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Keywords: honors, honors courses, honors students, honors programs, community college, Community College Survey of Student Engagement, CCSSE.

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Gender and Ethnic/Racial Differences in Community College Student Enrollment in Honors Courses: A National Study

Abraham Korah[α] & John R. Slate[σ]

Abstract- Examined in this study was the gender and ethnic/racial composition of students who had participated in community college honors courses. Data were gathered from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, a 38 question instrument in which information was obtained about student perceptions of the academic and nonacademic community college environment. The data that were examined consisted of survey responses from over 108,000 students, a 25% random sample of the 2014 cohort dataset. Within the group of students who participated in honors courses, 6,609 students indicated their gender, and 5,507 students indicated being in an ethnic/racial group. Inferential statistical procedures revealed the presence of similar percentages of male and female students had enrolled in honors courses.Statistically significant differences were present, however, in student enrollment by ethnicity/race. The percentage of Hispanic students participating in honors was less than expected whereas the percentage of Black students participating was higher than expected. Smaller class sizes and opportunities for greater engagement with faculty may benefit both Hispanic and Black students, two student groups that have had less success in community colleges. Implications and suggestions for further research were discussed.

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I. Introduction

The first honors program was started at Swarthmore College, a private liberal arts college, in 1922 (Rinn, 2003). In community colleges, the development of honors courses first occurred in the 1950s and 1960s (Barnes & Woodward, 1959; Bogdan, 1962; Bradshaw, 1962). Since that time, honors courses have become a common feature of the community college setting. Approximately half of all community colleges provide opportunities for students to enroll in honors courses (Beck, 2003). As the number of community colleges with honors courses, honors programs, and honors colleges increases, the debate regarding the congruence of honors and the mission of community colleges continues (Floyd & Holloway, 2006).

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II. Review of the Literature

Community colleges enrolled approximately 45% of all undergraduates in the Fall of 2014 (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016). Further examination shows that 57% of students were female, 51% considered themselves ethnic/racial minorities, and 36% were first generation college students. Within this diverse groupof students who attend open enrollment community colleges are a select group of students who meet defined academic guidelines that allow accesstoclosed enrollment honors courses.

Honors programs and colleges have been established in approximately half of all community colleges in the United States (Beck, 2003). Institutional resources, that are limited in nature, are spent on a very small group of students (Galinova, 2005). Due to the ubiquity and resource needed to operatehonors in community colleges, questions have been raisedaround whether or not promoting a structure to serve a selective group of students is congruent with the meritocratic and egalitarian missions of community colleges (Treat & Barnard, 2012).

Congruence with the mission of community colleges is more likely when the composition of the honors programs includes groups who have had higher historical barriers to transfer such as students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Jenkins & Fink, 2016). Treat and Barnard (2012) posited that diverting 5% of an average community college budget to serve upward of 250 students may adversely affect the community college mission of serving a broad range of students. Therefore, Treat and Barnard (2012) suggested that honors program administrators should focus on diversity, excellence in teaching, and developing community to connect honors to the mission of the college.

The influence of honors course participation on student success continues to be debated. Researchers (e.g., Outcalt, 1999; Owens & Travis, 2013;Scager, Akkerman, Pilot, & Wubbels, 2013) have conducted both qualitative and quantitative research to enhance the understanding of the effectiveness of student participation in honors education. Scholars (e.g., Brimeyer, Schueths, & Smith, 2014; Nichols & Chang, 2013; Bulakowski & Townsend, 1995) investigating

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honors have analyzed the influence of honors in community colleges environments and the factors that predict the success of honors students.

III. Influence of Honors

Multiple attributes have been touted as benefits for community college that have an honors curriculum. Proponents of community college honors tout the opportunity to attract well prepared students to campus as a beneficial component of honors (Owens & Travis, 2013). Honors students may also positively influence a college's academic environment and benefit all students.

Recent comprehensive national studies of honor courses in community colleges are limited. Outcalt (1999) conducted a comprehensive study of community college honors in the late 1990s. In this study, Outcalt (1999) examined a random sample of 163 community college honors programs to determine the institutional and student characteristics that existed in the 36% of community colleges where honors programswere present. A finding of note was the presence of fewer honors programs in community colleges with higher percentages of Black students who were enrolled.

