs, institutionalizing the solicitation of honors recommendations, and enlisting honors program students to serve as unofficial travel guides.

The students who participated in this research grew into the role of honors students rather than being recruited from high school. Like their classmates who often do not persist, transfer, or graduate, they faced obstacles, impediments, and external pressures to their time, yet they found their way to the honors program, often through either faculty encouragement or unofficial peer guidance. Once in honors, they were able to take advantage of program features such as smaller, student-centered classes, a designated study space, scholarships, additional transfer advising, and the company of a similarly driven community of peers. Such program features assist honors students in developing the incentive, focus, and motivation to succeed.

Honors programs at community colleges need not exist as “boutique” programs designed for the pre-qualified; they can and should serve a broad swath of the college's general population. Scaling honors programs up to a size that can allow them to make a notable difference in a college's completion rate requires funding and space. Just as importantly, identifying the reforms that can lead to growth and diversification is contingent upon a research methodology and administrative outlook that seek not simple numbers and rates of failure but the input of successful students, the type of students with whom honors directors interact daily.

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## APPENDIX

### Focus Group Script

“Welcome and thank you for participating in this focus group. The purpose of the focus group is to get your feedback about how we can better serve students such as yourselves.

Specifically, I want to understand what you do to successfully make progress at this institution. I want to understand what has made you successful.

The underlying assumption is that students like you have a good understanding of how to succeed. You have each completed at least one developmental course and you are now in the Honors Program. That is why we are talking with you. We want to hear what you believe to be the experiences that successful students at the Community College of Baltimore County share. Some of these experiences may have to do with the college, specifically. Others may be connected to life circumstances. More than that, we want to know what successful students like you know and do to achieve success.

#### *Categories of Matrix*

##### CATEGORY ONE: STARTING LOCATION

“What were the most important reasons that brought you to college?”

“Taking this into consideration, what changes would you recommend that could help bring more students like you to college?”

##### CATEGORY TWO: CHARTING A COURSE

“What were your goals at the start of college? How did your goals change or develop during your time in college?”

“Taking this into consideration, what changes would you recommend to the college to help more students develop goals?”

##### CATEGORY THREE: IMPEDIMENTS TO PROGRESS

“What has been the most difficult experience at CCBC for each of you? How have you successfully navigated through those difficulties?”

“Taking this into consideration, what changes would you recommend to the college to help more students navigate through these difficulties?”

#### CATEGORY FOUR: THE EXPLORER'S OUTLOOK

“What were some of the biggest challenges you have faced in your coursework?”

“Taking this into consideration, what changes would you recommend to the college to help more students master challenging coursework?”

#### CATEGORY FIVE: MAKING EARLY PROGRESS

“You all have strong GPAs. When you first started, did you have to adjust to college life?”

“Taking this into consideration, what changes would you recommend to the college to help more students adjust to college life?”

#### CATEGORY SIX: CREATING A SUSTAINABLE JOURNEY

“What, if anything, surprised you about college?”

“Taking this into consideration, what changes would you recommend to the college to help more students navigate through these surprises?”

“You each have several responsibilities outside of the classroom. What strategies do you use to help maintain your life outside of the classroom as well as your coursework?”

“Taking this into consideration, what changes would you recommend to the college to help more students balance their lives with the addition of coursework?”

#### CATEGORY SEVEN: TRAVEL GUIDES

“Tell me a little bit about a member of the college—this may be a fellow student, staff member, or faculty member—who has been the most helpful during your time here.”

“Taking this into consideration, what changes would you recommend to the college to help more students develop this kind of relationship?”