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## Serving Our Communities: Leveraging the Honors College Model at Two-Year Institutions

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

# Serving Our Communities: Leveraging the Honors College Model at Two-Year Institutions

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### INTRODUCTION

As colleges of the community, two-year institutions provide a vital service throughout the country by offering post-secondary education that is local and accessible. Honors colleges at two-year institutions play a uniquely important role by providing additional opportunities, services, and programming that support positive outcomes for the community, especially for those members

of underrepresented and underserved populations. Peter C. Sederberg argues in his introduction to *The Honors College Phenomenon* that those involved in honors education across the nation often “recognize that excellent honors educational opportunities can be cultivated across the diverse settings of American higher education from two-year community colleges through large, comprehensive research universities,” and though we “find somewhat less diversity among honors colleges . . . the emphasis must be placed on ‘somewhat’” (6). Even in the early 2000s, Sederberg and others recognized that the phenomenon of honors colleges was taking root at myriad institutions, and two-year colleges were no exception.

That trend holds true more than a decade later. Some may wonder how the honors college structure could be valuable, particularly when honors programs are already well established, recognized, and understood among the faculty and staff as an important opportunity for students. A significant reason is that they are supported by administration. The honors college is primarily distinguished from an honors program in the administrative structure (being led by a dean or executive director), access to campus-wide planning and development, and enhanced funding and other support. Obviously, giving honors an equal seat at the table in deans’ councils, budgetary discussions, campus planning conversations, and curriculum development allows for better advocacy for the needs of the students and faculty invested in the program. Having honors participate in these higher-level discussions, however, also allows us to share what we have learned in honors instruction, advising, and recruiting with campus partners and through our community development work. If we think of honors as a kind of laboratory—as suggested in the National Collegiate Honors Council’s (NCHC) new “Shared Principles and Practices of Honors Education”—where we can experiment with various approaches to education with engaged faculty and students who are willing to take academic risks, it stands to reason that the resources we are offering academically motivated students would be useful in other areas of instruction and student development across campus. The benefits of establishing an honors college at a two-year institution are vast. The benefits to the student

and faculty will be fairly straightforward for readers of this monograph. Alexandria Holloway, writing in 2008, argued further for the benefits outside of the honors college itself:

Administrators benefit with the return on investments or by having a proven number of successful graduates over a short period of time, a contented faculty, and exemplary student representatives. The entire community benefits from receiving over 10,000 hours in cumulative service learning projects. Ultimately, the advantage to The Honors College and the community is the prestige of having provided accessibility to a local institution that prepares its academically gifted students at an affordable cost. (60)

We couldn't have said it better ourselves.

Recognizing that honors colleges at two-year institutions cannot be built from a one-size-fits-all mindset, this chapter explores the role of honors colleges at two-year institutions in enriching the campus and local communities. Through the lens of three honors colleges that serve different geographic locations and uniquely different student populations—including large numbers of minority, first-generation, and low-income students—we will explore how honors can fulfill unmet needs and solidify its place as a cornerstone of opportunity and success in the community.

## **INTRODUCING OUR HONORS COLLEGES**

The Cleveland State Community College (CSCC) Honors College was established in 2019. CSCC is the second-smallest two-year college in Tennessee with one main campus and two remote sites. The total CSCC headcount (including dual enrollment) is about 2,700 students, a number that has dropped due to COVID impacts that significantly reduced enrollments. Honors college enrollment at this institution can range from 80 to 120 depending on the semester, the size of recent graduating classes, and the size of recent incoming classes. The application process for the honors college focuses on a student's academic motivation rather than academic preparedness because the curriculum is designed to develop

advanced academic skills in motivated students. The service area is largely rural, with a population made up of a stark contrast: notable wealth and devastating poverty. As is likely the case with many honors colleges, the establishment of the honors college at CSCC was intended as an initiative that strengthens students, the campus, and the surrounding community.

