

# Nontraditional Honors

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While honors programs and colleges often proclaim the importance of recruiting and retaining a diverse group of high-ability students, many are still exclusionary and predicated on assumptions about the student body that are no longer valid. In general, we assume that honors students matriculate straight from high school and, having no family obligations, are able to reside in honors living-learning communities, participate in co-curricular honors experiences, and take advantage of honors study abroad opportunities. The structure and programming of honors can thus prohibit the full participation of nontraditional students and compound the personal and psychological barriers that keep many talented, high-achieving nontraditional students from pursuing honors. Yet the diverse voices that nontraditional students provide can add a fuller range of perspectives to our programs and especially to our discussion-based honors courses. Furthermore, nontraditional students are crucial to the future health of honors; with the seismic shift in student demographics, honors programs ignore nontraditional students at their own peril.

Certainly “traditional” and “nontraditional” are constructed and slippery terms. Many researchers have used age as the sole indicator, typically labeling twenty-five-year-olds and older as nontraditional. Using this single criterion, 38% of students enrolled in colleges and universities in 2007 were nontraditional (Ross-Gordon). In our experience, though, age does not tell the whole story. When our honors students were developing a research project about nontraditional students, they resisted this narrow definition. One twenty-one-year-old student commented that, having spent a couple of years after high school working and then struggling to fit in as a gay man on a predominantly straight campus, he felt anything but traditional. If we define nontraditional to include students with dependents, full-time employment, prior military service, financial independence, delayed entry into college, and part-time status, nearly three quarters of the college student population are nontraditional (Choy). Many nontraditional students come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and are first-generation college students (National Center for Education Statistics). While those of us who teach at community colleges,

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regional campuses, and urban universities have been witnessing this trend for some time, traditional residential universities are increasingly likely see growth in their nontraditional populations. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that the “share of students who are over 25 is projected to increase another 23% by 2019” (Bell). This trend, coupled with declining numbers of eighteen- to twenty-two-year-olds, indicates that all institutions will be looking to enroll nontraditional students in order to be competitive and relevant (Kelly and Strawn). Colleges and universities, including their honors programs, will need to adapt to the growing numbers of nontraditional students on their campuses.

We argue that developing honors programs that fully embrace nontraditional students is one of the central challenges the honors community faces in the twenty-first century. We need to do more than simply allow nontraditional students access to existing programs that are designed for their traditional peers; we also need to see nontraditional students as key stakeholders and develop inclusive, flexible programs that serve their specific needs. We also need to better articulate the value of an honors education for these students, demonstrating how innovative, engaged learning and discovery will give them the skills to succeed in a changing world. These demographic changes provide us with an opportunity to assess the missions, strategic goals, target audiences, and intended learning outcomes for honors.

### OUR EXPERIENCES

When we became honors directors at Miami University Hamilton (Whitney) and Miami University Middletown (Janice), we had no program and no honors students. We teach at the commuter campuses of Miami University in Ohio, a traditional residential institution. Our campuses have a high percentage of first-generation college students (47%) and Pell Grant recipients (over 60%). The average age at Miami Hamilton is twenty-six and Miami Middletown is twenty-seven, with a large number of students starting or returning to college after working for many years, serving in the military, or raising families. Few of our students have the background and high school successes we associate with a typical honors student. Most did not graduate in the top 10% of their high school classes, were not selected for high school honors or AP classes, and did not have exceptional ACT or SAT scores. Few had the kinds of positive encouragement from parents, teachers, and counselors that would lead them to seek out honors in college.

Our campuses had made attempts over the years to offer occasional honors sections of core courses and honors topics courses, but without a structure to admit and nurture honors students these courses did not fare well. The decision to create honors director positions signaled the campus administration's

commitment to providing opportunities for high-achieving students, but we needed to develop a program that made sense for our student population. Some students begin their coursework at our campuses and then relocate to the main campus, which has a thriving university honors program, while others complete two- and four-year degrees with us. We needed to develop pathways for our relocating students to complete the university honors program as well as a self-contained program that students could complete entirely on our campuses.

Our first step was to build a relationship with the Miami University Honors Program. In an interesting twist, the UHP, led by Carolyn Haynes, had just spent years developing an innovative outcomes-based program that it was about to roll out in fall 2009 (Taylor and Haynes) that is aligned with AAC&U's College Learning for the New Global Century outcomes. In order to meet these outcomes, students complete nine honors "experiences" that can include co-curricular activities as well as honors classes. While the program was designed with traditional-age students in mind, we thought its flexibility and emphasis on experiential learning had great potential for the non-traditional student populations on our campuses. The program does not require a specific high school GPA or ACT/SAT score for admission; instead, students are admitted based on the strength of an essay-based application. Our students, many of whom left high school two, ten, or twenty years ago, have often undergone major personal transformations and find themselves excelling academically in ways they never had before, so their high school records and test scores are poor criteria for admission.

As professors, we knew that nontraditional students tend to be motivated, mature, self-directed—the very qualities we seek in honors students. They also bring a diversity of backgrounds and life experiences that we believed would be critical in developing a pluralistic program. With great excitement we began to approach high-achieving nontraditional students to invite them to apply to our new honors program, only to have most of them turn us down. What we had not fully anticipated were the personal, psychological, and institutional barriers that stood between these excellent students and an honors education. We have spent the past three years working through these problems and adapting the program to be more accessible to nontraditional students. Based on our experiences and research on nontraditional learners, we have developed suggestions for ways that honors programs and colleges can address obstacles commonly faced by nontraditional students.

## **PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS**

When we initially met with nontraditional students, we heard the common refrain "I'm just not an honors student." When we probed more deeply,

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we found many students struggling to identify as college students at all, let alone as honors students. Even with their classroom successes, many of them carried with them a sense of unworthiness based, at least in part, on previous negative educational experiences.

