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Opening Doors: Facilitating Transfer Students' Participation in Honors

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Those of us who reflect on our work as honors educators and administrators are more certain than ever that honors programs and colleges are critical sites for development of equity, diversity, and inclusion in higher education. Numerous roundtable discussions and research presentations at recent regional and national honors conferences signal this awareness as do equally numerous honors-related publications, including two monographs released through the National Collegiate Honors Council; *Setting the Table for Diversity*, edited by Coleman and Kotinek, and *Occupy Honors Education*, edited by Coleman, Kotinek, & Oda. Lisa Coleman opens the former volume with a series of questions that frame the conversation on diversity in honors:

> Who is in our honors programs, who isn't, and why? Do we serve all members and potential members equally by providing them with the support systems, the resources, mentors, and faculty and staff with

whom they can identify? Do we help our students and ourselves address difference and do so in a respectful and constructive manner that enables all students to feel welcome and at home in the honors space? Do we construct curricula and create experiential-learning and service-learning opportunities that serve the ends of diversity (equity and inclusion) and social justice? (12)

Clearly, the need for honors programs to recruit, retain, and meaningfully engage diverse populations of talented students is widely acknowledged.

I claim that the following assertion is a natural corollary: *honors faculty and administrators should make every effort to ensure that honors is accessible to and inclusive of transfer students.* A large number of college students transfer from one post-secondary institution to another: a 2015 study by the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) shows that 37.2% of all students beginning post-secondary education in the United States in 2008 transferred at some point in their college careers, most often in the second year, and many of these students transferred from two-year institutions to four-year institutions. A 2017 NSC "Snapshot Report" shows that during the 2015–2016 academic year, 49% of all students completing a bachelor's degree at a four-year institution in the U.S. had been enrolled at a two-year institution for at least one term in the past ten years. In some states this figure was over 70%, and the states with the highest two-year-to-four-year transfer rate were those where a plurality of two-year-college students came from populations historically underrepresented in college. Honors programs that are unprepared to admit these students will miss out on their considerable contributions.

Transfer students are not only numerous, but as suggested in the previous paragraph, they also tend to represent greater ethnic, racial, socioeconomic, and age diversity than students who complete their four-year degrees at one institution uninterruptedly, and this is particularly true of students who begin their studies at two-year colleges. For example, a 2016 report from The College Board shows that Hispanic and African American students are overrepresented in two-year colleges, and the 2017 NSC report on "Current Term Enrollment Estimates" shows that 61.9% of all first-time nontraditional college attendees, defined as those over twenty-four years old, in the fall of 2017 were enrolled at two-year public institutions. Further, in my attempts to better understand the contribution of two-year colleges to four-year institutions' racial and ethnic diversity, I collected demographic data on the four-year schools considered below as well as on each of these institutions' primary two-year "feeder" school. Averaging all of the pairs for which data

was available for both members of the pair, I found that 21.4% of the most recent entering class were persons of color while the corresponding mean for the two-year "feeder" schools was 27.2%, a slightly but not insubstantially higher figure. (See Appendix 2 for a fuller description of these data.)

Thus, if we believe that honors programs and colleges benefit by engaging a diverse population of learners, we must make serious efforts to make honors accessible to transfer students. My purpose here is to demonstrate that though we, as leaders of honors programs and colleges, acknowledge the need to develop increasingly diverse honors communities, our efforts to reach out to transfer students in particular are currently insufficient to ensure these students' inclusion in and engagement with honors. I echo the words of Finnie D. Coleman, who opens his contribution to the volume *Occupy Honors Education* by urging us to move past merely talking about what "occupying honors" might look like to actually doing it:

> I intend here only to challenge honors faculty, students, and staff to look beyond the *rhetoric* of occupation to develop strategies and plans that will lead to a specific set of positive outcomes: placing honors education on the cutting edge of educational practice and promoting the democratic values of diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice. (317–18, emphasis in the original)

Coleman's charge is not a hollow one: many of the moves toward equity made by honors programs appear to be largely rhetorical. For instance, as Philip Frana and Stacy Rice noted in 2017, a majority of honors programs and colleges at four-year institutions report having some sort of articulation agreement or memorandum of understanding (MoU) with at least one two-year college honors program, according to the terms of which agreement the four-year school recognizes some honors credit earned at its two-year partner. However, as we will see later, many four-year schools' honors programs do not even make these agreements known on their websites, sites that are many students' first source of information on a program's offerings. While these agreements' invisibility does not vitiate their institutional force, it does make them less effective at encouraging transfer students' involvement in honors curricula.