\* \* \*

Located in Miami-Dade County, Miami Dade College (MDC) is a large multi-campus public urban Minority and Hispanics Serving Institution (MSI & HSI) serving about 92,000 students and awarding bachelor's and associate's degrees, as well as vocational, technical, and college credit certificates. Born from an honors program that allowed students to take different courses across all eight MDC campuses, the honors college was established in 2002 to provide a centralized, streamlined, and coherent honors cohort experience. Today, it is a "college within a college" serving five of the eight MDC campuses, and at full enrollment, it boasts 750 students distributed equally across those campuses.

Over the past two decades, the MDC Honors College has provided an opportunity for almost 5,000 students to transform their lives by earning their associate of arts degree, transferring to their best-match institution, and ultimately achieving their goals of academic, career, and personal success. Admission is competitive and limited to only first-time-in-college (FTIC) students intending to earn an associate of arts degree and transfer. Acceptance rates vary depending on the number of applicants each year (between 34%–45%), but thanks to brand recognition and improved marketing, applications have significantly increased during all years of the pandemic. Students must have a minimum 3.7 high school GPA (weighted or unweighted) to apply, and they submit the following materials: admissions application, standardized test scores, GPA, transcripts, personal essay, and letters of recommendation, all of which are then evaluated by the campus honors directors for college fit and potential for success. Through the Honors College Fellows Award, all honors college students who are accepted and matriculate are provided funds to cover tuition, fees, and books,

and they are also awarded a stipend for other expenses. The financial awards provided by the honors college mean that the vast majority of students receive a quality education free of charge. Uniquely, the nature of the awards are stackable in nature, which means that students can apply for and receive other support and use those additional banked funds as they continue their academic journey at the college and beyond it when they transfer to their institution of choice.

\* \* \*

Prior to the existence of the Houston Community College Honors College (HCCHC), HCC honors used a contract system and was supervised by a single honors director with a one-course release. While the contract approach worked for quite some time with one director, an increasing number of students interested in honors credit and more professors signing contracts created an unsustainable system. In 2006, a small delegation of HCC representatives traveled to Miami Dade College to study their diverse and well-structured honors college. Soon after, the Board of Trustees approved the operation of the HCCHC with a \$175,000 budget and a charge to serve HCC's central campus. In the fall of 2007, the HCCHC enrolled 16 students and ended up with a budget of around \$105,000 (including merit scholarships). The college stabilized its enrollment of 25 students the following year.

The HCCHC eventually opened at two more campuses and hired two directors to serve our Northwest and Southwest regions. In January 2016, they opened their doors to their first cohorts. In 2019 and 2021, the institution launched two additional honors colleges serving HCC's Southeast and Northeast sectors. Today, the HCCHC is led by an Executive Director who reports to the AVC of Curriculum and Learning Initiatives, has five full-time directors, serves 250 students (from a college-wide student body of about 57,000 students), and operates with a budget of around \$334,000. Directors are responsible for the total operation of their respective honors colleges, including recruiting, degree advising, and event planning among a host of responsibilities. They receive an 80% course release on a 12-month contract.

As of May 2020, the admissions process consists of an online application and an oral interview. Students need a 3.5 GPA, test scores (e.g., SAT, TSI, ACT), unofficial high school or college transcripts, a 500-word essay discussing one of three topics, and two letters of recommendation that speak to the applicant's character. Once applications are screened, directors hold a one-hour interview with applicants who meet the minimum requirements. Accepted students receive the Chancellor's Merit Scholarship and a Barnes and Noble Book Scholarship to cover tuition and books.

### **WHAT DOES AN HONORS COLLEGE DO THAT A PROGRAM DOES NOT?**

As outlined in this chapter, the main differentiators between an honors college and an honors program include autonomy, control, influence, and institutional support rather than size or programming. Some honors colleges may have significantly smaller student populations than large honors programs even while both may engage in similar programming. An honors college is generally led by a dean instead of a program director. Through convention, the title of dean may carry more respect and authority among those who work in academia (staff, faculty, and administrators), while a director is generally considered a mid-level administrator with limited power or influence. Operating under a dean and with the gravitas of a college, an honors college has greater autonomy to act independently as a unit, has greater levels of control to manage its own affairs including a designated budget, can influence other units more readily, and generally receives greater financial support.

