

## **Innovative Approaches to Educating Academically Talented Students at Metropolitan Colleges and Universities**

One of the great strengths of higher education in the United States is the diversity of its institutions, programs, faculty, and students. There are over 3,700 public and private colleges and universities in the U.S., ranging from large research universities to small liberal arts and community colleges. Within these institutions are a rich array of programs designed to meet the academic, social, and cultural needs of a wide variety of students. One of the oldest approaches to addressing the special needs of one such community, that of academically talented or high ability students, is honors programs.

This issue of *Metropolitan Universities* attempts to address the following questions:

- What exactly are honors programs and how did they come into existence?
- Why do colleges and universities create honors programs/colleges and what benefits do they derive from having them?
- How are honors programs structured and organized at different types of metropolitan colleges and universities?
- How do metropolitan students get admitted and what kinds of special educational and cocurricular services do they receive from honors programs?
- How do honors programs/colleges enrich and become enriched by metropolitan colleges and universities?
- What are the future challenges and opportunities faced by programs for academically talented students?

The authors and guest editor for this issue were chosen because of their many years of experience with honors education and because they represent a range of approaches to honors in metropolitan colleges and universities. As guest editor, I may direct an honors college at a land-grant university located in a rural area, but I am also currently working with two of the university's three branch campuses, each located in an urban area, to establish upper division honors programs for their students. In addition, I have recently organized two conferences for the predominantly metropolitan community and technical colleges within the State of Washington on how to create, maintain, or expand educational opportunities for academically talented students. These experiences have opened my eyes to new aspects of honors program design and a great understanding of the impacts of urban and metropolitan students on honors programs. Therefore, as a starting place, it may be helpful to understand the roots of honors.

## **The Roots of Honors**

The years between World War I and World War II were a time of experimentation within higher education, as work-study, Great Books, and honors programs came into being. Frank Aydelotte, a faculty member at Swathmore College, is generally credited with being the father of the modern honors movement. Aydelotte established in the early 1920s the innovative pass-honors approach that Swarthmore is widely known for and that remains in practice today. His goal was to improve instruction for high achieving and academically talented students through the creation of special programs, activities, or facilities that would challenge bright students to master material more quickly. In a 1994 monograph titled *Breaking the Lock Step: The Development of Honors Work in American Colleges and Universities* (see "Suggested Readings"), Aydelotte traced the history of honors to that date and argued for greater flexibility and creativity in approaches to the teaching of academically talented students.

The next major period of growth in honors programs occurred in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Following the launching of Sputnik, colleges and universities, the federal government, and the general public recognized the importance of developing America's intellectual resources during the Cold War if the U.S. was to remain competitive militarily and economically.

In addition, as the numbers of students entering higher education grew during the decades following World War II, the belief developed and is still widely held today that in any college or university with a heterogeneous student body, there are two groups that are at a disadvantage: students whose skills and background have not adequately prepared them for the college curriculum, and those students whose skill levels and background are such that they would not be challenged by the regular curriculum. In response to these perceived needs, most colleges and universities developed and continue to provide remedial courses, programs, and special advising for the former group. Honors programs and colleges were designed to support the educational needs of the latter group.

In the last decade, new honors programs and colleges have been created and existing honors programs have been elevated to honors colleges. Currently, there are approximately 1,200 colleges and universities with honors programs/colleges in the United States. Of these, 678 are members of the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC), the professional organization that provides a variety of services (national and regional conferences) and publications (see "Suggested Readings") for honors directors and colleges and universities interested in the education of high ability students. In addition, NCHC has published "Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program" (Digby, 1997), which provides guidelines to institutions interested in developing an honors program, for those institutions engaged in improving their programs, or for internal or external evaluation purposes, including accreditation.

## **Honors Programs/Colleges—A Description**

One of the challenges of describing honors is that it is similar to the famous story of the blind men, each of whom is holding onto a different part of an elephant, and each of whom believes that he can accurately describe the whole creature. Honors has a

very similar quality. One of the few truisms within honors education is that no two honors programs are alike. As will become quickly apparent from the articles within this issue, honors programs develop from the context or mission, students served, and curricular focus of the college or university within which they operate.

Historically, honors programs have been organized within liberal arts and that same focus continues for the most part into the present. In many institutions, honors is an alternative general education program or provides alternate ways to complete general education requirements. In other institutions, honors is done solely within students' majors. In some colleges and universities, honors involves independent study with faculty members and completion of a thesis. Finally, in many colleges and universities, honors is a mixture of all three. And, as professional and technical programs have expanded in size and popularity, honors can now be found in those areas as well.