The advertisement of MoUs is one of many moves an honors program or college might make to ensure greater inclusion and engagement of transfer students and others historically underrepresented in the four-year college honors experience. Other such moves range from the purely rhetorical, e.g.,

being intentional in the wording of the program's website, to the elaborately structural, e.g., overhauling the design of a program's curriculum. In the sections that follow, I examine several of these moves and analyze a sample of honors websites to determine the extent to which honors programs appear to be making them. I use the words "appear to be making" intentionally: although a program's practices may serve to accommodate transfer students, if those practices are not prominently advertised, then their invisibility may instead discourage transfer students' involvement.

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A note on language. From this point on I will use the term "honors programs" to refer to both honors programs and honors colleges in order to avoid wordiness. Moreover, though almost everything I discuss in this article applies equally well to both programs and colleges, the majority (90.9%, or 20 out of 22) that I consider in my survey are honors programs.

WHY THERE ARE SO FEW TRANSFER STUDENTS IN HONORS PROGRAMS

In 2006, Dowd et al. noted the rich potential in the nation's two-year colleges: "the talent pool at community colleges is large and growing. Students who manage to transfer complete their bachelor's degree programs at high rates" (3). The most recent relevant data from the National Student Clearinghouse in 2018 suggest that this success rate continues today, with a six-year graduation rate of 41.8% for students beginning at a public two-year college. Meanwhile, it has been clear for some time that putting articulation agreements into place is insufficient to ensure transfer students' involvement in honors. As Bagnato lamented in 2006, "while many colleges have articulation agreements with state universities, even an honors program at a community college doesn't necessarily translate to acceptance at an elite U.S. university" (5).

We face numerous challenges as we attempt to bring transfer students, from two-year schools or elsewhere, into honors programs. To begin with, transfer students may not be aware that honors is an option for them. Furthermore, even if honors is actively marketed to transfer students, these students may not identify themselves as "honors material," which may lead to their undermatching and electing not to take part in honors programming. Finally, for those transfer students who do opt to participate in honors, curricular obstacles may prevent them from successfully completing honors requirements.

It is worth our time to consider the idea of "honors identity." Twenty years ago, writing specifically about nontraditional honors students, Betsy G. Yarrison remarked:

> Many prospective honors candidates from among the non-traditional population do not see themselves as intellectually gifted. . . . [I]t is very common for us to approach a student who is transferring into the university with a GPA of 3.83 and have her say, "Honors? You must be kidding! I'm not smart enough for Honors." (23)

As Yarrison suggests here, many students from nontraditional college-going groups undermatch, intentionally placing themselves in less challenging academic settings than their talents would allow them to navigate. Dziesinski, Camarena, and Homrich-Knieling explain:

> For students from majority groups, negotiating an honors identity may not be problematic in itself because honors likely coordinates well with other identities more associated with privilege. . . . In contrast, for students coming from underrepresented or marginalized groups, becoming enlightened simultaneously to the privilege of honors and to the oppression related to their underrepresented or marginalized group status put[s] these students in a difficult position. (92)

Jones, writing in the same 2017 volume, agrees, pointing out that undermatching can "lead some students to voluntarily opt out of program participation if they [do] not perceive themselves as being honors qualified" (68). The more recent work of Kang and Torres in 2018 found that roughly 40% of a sample of nearly 5,000 students undermatched in their choice of college (by enrolling in a school that was not as selective as they were qualified to attend) and that even after controlling for a number of other factors, undermatching was responsible for a decrease in completion of a college degree.

Various authors (e.g., Bagnato; Gabbard et al.; Pressler; Sanon-Jules; Jones) recommend specific policies, practices, and pedagogies to help students develop cultural capital and counter the non-honors self-identification of members of traditionally underrepresented groups. Honors administrators must go further and ensure that their policies, practices, and pedagogies are made as transparent as possible, prominently displaying them on honors websites and other publicly available materials. Absent this transparency, policies intended to help students with less academic cultural capital will have a lessened impact as these students may not know to ask about their existence.

We should also work to dismantle curricular barriers to transfer students' success in honors programs, including overly rigid course requirements, unrealistic "good-standing" requirements, and time-consuming extra- and co-curricular expectations. Because transfer students often come to their new institutions having already earned a great deal of credit, many face a shorter path to on-time graduation than their peers who began at the same institution. As a consequence, many transfer students find themselves focusing on their major coursework at the expense of other courses, including honors. If the honors curriculum is insufficiently flexible, transfer students may not be able to complete the courses needed to graduate "with honors" or to remain in good standing in the honors program. As Yarrison notes, many transfer students have neither interest in nor need for the extra- and co-curricular participation some honors programs require of their students.

We thus need to focus on the following aspects of an honors program in regard to transfer students:

1. admissions criteria and procedures;
2. requirements for graduating and remaining in good standing in honors;
3. design of the honors curriculum (with specific attention to required courses and to the "balance" of the curriculum throughout a student's career),
4. existence (and advertisement) of articulation agreements, memoranda of understanding, or other recognitions of transfer honors credit; and
5. website language and design.