### **INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES**

Because variabilities exist across both colleges and programs with no one specific, predetermined model for either, individual differences abound. While some honors colleges employ a dean specifically dedicated to the administration of that program (as at MDC), others may have a dean who oversees the honors college

and various other departments on their campus (as at CSCC). Still others may have their honors college reporting to an Executive Director (as at HCC), a Vice President, Assistant to Associate Vice President, or Provost. This elevated reporting line stands to reason since the general rationale behind having an honors college report to higher levels of administration leadership is to allow it enhanced gravitas within the structure of the college. Similarly, some honors colleges, given the fiscal ability to do so, may have staff specifically dedicated to the administration of honors scheduling, recruiting, and events, while others may be structured so that this work falls primarily to the dean or is shared by staff members shared among departments. The MDC Honors College largely handles all aspects of its own operations independently, including course scheduling, recruitment and admissions, events, and other types of regular and special activities. In short, an institution's financial investment in the honors college is often dictated by its enrollment, state funding, grants, and endowments. and the resulting fiscal solvency/freedom to prioritize honors and other educational and engagement initiatives. Because the goal of establishing an honors college is to give honors more impact on campus and more influence when advocating for what it needs to serve students, faculty, and communities as effectively as possible, the resulting structure is, nevertheless, dictated by both limitations and possibilities as well as the vision of senior administrators and the long-standing priorities of the college.

While NCHC's "Shared Principles and Practices of Honors Education" offer standards for honors programs and honors colleges, some units may be beholden to different standards and expectations, such as those associated with state or regional honors councils, state organizations, or Boards of Regents. Others may be limited by financial and structural constraints imposed by the college's leadership. For these reasons, the "Shared Principles and Practices" are framed by the acknowledgement "that honors programs and colleges exist in vastly different institutional and environmental contexts, possess a wide variety of missions and approaches, and have varied access to resources to bring about these



outcomes” (1). Efforts to create consistency across various honors programs and honors colleges, while valiant, will always be subject to growth and development; honors colleges will have to adapt just as higher education does to meet the needs of a changing world.

### **DOING MORE**

The semi-autonomous nature of the academic unit of a “college” gives honors colleges greater operational latitude and an ability to largely determine their own destiny. If managed correctly and according to the norms of the institution, a college allows the dean to control most operations such as staffing, budget, marketing, recruitment, admissions, probations/dismissals, programming, activities, alumni affairs, partnerships, articulation agreements and memorandums of understanding with other institutions, and to a lesser degree curriculum changes. Depending on the academic bylaws of the institution, minor curricular revisions and adjustments may be under the dean’s control while significant and programmatic curricular changes usually are not.

### **IMPACTING CAMPUS**

Based on the weight of the dean title and depending on the political climate and norms of the institution, an honors college dean can influence key internal and external stakeholders and constituents for the benefit of the college. Influential internal and external partnerships and alliances, both formal and informal, do much to support the mission of the college. Honors program directors can exert influence to support honors; however, this influence is largely related to the personal political capital of the individual director and/or the norms and background of the institution. The subordinate nature of a director title can be a limiting factor on influence.

Moreover, a college is generally considered a quasi-independent operating unit standing either alone or within a large unit such as a college or university, whereas honors programs are generally subordinate in the hierarchical structure of an academic

institution, which usually limits their ability to operate with complete autonomy. While some honors programs may enjoy levels of independence equal to that of a college, these situations are rare and unique to particular institutions that are usually smaller in size.