Regardless of the approach a college or university has chosen to take, the central core of honors education is a commitment to excellence. Sam Schuman, a former president of the National Collegiate Honors Council, has written (Schuman, 1989) that "The defining feature of Honors is a vision of doing collegiate education as well as it can be done. It is the business of Honors to cultivate academic excellence; excellent teaching, excellent learning, and the subsidiary excellences (curriculum design, extra-curricular programming, etc.) that contribute to them."

With all of the above caveats, it is still possible to identify some characteristics that are common to most honors programs. They would include:

- smaller classes than is the norm at a given institution;
- more emphasis upon collaborative learning and a general deemphasis on lectures;
- more work or different kinds of work than in comparable classes within the curriculum;
- faculty who excel in undergraduate teaching;
- emphasis upon the use of primary source material;
- team or group teaching;
- interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary courses;
- opportunities for independent study with faculty that frequently culminates in an honors thesis; and
- some kind of physical space that is devoted to honors activities, i.e., offices, lounge, computer lab, classrooms.

As this issue illustrates, honors programs do not exist only at four-year colleges and universities. In fact, community colleges have been among the most active and innovative members of the honors community, and often serve a more diverse student population, including more first-generation college students, and offer more technical curricula than most four-year institutions. Indeed, honors programs have allowed community colleges to offer high ability students challenging coursework and mentoring in order to prepare them for the transition to a four-year institution.

In large research universities, honors programs/colleges provide students with some of the benefits they might have received at a small liberal arts college, along with the readily available resources of a research institution. At small liberal arts colleges

where small classes and high faculty contact are the norm, honors programs frequently provide students with the research and faculty mentoring experiences more common to a large, comprehensive university.

### ***Benefits of Having an Honors Program/College***

A 1996 article in the September 16th issue of *U.S. News & World Report* (Fischer, 1996) entitled "The New Honors Programs: Low-cost, high-quality option for the academically talented" stated: "...long aware that they [universities] were not adequately serving the needs of the best and brightest of their students, an increasing number of public universities are attempting to remedy this deficiency by launching honors programs that are the equivalent of educational boutiques. The result: Public universities are attracting more and more high-achieving students." On February 14, 1997, *The Christian Science Monitor* (Spaid, 1997) reported that since 1993 the number of honors colleges in the U.S. had doubled because such institutions believe these programs increase the institution's ability to compete for top students, and because "these programs enhance a school's reputation and visibility."

In addition to aiding in recruitment, honors programs/colleges are credited with:

- attracting and retaining faculty committed to quality undergraduate teaching;
- assisting with fundraising, e.g., recently the Pennsylvania State University announced a \$35 million dollar gift to transform their scholars program into an honors college;
- providing the institution with an in-house laboratory in which to pilot test new pedagogies, course content, and programs prior to making changes university-wide; and
- enhancing the public reputation and image of the college or university, i.e., often honors programs/colleges are the offices responsible for mentoring students for prestigious scholarships (Rhodes, Trumans, Marshalls) or for scholarships/fellowships for graduate school, and for providing a focus for excellence in undergraduate education on campus.

As the articles in this issue illustrate, most honors programs/colleges feel a responsibility to the campus and local community. Honors programs/colleges within institutions with a clear urban mission feel an even greater responsibility to weave the students, faculty, curriculum, and community together. It is common for honors programs/colleges to organize speakers' series and other activities that are open to the whole community, as well as sponsoring community service projects.

For students, some of the benefits of participating in honors include: small classes, more individual attention from faculty, special advising or mentoring, peers who are equally committed to academic achievement, and more challenging and enriching course work. In addition, most colleges and universities have some dedicated scholarships for honors students. Some institutions offer special residential experiences for honors students while others have active student groups, mandatory service requirements, or special benefits such as priority registration, extended library privileges, or faculty research mentors.

## Challenges Ahead

If the scholars and pundits are correct, the decades ahead will be a time of continuing economic, political, social, and intellectual change for higher education. Honors programs/colleges are not immune to the forces that are bringing about these changes. In fact, it could be argued that honors programs may be more vulnerable as student interest continues to shift to vocational programs and as colleges and universities, especially public ones, attempt to become more businesslike and cost-efficient and seek to reduce personnel-intensive programs.

Of the many challenges that lie ahead, three seem most significant to the long-term health and vitality of honors programs/colleges: the declining interest in the liberal arts; resources; and the changing nature of students.