Each of these data can be taken as a marker both of an honors program's attitude toward transfer students and of the program's active commitment to recruiting and retaining transfer students in its community. We need to ask the following questions: Are transfer students eligible to take part in honors at a particular institution? If they are eligible to take part, are they, further, encouraged to take part? And, once admitted to the honors program, how are they made to feel welcome and helped to succeed?

Before addressing these questions, I need to explain my methodological choice to survey honors websites rather than contact honors directors and deans directly. As I have previously noted, the effectiveness of honors policies in helping transfer students and others to engage is dependent not only on those policies' emplacement but also on their advertisement. That is, what matters is not only what we do to help our students but also how and how well we make known what it is that we do. Even if transfer students are technically

welcome in honors, potentially aided by articulation agreements and waivers of honors requirements, these practices and others are unhelpful if the students are not aware of their existence.

Admissions Criteria and Procedures

In evaluating potential honors students, many programs rely heavily on traditional measures of academic excellence:

- high school GPA (weighted or unweighted);

- standardized test scores;

- lists of honors, Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, or dual enrollment courses taken in high school;

- lists of extracurricular activities; and

- lists of volunteer, service, and community engagement activities.

Cleaving too closely to such measures generally privileges already privileged individuals, who are disproportionately white, middle- and upper-middle-class, and from households headed by college graduates. Some of these measures have built-in cultural, racial, and ethnic biases (see, for example, the groundbreaking work discussed in Steele). Moreover, scoring highly on measures that require time commitment beyond regular school hours is difficult for high school students from families with lower socioeconomic status, who must work to support themselves or their families or to save up for college (Eccles et al; Lareau; Dumais; Covay & Carbonaro; Stearns & Glennie; and Putnam).

Moreover, if admissions criteria are designed in such a way to specifically rule out transfer students or to effectively deny transfer students' interest in the program, few are likely to apply successfully. For example, admissions criteria may expressly state that students must be entering first-year students, or they may require that the applicant have earned no more than a certain number of hours of college credit or be a member of an honors program at a previous institution. Admissions criteria may omit any mention of transfer students, forcing such students to contact the honors office to learn more when they may lack the academic cultural capital or "honors identity" to know to take this action.

Several authors (Godow; Soares; Jones) make specific recommendations for more inclusive practices such as the ones described below.

Requirements for Graduating and Remaining in Good Standing in Honors

If requirements for graduation are overly burdensome, many transfer students will be unlikely to complete them successfully. The same is true of certain "good standing" requirements. For instance, if students must take one honors course every term or even every other term to remain in good standing, sufficient honors courses must be offered to enable all students, including transfer students, to clear this bar. Introducing honors contract courses and allowing "double-dipping" between honors and major requirements can add flexibility and accessibility to the honors curriculum. Youmans, for example, notes the positive impact of hybrid courses in the disciplines that include both honors and non-honors students, courses in which honors students raise the bar for all students in the class as well as the instructor: "faculty members who have agreed to develop hybrid courses have reported an influx of new ideas, both methodological and content-based, that naturally carry over to the other sections of the course" (22).

Extra- and co-curricular requirements may also offer unrealistic challenges to transfer students, whose paths to on-time graduation require a quicker pace. As Yarrison reminds us, nontraditional students in particular "don't need mandatory public service or volunteer work. . . . They do not need freshman colloquia that teach them how to live away from home for the first time. . . . [They] do not need programs that depend on their willingness to study away from their home campus" (26–27).

Design of the Honors Curriculum

The structure of the honors curriculum has a strong impact on students' successful completion of honors requirements. Transfer students, who typically face a shorter time to graduation and less flexibility in their focus on major coursework, are more strongly impacted than others. If an honors curriculum is designed in such a way that many of the required courses must be taken in the first year or two of college, students entering the program in their second year or later may find it difficult or impossible to complete honors graduation requirements. The curriculum might also be imbalanced by requiring a large number of courses outside of the major. Since many transfer students, especially those coming from two-year colleges, come to their new institutions having met most or all of their general education requirements, they often plan to enroll in major courses only. If honors course offerings are

too rigid, transfer students may find it difficult to reconcile their major course schedules with their honors requirements.

Finally, even if an honors curriculum is designed to be navigable by both continuing and transfer students, the curriculum's structure may not be clearly described on the program's website, once again forcing interested students to be proactive in seeking more information about the program's offerings and expectations.

Articulation Agreements and Memoranda of Understanding

Many honors programs have put in place articulation agreements, memoranda of understanding, or some other formal procedure enabling official recognition of honors credit earned elsewhere. Frana and Rice have provided information on how to craft such measures, and others (Morphew, Twombly, & Wolf-Wendel; Townsend & Wilson) also discuss articulation agreements and other means of ensuring a smooth transfer process. In the absence of such measures, many transfer students find it difficult to complete honors requirements. Moreover, if the measures are not advertised clearly on the honors program's website or other promotional literature, transfer students are unlikely to benefit from them.