## **BEST PRACTICES**

As noted throughout this chapter, *standardization* is not a word that applies to honors colleges at two-year institutions. Honors colleges are as diverse and unique as their institutions and the students they serve. A one-size-fits-all approach, even across similar institutions and student types, would not lead to optimal outcomes and would likely require significant revisions as the honors college evolves within the existing college structure. In spite of this caution about one-size-fits-all approaches, some best practices do emerge from a study of honors colleges at two-year institutions.

## **RESOURCES**

Adequate resources are critical to the success of any honors college. Financial resources, human capital, extensive course offerings, and a variety of student programming are essential to success. In a climate of shrinking budgets, creativity is the key to finding the resources needed to sustain a robust honors experience. Cross-campus partnerships with other academic and non-academic units can often yield funds and resources. Shared programming and cost-sharing can augment budgets and provide quality programming that benefit both honors and non-honors students alike.

External partnerships and alliances can augment shortfalls and provide greater community visibility. The MDC Honors College worked with the University of Miami to create a partnership that provided STEM internships to students during the summer. The partnership benefited both institutions and provided high-quality paid internship experiences with research-focused faculty that ultimately better prepared honors students for transfer and success in several STEM fields. The partnership was extended for the summer of 2022 to include STEM internships at three local research-focused

universities: the University of Miami, Florida Atlantic University, and Florida International University. This program expansion benefited the students and institutions by diversifying the research internship subject specialties available to students, increasing the total number of internships open to students, and providing greater opportunities for the institutions to benefit from these partnerships.

Along with external and internal partnerships, repurposing and expanding staff and faculty roles can also help fill gaps. Faculty can support programming and activities in ongoing roles or in special circumstances. Staff can be cross-trained to serve in several capacities, and cross-unit sharing of personnel can provide support where needed. Honors leaders should partner with other departments on campus and in the community as often as possible. Small programs and those with few staff members may fall into the trap of tackling every task, event, or need on their own, but other campus entities, including the admissions office, student life, or student-run clubs, may be willing to collaborate on particular projects. Service projects may appeal to existing community partners; of course, seeking out new collaborators may be necessary on occasion, but that search can be time consuming and labor intensive. When honors-specific resources are scarce, honors colleges can use their increased influence on the campus and surrounding community to involve them in a particular honors enterprise, to enlighten them about honors education, and to recruit more students into the honors community.

Just as honors college leaders must understand their available resources, senior administrators must fully understand the range and value of the honors programming supported by these resources and their contribution to the institution. New directors who have not made requests for honors faculty from a department chair, space for an honors lounge from a president, or funding from student life for an honors event may struggle with this charge. The distribution of needed resources can be complicated for large institutions or institutions whose top honors officials may not fall under the jurisdiction of traditional academic governance. Both scenarios operate at HCC. Thus, the success of an honors college is tied to

a dean's ability to educate senior leadership about its needs and impact on campus-wide recruiting, retention, and success.

## **AUTONOMY**

Honors colleges benefit from having their leaders sit at the table where decisions about funding, staffing, and strategic planning are made. An honors dean sitting on the deans' council, for example, would be able to take part in decisions about budgeting and program creation. While this arrangement provides the honors college with a direct line to resource allocation, it also provides honors leadership with more knowledge of the goings on of the entire campus, which in turn may inform decisions about honors curriculum design, alignment with a college's evolving strategic plan, and funding and staffing requests.

The honors college at CSCC has seen increased autonomy in curriculum design and staffing of honors classes after establishing the dean's position. Participating on CSCC's Deans' Council gives the dean access to timely reports from senior staff about shifts in college-wide operations and more lead time on programming and scheduling decisions. For example, when the current strategic plan was built, the dean could make the case for tactics that would enhance honors recruiting and programming. When the college decided to move to 7-week course schedules, for example, the honors college had time to redesign its course structure accordingly.