*The decline of the liberal arts.* During the last few decades there has been a growth in the popularity of vocationally oriented curricula and a simultaneous decline in the number of undergraduates majoring in traditional liberal arts areas. While many honors programs support advanced work in students' majors, the vast majority offer coursework predominantly in the liberal arts. Most honors programs offer courses that replace all or significant parts of general education requirements.

Across the country, general education programs are under review. In some institutions, requirements have been reduced or weakened. Discipline-specific accreditation, especially in professional fields, has urged if not mandated an increase in the number of courses in specific technical areas. Students, concerned about an unpredictable job market and anxious not to acquire more debt, frequently see little value in taking courses that are not career related.

Often it seems that honors programs/colleges are one of the last bastions on campus arguing to preserve the original idea of higher, liberal education: the acquisition of knowledge, learning for its own sake, and self-perfectability. Making the case for the importance of a liberal education will be one of the great challenges for honors directors in the decades ahead.

*Resources.* Whether public or private, four-year or two-year, most colleges and universities have experienced some level of budget cuts during the 1980s and 1990s. Within the public sector, many institutions feel as if they have gone from being state supported, to state assisted, to state located.

Honors programs/colleges are in a dilemma regarding resources. As mentioned above, there is currently a trend for colleges and universities to create honors programs/colleges to aid with recruiting and to lend prestige to the institution. Honors education, however, is characterized by small classes, high faculty-student contact, and individualized advising. In addition, most honors programs have dedicated staff, space, and extracurricular activities. Providing this kind of highly individualized education can be very expensive, and, at times of budget crises, honors programs can be seen as expensive luxuries serving only a small, elite group of students.

As the articles in this issue illustrate, new as well as old established honors programs struggle with resource issues. Few programs have the resources, fiscal as well

as human, to provide the quality education they would like to provide. Furthermore, as the student populations they serve matriculate with different levels of academic preparation, it is likely that even more resources will be needed in order to assist students to gain the skills they are lacking and that they need to succeed.

Like all of higher education, honors programs/colleges must find creative solutions to declining resources. Recently, many honors programs have begun active fundraising to supplement state or institutional funds.

*Changing nature of students.* When honors programs were started in the 1920s and then expanded in the 1960s, they served predominantly white, traditional-age students who lived on campus. While many honors programs continue to serve this population, most honors programs/colleges, and especially those in metropolitan areas, are attempting to meet the academic needs of a much broader range of students.

In addition to changes in age, ethnic composition, religious background, and work and living situations, honors programs/colleges are also confronted with the challenge of a lack of preparation. Many very talented students enter college without the necessary skills to achieve at a level of which they are intellectually capable. This is a special challenge familiar to metropolitan institutions and from them will come lessons helpful to others.

To try to meet this challenge, honors programs have been leaders in the introduction of experiential and collaborative learning techniques in honors classes. Their faculty have developed special courses for freshmen to assist with their transition into the academy as well as courses that help students to acquire skills, such as research skills, that they will need for success in college. Honors curricula have also evolved to include the contributions of American women and ethnic minorities as well as non-Western history and philosophy. Service learning opportunities have been introduced to help students see the connection between theory and practice and to introduce them to social issues in their surrounding communities.

No one within the honors community, however, is sanguine about our ability to respond to the changing demographics of our students. Higher education is struggling to meet the expectations and needs of distance-learning students, commuters, lifelong learners, and recent immigrants. Honors faculty recognize that their mission is to educate many of America's most talented students and that creative pedagogies, including increased use of information technologies, must be developed to ensure that all talented students receive a rigorous and challenging education.

Regardless of their backgrounds, ethnicity, religion, or age, students remain the primary focus of honors programs/colleges. As one of our author states, "the value of Honors in the metropolitan university lies primarily in its ability to encourage students to move beyond what they imagine to be possible."

### **Looking ahead: The Articles in this Issue**

The articles that follow illustrate the breadth and variety within honors education. Each of the programs/colleges highlighted demonstrates the axiom that honors should

reflect the institution's mission and culture. Yet all of the authors address issues that are common to all honors programs: mission, curricula, admissions, students, and cocurricular activities. Practical advice is offered on what policies/practices have worked, why, and what issues and challenges lie ahead. In addition, each author grapples with the question of why honors programs are important in metropolitan universities.

**Ada Long**, a former president of the National Collegiate Honors Council and long-time director of the honors program at the University of Alabama-Birmingham, discusses how her honors program has used the tension created between "urban" and "research" in an urban research university to create a small, interdisciplinary, community service-oriented honors program that serves the needs of a diverse student population. She credits student involvement and a constantly evolving curriculum for the success of her program.