Honors Program Website Language and Design

Websites are rhetorically complicated texts. The composition of an effective website requires attention to many often-competing considerations. Carliner, for example, provides an exhaustive list of design elements, and Arola and Gallagher provide opposing viewpoints on website templates. The formal study of website design is a nontrivial matter requiring considerable technical expertise (e.g., Eyman, ch. 3). Even minor decisions involving wording, organization, and visual elements can have a profound impact on the way visitors receive the website and its content and can be unwelcoming to transfer students:

1. **Absence of transfer students from mention**. Even if they are technically welcome to take part in an honors program, if transfer students are not explicitly acknowledged, then they are unwelcome and have to take additional steps to gain admission into the program.

2. **Language**. Website language might signal an assumption that all honors students

a. plan to be in the program for four years,

b. wish to live on campus,

c. need to take part in "acclimation to college" activities, or

d. have time for cultural, community-building, or other co-curricular events aimed primarily at first-year students.

Such language minimizes the experience of transfer students, who will often neither need nor desire to take part in these activities. Language suggesting a "traditional" college experience can be coded in other ways, too. For instance, some institutions' websites (particularly those of liberal arts schools) may tout for example, their schools' selectivity, prestige, rigorous curriculum, or longstanding campus traditions, all of which signal an unwelcome atmosphere for transfer students who do not represent a traditional college-going population.

3. **Visual elements**. While many institutions take care to visually represent racial, ethnic, and gender diversity on their websites, not all websites identifiably showcase transfer students. Moreover, visual elements provided without captions or other contextualizing language may rely on the viewers' familiarity with a traditional academic setting for them to properly interpret the visuals' content. Transfer students' familiarity with this setting may be lower than that of more traditional honors students.

CURRENT PRACTICES, AS ADVERTISED: A SURVEY OF COPLAC HONORS PROGRAMS' WEBSITES

To better understand current policies and procedures related to transfer students' engagement with honors, at least as advertised, I collected data from nearly two dozen honors program websites in December 2017 and January 2018. I surveyed program websites at member institutions of the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC), twenty-two of whose thirty members have some sort of formal honors program or college. (See Appendix 1 for a list of these programs' landing pages.) I chose this collection of schools because, though varying somewhat in size and structure, they share a more or less common mission of providing a liberal arts education within a public, regional context. In theory, this similarity of mission should trickle down to the schools' honors programs.

Another compelling reason to consider COPLAC institutions follows from Jones's assertion that 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). Jones notes, "Where honors can have perhaps its greatest impact is by serving as a rigorous, persistent, and public advocate for change in how diversity, inclusion, and equity are perceived, enabling honors to model for other campus programs ways of implementing inclusive excellence" (38).

Although here I consider only websites, many of the observations below apply equally well to other texts and materials that were not surveyed, including student handbooks, course catalogues, promotional brochures, university tour scripts, and guidelines.

Also, while twenty-two schools represent a tiny fraction of all four-year institutions with honors programs and COPLAC schools represent a specific sort of institution, the consistency of my findings demonstrates the need for a broader study of how we make our programs known to all students, including transfer students.

Admissions Criteria and Procedures

Of the 22 honors program websites, fewer than half (10 programs, or 45.5% of the total) mention transfer students explicitly. Six of the programs whose websites do mention transfer students hold somewhat strict eligibility requirements for them: two bar entry to students with more than 45 earned hours, and a third does not accept students with more than 50 earned hours; one program requires transfer students to arrive with a GPA of at least 3.7 at their prior institution and another at least a 3.75; and one program restricts membership to students who took part in an honors program at their prior institution.

Some institutions are less clear about transfer admissions policies. For instance, Henderson State University's homepage notes that "other Henderson students, as well as transfers, may consult with the honor director about becoming members of the Honors College or about taking particular Honors College courses" ("Honors College"), without any indication of either an admissions process or criteria that will be applied. Meanwhile, Truman State University's website states, "no credit toward becoming an Honors Scholar shall be given for high school, transfer, or online courses, (including AP, CLEP, Study Abroad or substitutions) unless approved by the Honors

Scholar Committee" ("Important Policies and FAQ"). Fort Lewis College's instructions to transfer students are similar: "Interested students transferring to Fort Lewis College or FLC students who do not meet the aforementioned requirements should contact [the Honors Director] to discuss their particular situation" ("Applying to the Honors Program").

Only two of the ten programs whose websites mention transfer students (or 9.1% of all programs surveyed) offer both clear and complete instructions to transfer students and entry to transfer students without severe restrictions on past honors membership, GPA, or credit hours earned. Thus, most programs' websites either do not welcome transfer students or showcase rigid prerequisites for transfer students' participation in honors.