The autonomy of an honors college can take many forms. For instance, HCC honors directors remain full-time faculty in their respective departments (e.g., history, philosophy, or English); however, at the time of their appointment, their reporting line changes from the department chair to the executive director of the honors college, and they receive an 80% course release. The honors college operates on its own dedicated budget (excluding director salaries), thus generating more freedom. In some cases, this institutional positionality has shielded the honors college from the encroachment of other departments and programs that might have otherwise funneled students and other resources away. This autonomy is bolstered by the honors college's ability to set its own

academic curriculum, which also leads to diversity in programming. Whatever form this autonomy takes, the honors college must have control over its own operation while still remaining aligned with the institution's mission and vision and conforming to state and federal mandates.

At MDC, the honors college functions with a specific structure, purpose, and charge that have endured and proven successful over the past two decades. The college operates under a distributed campus model, which is led by a dean and where each of the five campus non-faculty full-time directors operate on their campuses in a semi-autonomous fashion. This structure provides for the autonomy of each campus to program and operate uniquely as they serve their particular student population and community, even as they also support the overall functioning and mission of the larger institution.

### **SERVING A UNIQUE STUDENT BODY AND COMMUNITY**

While honors colleges come in a variety of shapes and sizes, the most successful ones reflect the unique needs of their students and community, which is the case with each of the honors colleges profiled in this chapter. At MDC, the Honors College Padron Campus (one of the five honors campuses in the system) is located in the neighborhood of Little Havana, which draws many low-income first-time-in-college (FTIC) Hispanic/Latinx students from often Spanish-only speaking households. To better serve the area and capitalize on the unique nature of the community, Padron Campus Honors offers a Dual Language associate's degree program, the first of its kind in the U.S. Offering an intensive curriculum in both English and Spanish, the program supports academically gifted bilingual students in a manner that considers community interests, needs, and demographics.

CSCC is located in rural eastern Tennessee. While some of the high schools in this service area are relatively affluent, many have relatively few resources. Students in the more affluent areas often gravitate toward the main campus in Cleveland, while students in the northern service area where resource are scarce tend to gravitate

to the Athens campus. Students arrive with varying degrees of preparation for college-level work, and the programming offered at each campus must account for the differences in preparation and the differences in reliable internet access and access to technology. The admissions process, curriculum, and course modality have also been adapted to meet those needs. A holistic admissions process is now in place, and it focuses on attracting students who are academically motivated and want to use honors to help them build their skills before they graduate. A common refrain at two-year institutions is that honors is in the business of developing honors students. This approach runs counter to attracting students who already have the necessary skills and motivation expected of honors candidates. Often this situation means designing an admissions process that does not consider standardized test scores and allows students to submit a written application or request to interview for the program. Classes focus on research and writing skills, leadership techniques, and team-based, problem-based learning. These tracks often appeal to adult students, and we offer online options for students with full-time jobs, caretaking responsibilities at home, and other obligations that make attending a traditional classroom impossible.

There are, however, ways in which honors colleges, be they a single campus or multi-campus operation, uniquely serve and benefit their communities and that is by producing remarkable students (Andrews, “Multi-Collegiate” and “Coordinating”). Misconceptions about what and who honors students are remain fairly common. For instance, hearing comments that honors students are the “best of the best,” the “cream of the crop,” or “top tier” is common, and while some students do come to honors much more intellectually and emotionally developed than others, we also note that what makes an honors college unique to its students and larger community has more to do with how students complete the requirements of the honors college than how they enter it. Rather than coming to us as the “best of the best,” students entering honors colleges at two-year institutions are likely to range from advanced learners to relatively above average and average students; nevertheless, in the honors environment they can go on to graduate as “top tier.”