We needed to find ways to give these students the confidence to consider honors. One of our strategies has been to get our faculty members heavily involved in identifying and encouraging students. Often a nomination from a trusted and respected faculty member allows a student to see herself in a different light. Once our program began enrolling a few nontraditional students, we asked them to serve as ambassadors to their peers. We had them staff tables in the commons and attend new student orientation sessions. Peer recruiting allowed students to hear the stories of others who had similar life circumstances and challenges yet had been admitted to and were thriving in the honors program. As potential students began to see more honors students who looked like them, our recruitment efforts became easier. We have followed up these efforts with structured peer mentoring, connecting more advanced nontraditional honors students with newer ones. We have still found that nontraditional students often take a few semesters of successful work in the program before they begin to see themselves as honors students.

### PERSONAL BARRIERS

Nontraditional students face major time pressures and scheduling constraints that can make it difficult for them to access honors classes and opportunities. They often juggle school with part-time or full-time employment, significant family obligations, community involvement, and other responsibilities, often without strong support systems. Spending time on honors can mean making difficult sacrifices and taking uncomfortable risks. Nontraditional students want to know precisely how much time they will have to devote to honors classes and requirements and whether participation in the program will jeopardize their GPAs or their time to graduation, questions that are difficult to answer. As Ashton notes in his article on honors students from lower socio-economic classes, “the risk of failure [for them] is much greater, threatening not just psychological or social damage but financial ruin” (Ashton 67). The same applies to nontraditional students, many of whom have taken incredible risks to enroll in higher education and whose situations are often precarious. They fear taking on any additional responsibilities that may threaten their degree completion and their chances for improving their lives and the lives of their families.

While we cannot deny that joining the honors program is risky for some nontraditional students, we have tried to find ways to mitigate some of these risks. One key has been to design our entry point into the program, an

introductory seminar, to function as a low-stakes trial run in honors so that students would be more willing to explore this option before making a commitment to the program. We have found that nontraditional students need multiple pathways to complete an honors program from different points of entry and over varying numbers of terms; “one size fits all” does not work, and we tailor the number of honors requirements to the length of time a student is in the program. With an increasing number of part-time students joining our program, we started describing our requirements without reference to class year so that these students could navigate the program more easily. Finally, we have developed honors opportunities for both associates and bachelor’s degree students and have made it possible for students to join honors at almost any stage of their college career.

Another key obstacle that nontraditional students face is that they are typically place-bound and thus unable to participate in many of the residential and study abroad opportunities afforded to traditional honors students. Honors programs are often connected to residential living-learning communities that encourage development of support networks and involve cohort classes, intensive mentoring, and social and cultural events. Nontraditional students, who rarely live in residence halls, miss out on these opportunities, and study abroad is similarly inaccessible both personally and financially. Nontraditional students may thus be excluded from forming close relationships with professors and peers and from developing a distinct sense of identity as an honors student, leading to the sense of isolation that many nontraditional learners report feeling on college campuses.

Our job has been to develop inclusive and enriching ways to engage students who do not live on campus or have the means or time to study abroad. An honors mentorship program may allow a student to live with her family yet still connect deeply with the on-campus community. Short-term study-away programs can provide meaningful cross-cultural learning, as can immersive experiences in another culture within one’s home community. In our outcomes-based program, students can petition to receive honors credit for community service and job-related activities, enabling them to construct meaningful links between these experiences and their coursework.

## **OTHER INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS**

At times the language that honors programs use, as well as the images they project, reinforces perceived barriers for nontraditional students. In a review of honors program websites, we found that many programs state that nontraditional students are eligible for the honors program while at the same time making honors appear difficult and inaccessible. Nontraditional students may have to complete additional steps in the application process or, if they

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are not incoming first-year students, retake core courses to fulfill honors requirements, indicating to nontraditional students that the program is not designed with them in mind and discouraging them from applying. We found that a relatively small number of honors programs provide pictures of nontraditional students or highlight their stories and successes on their websites even though an inclusive website and marketing materials are especially important in recruiting nontraditional students.

Scheduling can also be a major barrier for nontraditional students. Since our programs are small, we typically offer only one section of our required introductory honors course each semester. In order to attract talented students who cannot attend the course at the scheduled time, we developed a hybrid version of the course, half online and half face-to-face, and we are now exploring a fully online version. The option to count co-curricular experiences—independent research, community service, work activities—also allows students more freedom in scheduling. Offering hybrid, online, and technologically advanced classes, along with allowing students to complete honors requirements outside of honors classes, creates a more accessible and welcoming environment for all students who face major time constraints.

Another institutional barrier is the model of student development upon which programs are predicated. We found that honors requirements designed for first- and early-second-year students were not challenging to some of our nontraditional students, even those in their first and second years of coursework. Someone who has been in the workforce for many years may have skills in collaboration and leadership far beyond typical eighteen-year-old first-year students. A veteran returning from Iraq or Afghanistan may have a cross-cultural awareness that is much more sophisticated than we usually encounter among traditional students, even those who have traveled abroad. Consequently, we allow students to progress at their own pace through an electronic portfolio, which allows some nontraditional students to move more quickly to higher-tier objectives.

## CONCLUSION

In the Lumina Foundation report “Return to Learning: Adults’ Success in College is Key to America’s Future,” the authors conclude that “[i]n the 21st century, our nation needs to maximize the potential of adult learners to face global challenges” (Pusser et al. 18). Honors can play a large part in that success if we revise and adapt our programs for nontraditional learners. For our own sakes as well as for our students, we need to seize the opportunity to define the future of honors by anticipating rather than reacting to the rapid demographic changes in higher education. Our continuing relevance and

impact depend on making honors programs accessible to nontraditional students.

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