Requirements for Graduating and Remaining in Good Standing in Honors

Six out of 22 programs' websites (27.3%) make no explicit mention of requirements for remaining in good standing. The most common good-standing requirement mentioned is overall GPA: 14 of 22 programs, comprising 63.6% of all programs and 87.5% of those explicitly mentioning good-standing requirements, require students to maintain a given minimal GPA to be retained in the program. This minimum ranges from 3.0 to 3.6, with a mean of 3.282 ($\sigma = 0.1565$) and a nearly identical median of 3.275. One program (at Eastern Connecticut State University) offers a "sliding scale," requiring first-year students, for instance, to maintain a GPA of 3.3 and seniors a GPA of 3.5. In all cases, the GPA required for staying in good standing is lower than the GPA required of transfer students by the two programs with GPA requirements.

The next most common good-standing criterion is regular completion of honors courses: 7 out of 22 programs (31.8% of all programs and 43.8% of those mentioning good-standing requirements), all of which also require a minimum GPA, require students to complete a certain number of honors credit hours per semester or per academic year. All but one of these programs require one course per academic year; the remaining program requires two courses. Only one program requires students to complete at least 28 hours of any coursework, including honors, per academic year. Three programs, all of which require a minimum GPA and two of which also require regular completion of honors courses, have co-curricular requirements as well, necessitating that students take part in a certain number of honors events per month or per term. As I noted in the previous section, requiring participation

in co-curricular programming may be a significant barrier to many transfer students' success in honors.

The University of Minnesota, Morris's program is unique in that it has no good-standing requirements at all. This program's website declares, "once you're admitted to the program, you're in and will not be asked to leave it. If there's a course you'd like to take, don't hesitate to enroll" ("FAQ").

For graduation with honors, all 22 programs require students to complete a certain number of credit hours in honors. Four programs (18.2% of the total) have multiple tiers of achievement, permitting students to earn different levels of distinction for different levels of commitment to the program. The average number of hours required to graduate with highest distinction is 21.8; this drops to 18.6 after removing the two "outlier" programs that require students to complete the majority of their general education courses in honors.

Fourteen out of 22 programs (63.6%) additionally require students to complete an honors thesis, capstone, course-based study abroad, or some other substantive curricular activity to graduate with honors. While some programs insist on a specific sort of activity, others are more flexible. Midwestern State University, for instance, allows students to choose between a research project, an internship, or a study abroad program. This program, however, joins five others (together comprising 27.3% of all programs surveyed) in requiring students to participate in various co-curricular and extracurricular events in order to graduate with honors.

In summary, while most programs' good-standing requirements are reasonable and pose no more difficulty to transfer students than they do to any other students, graduation requirements, largely based on the number of credit hours students must complete in honors, may place barriers between transfer students and graduation with honors.

Design of the Honors Curriculum

Regardless of the number of honors credits required, the structure of an honors curriculum can strongly affect transfer students' success in completing it. In particular, some transfer students may find it difficult to complete honors curricula that are "frontloaded," with a significant portion of required courses falling in the early years of a student's college career. On the other hand, an honors curriculum that places too many requirements in the final semesters of a student's study may find itself in competition with major departmental curricula for transfer students' time.

To assess how well balanced the curricula were, I separated all honors courses required for each program into three categories: (a) specific required courses at the 100- and 200-level, (b) specific required courses at the 300-level and higher, and (c) required honors credits that can be earned at any point in the student's tenure in honors. On average, 21.3% of all credits fall into the first category, 32.5% into the second, and 46.3% into the third. These categories offer an oversimplification, of course, particularly when students (like transfer students) who enter a program after one or more terms may be granted waivers for earlier courses and when students are granted the opportunity to earn honors credit for upper-level major courses.

Some curricular structures can give flexibility to all students, including transfer students, without sacrificing the richness of the honors experience. Granting waivers to honors "latecomers," including both continuing students and transfer students, respects these students' academic efforts prior to joining the honors community. Such waivers are reasonable for courses like first-year seminars or first-year writing, which students are likely to take in their first one or two semesters regardless of their membership in an honors program. Moreover, honors contracts, reading courses or independent study in honors, and honors credit for high-impact practices like study abroad and internships grant students autonomy in crafting a sustainable honors schedule. USC Aiken's honors program provides an example of curricular flexibility through its honors-designated "enriched" courses:

> These courses are not offered as separate sections; rather, the department or school identifies courses each semester as Honors-designated 'enriched'. Faculty members meet separately with Honors students enrolled in the course to work with them on a topic or topics of interest in order to provide more depth to the course. ("About Honors Courses")

Half of the programs (11, or 50%) surveyed have in place some such curricular structure. Seven programs (31.8%) offer some variation of an honors contract option for receiving honors credit through otherwise non-honors coursework while one program specifically rules out such an option; 5 programs (22.7%) offer honors credit for study abroad; and 3 programs (13.6%) mention the possibility of obtaining honors credit for other high-impact practices, including internships, undergraduate research, or community-engaged learning projects. Two programs, those at Truman State University and the University of Montevallo, regularly offer honors sections of a significant number

of general education and major courses, ensuring a high degree of curricular flexibility without the burden imposed by the requirement that many or all general education courses be taken in honors as in some programs surveyed.