At each of HCC's five campuses, the honors college offers its students leadership training, cultural activities, opportunities for international study and travel, a unique cohort experience, and much more ("HCC Honors College"). Yet because HCC is open enrollment, each honors college pulls from the same population of general enrollment students in the greater Houston Area. And while students must meet a 3.5/4.0 GPA requirement to enter the honors college, they must maintain a 3.2 thereafter. Clearly, this figure is the bare minimum, and most students end up well above a 3.5. In any case, as any experienced instructor would probably admit, a 3.5 or better GPA is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for determining the quality of a student. The same can be said about high test scores and glowing recommendation letters. What the HCCHC does is take students at varying levels of academic achievement, socioeconomic status, religious and ethnic background, and provide them, at no cost, with the intellectual, emotional, and educational resources they need to develop into the high-achieving students they are by the time they leave. Of course, any given student from the general population or from one of the other special programs available at HCC could similarly obtain a "high-achieving" status. The HCCHC makes a difference because it is a one-stop shop for personal development unlike any in the region.

## **OUTCOMES ORIENTED**

Like all academic programs, a successful honors college should be outcomes oriented. Defined outcomes also help with recruitment and retention, and they are key to achieving a good student/program fit. For example, CSCC Honors College has built its curriculum around five specific program goals: Academic Excellence, In-Depth Subject Exploration, Presentation Skills, Leadership Skills and Techniques, and Service to Campus and/or Community ("The Honors College at Cleveland State"). These goals guide the curriculum and the development of individual classes. Students must engage in all five of these goals through their honors courses before they graduate. To that end, we make sure that these goals

are accounted for in the core honors curriculum, which is made up of an honors first-year seminar, a leadership development studies course, and an honors capstone. The honors leadership team works with the honors faculty to develop honors projects and workloads that emphasize these goals in every honors course. Students must take a minimum of 13 hours of honors credit and demonstrate mastery of each of these program goals during their honors capstone course, which they take in their final semester before graduation in order to earn the honors diploma.

The MDC Honors College also has specific outcomes that are embedded in its mission statement:

The mission of The Honors College is to be an equitable, diverse, and inclusive scholarly community of excellence that admits, supports and graduates high-achieving learners who transfer debt-free to highly selective institutions and go on to lead responsible, productive and engaged lives while continuing their lifelong connection with The Honors College at Miami Dade College. (“The Honors College”)

From the initial recruiting meeting, through transfer institution selection and application, to future engagement in alumni programming, students are personally invested in the outcomes that drive honors college activities. One of the major focuses for students while in the program is transfer preparation, which is guided by what is known as the “best-match transfer process.” In this process, students work closely with their assigned director and assigned alumni mentor to select and apply to their best-match transfer institutions. They also help students pursue additional financial support if it is needed. By many accounts, the honors college has experienced success in preparing students to transfer and be successful and advance in their studies. Over the past three years (2019–2021), honors college graduates have received over 550 acceptances to the 2021 Top 50 Ranked Institutions according to *U.S. News & World Report*, which were accompanied by almost \$18 million in financial support (Miami Dade College). Moreover, since inception, the MDC Honors College counts 38 alums as Jack Kent Cooke Undergraduate Transfer Scholars, the most in the nation



by any institution. The latest data also points to 96% of students graduating from their transfer institution and 21% going on to earn a graduate or professional degree. Finally, the honors college has been tagged an “Ivy Stepladder” by *Time* magazine for the number of students that transfer to top institutions each year (Padgett).

A major outcome for the HCCHC is that honors students earn an academic AA or AS while completing all the honors courses assigned to them during advising. Retention rates and the number of students who complete their honors college degree are important metrics that attest to its success. Other tangible outcomes include the record of volunteerism for honors students, how many remain probation free, student participation in leadership positions in college and community clubs and organizations, and their participation in events and activities sponsored by the honors college. To be poetic, the honors college treats the whole person and considers itself successful when its students graduate as better people and students than when they first entered.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter discusses the value of establishing an honors college at two-year institutions and offers various models for bringing this to fruition instead of offering a one-size-fits-all approach. Our analysis has been rooted in a community-needs approach, focusing on how honors colleges at two-year institutions serve their students, faculty, campus, and larger communities. Ultimately, we hope this essay has freed readers from the trap of believing that an honors college must be based on a single popular or best-practice model by offering various models for designing, building, and administering an honors college structure that will serve the needs of the institution and its service areas.

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