**Audrey DeVore** writes about the interplay among the new University of California at Irvine, a campus-wide honors program, and the booming metropolitan region of Southern California, and she describes how her program serves a widely diverse student population, including a large percentage of recent immigrants, through a common core curricula, an active student community, and special activities that include an annual retreat.

In "Learning for Living through Metropolitan Honors," **Jay Freyman**, Director of the Honors College at the University of Maryland-Baltimore County, describes the philosophical underpinnings of his honors program. He discusses the strategies UMBC's Honors College has employed to build community among their predominately commuter students and how they have used the great ethnic and cultural diversity of the Washington-Baltimore metropolitan area to enhance and enrich their students' education.

Two experienced community college honors directors describe in their articles the important roles that honors programs can play in two-year institutions located in metropolitan areas. **Rae Rosenthal**, director of the Honors Program at Essex Community College, describes her program's attempt to develop a new definition of "qualified," when working with first generation, nontraditional, and underprepared students. A highly individualized admissions process, active support of minority students in the program, and special honors courses are all hallmarks of honors at Essex.

**K. Ann Dempsey**, director emerita of the honors program at St. Louis Community College at Florissant Valley, discusses how her community college honors program attempts to meet the needs of a diverse student population, often first-generation, with special courses, an array of cultural events, and serious research experiences that prepare students to transfer successfully to four-year institutions.

**Walter Denk**, the assistant director of the Honors Program at the University of Toledo since 1990, examines the relations between honors and the Toledo metropolitan area. Serving mostly a traditional age student population from across Ohio, the Honors Program attempts to provide their students with a curriculum, a residential setting, and activities that allow them to connect to the metropolitan community.

The article by **Ann Eisenberg** illustrates that even a relatively new honors program, the University Honors Program at the University of Texas at San Antonio, can—

with effective leadership and support from senior administrators—support the academic goals of first generation minority students. Special scholarships, small courses, and intensive advising have assisted UTSA's honors students to receive a more enriched and challenging education.

### Conclusion and Acknowledgments

One of the many challenges with which metropolitan colleges and universities currently struggle is how to provide a quality undergraduate education at a time of rapid economic change when those we serve are changing, becoming more diverse, and often come to us academically able and yet poorly prepared. This issue offers one approach, with many permutations, to addressing the special needs of the academically-talented students: honors programs and honors colleges. We hope the readers will find the articles stimulating, thought-provoking, and useful.

Finally, I would like to thank the editor of *Metropolitan Universities*, Barbara Holland, for her support and guidance as we conceived of and organized this thematic issue. Special thanks also go to many of my honors colleagues for their willingness to participate in this issue and for their ability to capture the excitement and challenge of working with talented honors students at metropolitan universities.

### Suggested Readings

For information on Honors Programs/Colleges, contact the National Collegiate Honors Council at its headquarters at Radford University, Box 7017, Radford, VA 24142-7017; telephone: 540-831-6100; fax: 540-831-5004; email: [nchc@runet.edu](mailto:nchc@runet.edu); or see the NCHC homepage: <http://www.honors.indiana.edu/nchc/nhc.html>. Some of NCHC's relevant publications include:

Austin, C. Grey, *Honors Programs: Development, Review and Revitalization* (Radford VA: NCHC Monographs in Honors Education, 1991).

Long, Ada, *A Handbook for Honors Administrators* (Radford VA: NCHC Monographs in Honors Education, 1995).

Schuman, Samuel, *Beginning in Honors—A Handbook* (Radford VA: NCHC Monographs in Honors Education, 1989).

NCHC also publishes a quarterly periodical, *The National Honors Report*, which includes an eclectic array of articles in each issue by honors administrators, faculty, and students on various aspects of honors education. Announcements of regional and national meetings and research on academically talented students are frequently reported in this publication.

Aydelotte, Frank, *Breaking the Lock Step: The Development of Honors Work in American Colleges and Universities* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1944).

Digby, Joan, *Peterson's Guide to Honors Programs* (Princeton, NJ: Petersons, 1997). Descriptions of over 350 honors programs/colleges.

Fischer, David, "The New Honors Programs: Low-cost, High-quality Option for the Academically Talented," *U.S. News & World Report*, 16 September 1996.

Spaid, Elizabeth Levitan, "State College Gambit to Lure Top Students," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 14 February 1997.

Weinstein, Bob, "Honors programs provide a back door into blue-chip colleges," *The Boston Sunday Globe*, 9 March 1997.