Existence of Articulation Agreements or Memoranda of Understanding

Only one out of 22, or 4.5%, of the honors programs' websites makes any mention of formal articulation agreements or memoranda of understanding; this university lists all nine two-year college honors programs with which the program shares a formal agreement. Moreover, only three out of 22 (13.6%) of the websites mention the possibility of earning honors credit for courses taken elsewhere.

While it is reasonable to expect that honors programs be wary of over-promising benefits that ultimately cannot be delivered, these programs' websites might project a more welcoming image to transfer students if they at least indicated the possibility of honors credit being granted for honors credits earned elsewhere.

Honors Program Website Language and Design

Absent Mention of Transfer Students

As already noted, only 10 out of 22 programs (45.5%) make explicit mention of transfer students anywhere in the program website. Moreover, only three of these (13.6% of the total) mention transfer students on the program's landing page. Thus, transfer students are generally invisible on honors websites.

Language

A simple breakdown of the nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs appearing on programs' landing pages tells us something about the programs' communication with students. The table given in Appendix 3 lists the most commonly occurring lexical words, including the 20 most commonly used nouns and adjectives and all verbs and adverbs used at least 5 times. The figures given in the final row are the percentage of the listed words represented by the respective part of speech. More concisely, Table 1, below, gives the relative frequency of the same parts of speech (expressed as a percentage of all lexical words) in both conversational English and academic prose, with data taken from Biber et al. (1999).

The distribution of parts of speech on honors landing pages is closer to that of academic prose than conversational English. This similarity is even more pronounced if we eliminate the three obvious outliers ("honor," "student(s)," and "program(s)"), yielding the following distributions of parts of speech for honors landing pages:

- Adjectives: 27.8%

- Adverbs: 5.9%

- Nouns: 50.7%

- Verbs: 15.6%

One inference might be that honors websites place more emphasis on description than on action. More careful analysis would be needed to conclude that honors programs are more likely to treat students as objects than as agents, but this conclusion seems plausible in that the verbs above refer as often to action performed by the program as to actions performed by the honors students.

Visual Elements

I performed a similar review of the visual content of honors landing pages. These 22 webpages contained a total of 90 still images and 6 videos. The most common subjects of the still images were experiential learning, including co-curricular activities, and study abroad (32 images, 35.6% of total); general university scenes (14 images; 15.6%); and informal honors gatherings (13 images; 14.4%). Only 6 of the 20 (30%) websites that had visual elements of some kind provided captions for some or all of their images. This absence of contextualizing information is not only an accessibility issue but makes it difficult for visitors to decode the images. Visitors must rely on an understanding of the images' context to decode their meaning, and this understanding comes more easily to visitors familiar with traditional academic conventions.

TABLE 1. RELATIVE FREQUENCY OF PARTS OF SPEECH IN ENGLISH COMMUNICATION

Part of Speech	Conversation	Academic Prose
Adjective	7.14%	18.87%
Adverb	14.29%	5.66%
Noun	42.86%	56.60%
Verb	35.71%	18.87%

CHARTING A WAY FORWARD: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OUTREACH TO TRANSFER STUDENTS

I offer here some specific recommendations for how we might adapt our policies and their promotion so that we make more evident our desire to recruit and retain outstanding transfer students. These recommendations, if implemented, would assist not only transfer students but all students, regardless of the way they come to honors.

Admissions Criteria and Procedures

Admissions criteria and procedures for transfer students should be designed so as not to restrict admissions to too small a group of transfer students, and they should be clearly listed on the program's website alongside corresponding criteria for entering first-year students.

In crafting specific criteria for transfer admission, I urge us to listen to David M. Jones, who offers evidence for the success of admissions criteria that are "based on a diversity-aware review of multiple measures of academic performance" (46). Specifically, honors administrators should not rely exclusively or even predominantly on standardized test scores, high school GPA, and other measures that may not only reinscribe historical inequities but may no longer be valid indicators of transfer students' current readiness for honors. After all, many transfer students come to honors a few years after having taken the SAT or ACT, making these already-suspect indicators of academic excellence even less valid measures. In contrast, asking transfer students to describe, in writing or an interview, their experience with learning outside the classroom, study abroad, community engagement, or other life experiences enables those screening honors applications to gain a much clearer view of the applicant. Soares indicates how various institutions, including Tufts University and UC Berkeley's Law School, have had success in asking students to demonstrate "situational judgement" by responding hypothetically to specific problems in specific contexts.

Requirements for Graduating and Remaining in Good Standing in Honors

Graduation requirements should be realistically achievable in a timely fashion by all students, including transfer students, and all requirements

should be prominently placed on the program's website. Honors contract courses and options for obtaining honors credit for major coursework, as well as multiple "tiers" for graduation with honors, should be available and advertised. For instance, the University of North Carolina, Asheville Honors Program recently began offering "Recognition as an Honors Scholar," which requires completion of twelve hours of honors credit, as an alternative to the longstanding acknowledgement of "Distinction as a University Scholar," which requires completion of twenty-one hours of honors credit. Three other programs surveyed offered similar options.

Similarly, requirements for remaining in good standing should be realistically achievable and should not include co-curricular or extracurricular expectations that are unlikely to be useful to transfer students. In providing meaningful out-of-class experiences for transfer students in honors, we need to consider their specific needs. For example, in addition to orientation programming designed to welcome brand-new college students to the honors experience, we might offer opportunities for transfer students to interact with each other socially, helping to foster a community of learners with similar prior academic experiences. Those transfer students who are of non-traditional age for college, a group comprising a majority of those enrolled in two-year colleges (see, for example, The College Board, "Trends"), have co-curricular needs but often find required activities pointless. As Yarrison reminds us, such students

> need a life of the mind away from their families and their dead-end jobs. . . . They need exciting guest lectures, Sleeping Bag seminars, field trips, and opportunities to attend conferences to present their research. They need *space*. . . . They don't need mandatory public service or volunteer work, but they know its value and can make younger students aware of it. . . . They already see the relevance of school to life: that is why they are back in school. (26–27; emphasis in the original)

As Yarrison suggests throughout her work, successful honors programs leverage transfer students of any age as an asset, encouraging their participation rather than placing barriers to involvement.

Finally, flexible curricular opportunities, such as contracts, honors credit for major courses, study abroad, and other high-impact practices, should be provided to help all students, including transfer students, remain in good standing in honors programs.

Design of the Honors Curriculum

Honors administrators should seek ways of adding flexibility to their curricula without sacrificing challenge by offering classes broadly and frequently enough to permit all students to complete honors requirements expeditiously. In particular, the honors experience should be distributed evenly throughout the students' careers in college, avoiding "frontloading" requirements in the first year or two of college. As just noted, honors contract options and honors courses in the major increase a curriculum's flexibility, as do multiple tiers of honors distinction at least one of which is reasonably accessible to hardworking transfer students.

Existence of Articulation Agreements or Memoranda of Understanding

Honors administrators should work with other campus leaders, including the institution's legal representatives, as needed, to formalize the means by which students transferring from other institutions can earn honors credit for courses taken elsewhere. Any such means should be advertised prominently on the university's website and in other promotional materials. See Frana & Rice for information on designing effective Memoranda of Understanding.

Honors Program Website Language and Design

As a minimal first step, honors websites should explicitly mention transfer students. Even this minor step signals a program's acknowledgement of the contributions transfer students can make to an honors community. Language and visual elements should be chosen to help all students feel welcome. All students will feel more welcome in a program whose website features student-centered language and photos of students (including transfer students) in action, with appropriate captions to help contextualize the students' work.

CONCLUSION

Given the axiom that diversity is an intrinsic good with immeasurable value to any academic community, honors programs should implement and promote practices facilitating admission and retention of transfer students. We need to move past the rhetoric of equity and inclusion and take real steps toward achieving these goals in reality. Pehlke reminds us,

> If some honors administrators insist on using primarily unjust means to admit incoming students into honors programs across the country, I would argue that honors is not living up to its name. . . . Administrators need to actively seek out diverse representation in the honors student body and faculty. This needs to be one of the foremost tasks of the honors commitment. (29–30)

Though a broader and deeper study of honors programs' promotional materials would be needed to get a complete picture, the survey I have provided here shows us a disconnect between our principles and our practices, at least in our advertisement of those practices.

Institutional change is slow, and it is unrealistic to expect every program to adopt equitable practices overnight. However, we must start by looking through a lens tinted by access, equity, inclusion, and diversity as we review and revise our courses, our curricula, and all of our offerings outside the classroom and far from our campuses. We must look through the same lenses as we work to make known to the world what it is we do. I end as I began, by invoking Lisa L. Coleman, who exhorts us to change, arguing that "each of us in honors in America is naïve if we believe that honors does not have to change integrally, significantly, if we are to continue to be productive players on the world stage as well as on the campuses of our home institutions" (xiv). Let us not be left behind. Let us remain the leaders we claim to be. Let us get to work.

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APPENDIX 1

COPLAC Honors Program and Honors College Websites

The following websites, along with various secondary and tertiary pages and various documents (e.g., course listings, student handbooks, and graduation checklists) found therein, were examined between December 2017 and January 2018.

- Eastern Connecticut State University:
  <http://www.easternct.edu/honors>

- Fort Lewis College (CO):
  <https://www.fortlewis.edu/honors>

- Georgia College and State University:
  <http://www.gcsu.edu/honors>

- Henderson State University (AR):
  <http://www.hsu.edu/HonorsCollege/index.html>

- Keene State College (NH):
  <https://www.keene.edu/academics/honors>

- Mansfield University (PA):
  <https://www.mansfield.edu/honors-program>

- Massachusetts College of the Liberal Arts:
  <http://www.mcla.edu/Academics/undergraduate/honors-program/index>

- Midwestern State University (TX):
  <https://mwsu.edu/academics/honors>

- Ramapo College of New Jersey:
  <https://www.ramapo.edu/honors>

- Shepherd University (WV):
  <http://www.shepherd.edu/honors>

- Southern Oregon University:
  <http://sou.edu/academics/honors-college/program>

- Southern Utah University:
  <https://www.suu.edu/honors>

- State University of New York, Geneseo:
  <https://www.geneseo.edu/edgarfellows>

- Truman State University (MO):
  <http://honors.truman.edu>

- University of Illinois, Springfield:
  <https://www.uis.edu/caphonors>

- University of Maine, Farmington:
  <http://www.umf.maine.edu/majors-academics/honors-program>

- University of Mary Washington (VA):
  <http://academics.umw.edu/honorsprogram>

- University of Minnesota, Morris:
  <https://academics.morris.umn.edu/honors>

- University of Montevallo (AL):
  <https://www.montevallo.edu/academics/experiential-learning/
  honors-program>

- University of North Carolina, Asheville:
  <http://honors.unca.edu>

- University of South Carolina, Aiken:
  <https://www.usca.edu/honorsprogram>

- University of Virginia, Wise:
  <https://www.uvawise.edu/academics/honors-program>

APPENDIX 2

Comparing the Racial and Ethnic Makeup of COPLAC Schools with that of Their Corresponding "Feeder" Schools

In the introduction, I alluded to an analysis of the racial and ethnic diversity of the student body of the four-year institutions surveyed in this article. I describe this analysis a bit more fully here.

By examining publicly available data and by contacting admissions offices for several of the COPLAC institutions considered in this article, I was able to determine the racial and ethnic makeup of a recent entering class of first-year students for 21 of the 22 schools surveyed here. (These data are quite recent, corresponding to either the Fall 2016 or Fall 2017 cohorts for all but two of these schools.) Further, for 13 of these institutions, I was able to determine both (a) the two-year college from which a plurality of transfer students to the corresponding four-year institution are graduated and (b) the racial and ethnic makeup of this two-year college.

On average, the entering first-year class of one of these 13 COPLAC schools comprised 21.4% students of color. Meanwhile, the average corresponding cohort from the 13 two-year "feeder" schools comprised 27.2% students of color. Moreover, in only four (4) of the 13 pairs was the percentage of students of color higher in the four-year COPLAC institution than it was in the corresponding two-year college.

Though much more (and more precise) data must be collected to say more, these preliminary findings suggest that, as a rule, two-year colleges have more racially and ethnically diverse student bodies than the four-year schools to which those students transferred.

APPENDIX 3

The Most Commonly Used Substantive Words in Honors Website Landing Pages, Broken Down by Part of Speech

Rank	Adjectives	*n*	Adverbs	*n*	Nouns	*n*	Verbs	*n*
1	honors	187	academically	12	student(s)	115	design(s)	18
2	academic	33	beyond	9	program(s)	107	offer(s)	15
3	intellectual	16	intellectually	8	college	52	apply	13
4	required	13	successfully	6	course(s)	39	include(s)	11
5	first	12	together	6	university	39	provide	9
6	interdisciplinary	12	after	5	year	25	complete	8
7	one	12			experience(s)	23	participate	8
8	challenging	11			scholars	23	contact	7
9	curricular	11			community	22	develop	7
10	motivated	10			faculty	19	achieve	5
11	small	10			opportunity/ies	18	become	5
12	special	10			requirements	18	do	5
13	creative	9			class(es)	17	enhance	5
14	other	9			activities	16	help	5
15	global	8			seminar(s)	15		
16	great	8			major(s)	13		
17	high	8			credit(s)	12		
18	independent	8			learning	12		
19	liberal	8			study	12		
20	unique	8			engagement	11		
					events	11		
Total		403		46		619		121
%		33.89		3.88		52.06		10.17