When examining academic engagement, honors students expressed less concern for grades and greater concern for learning compared to their nonparticipating peers (Brimeyer, Schueths, & Smith, 2014). Honors students perceived autonomy, complexity, and instructor expectations as challenges, especially when all three challenges were encountered at the same time (Scager, Akkerman, Pilot, & Wubbels, 2013). Faculty interaction continued as a factor in persisting in honors along with the richness of the learning environment (Nichols & Chang, 2013). Echoing the findings of Scager et al. (2013), Nichols and Chang (2013) noted that students were challenged most by the independent study component of the honors program.

Honors programs can influence student success by increasing transfer to 4-year institutions (Bulakowski & Townsend, 1995). The benefits of enrolling in community college honors courses may persist after students transfer. Participating in honors courses increases the ability of students to transition successfully to the university setting without experiencing transfer shock(Hammond, McBee, & Herbert, 2007; Phillips, 2004). The term transfer shock refers to a drop in GPA when transferring from a community college to a university (Phillips, 2004). In a study on transfer students, Phillips (2004) concluded that the GPAs of students who had taken community college honors courses remained stable during the first semester at a university. Students with similar community college GPAs who did not participate in honors prior to transfer experienced statistically significant decreases in GPA at the end of their first university semester.

IV. Student Success Predictors

A challenge involved in analyzing the effects of honors programs is quantifying the benefits derived from honors participation. Although the goals of honors education encompass the personal and professional growth of students, empirical data regarding the influence of participating in honors educationare limited (Bulakowski & Townsend, 1995). Researchers (e.g.,Campbell & Fuqua,2008; McDonald & Gawkoski, 1979; McKay, 2009)have examineda number of factors to ascertain which factors best predict successful student completion of honors programs.

The ability to be selective in an otherwise open enrollment environment may bring opportunities as well as increased scrutiny to community college honors endeavors (Trucker, 2014). Reports regarding honors student success are noted to be valuable but are not as readily available as overall community college student completion rates (Byrne, 1998). Due to varying entrance and completion requirements, minimal reporting, and the dearth of national studies,assessing how students fare in honors programsis difficult (Byrne, 1998).

When entering a community college, 80% of students start with the goal of earning a bachelor's degree (Jenkins & Fink, 2016). Students who start at a community colleges and transfer do possess the academic preparation to succeed in the university setting (Melguizo, Kienzl, &Alfonso, 2011).Readying students to transfer to a university and achieve the goal of a bachelors degree has been a challenge for community college faculty and administrators. Jenkins and Fink (2016) determined that only 14% of 720,000 first time in college students who enrolled at a community college in the Fall of 2007, received a bachelor's degrees within six years.Although research is limited, honors opportunities in community colleges may provide an opportunity to increase transfer rates.For example, an urban community college system in Maryland reported that 84% of students who entered in the Fall of 2006 transferred or graduated from the community college within four years (Trucker, 2014).

Universities face similar challenges to community colleges when retention rates of students admitted to university honors programs are examined. In a study of a Midwestern university's honors cohort, Campbell and Fuqua (2008)documented that less than 20% of students graduated with honors at the end of five years. Keller and Lacy (2013) compared retention and graduation rates of a sample of 2,071 Colorado State University honors students with a sample of students with similar credentials who did not participate in honors courses. Retention rates as measured by returning to the university for the fall semester of the second year were approximately 5% higher for honors participants.

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Four-year graduation rates were 64.2% for honors students versus 55.8% for nonparticipants, substantially higher than the results reported by Campbell and Fuqua (2008).

High school GPA was the best predictor of honors program completion in studies of honors students at Marquette University (McDonald & Gawkoski, 1979), the University of North Florida (McKay, 2009), and an unnamed Midwestern university (Campbell & Fuqua, 2008). Goodstein and Szarek (2013) corroborated the importance of high school GPA on predicting completion of honors programs through a longitudinal study of a public university in the Northeast. Savage, Raehsler, and Fiedor (2014) documented that students with lower high school GPAs who performed well on standardized tests were less likely to complete the honors program if these students maintained the same level of effort in college coursework. Academic performance in high school may illuminate factors that contribute to academic success beyond knowledge assessed by standardized testing (Savage et al., 2014). Corroborating other research of honors student success (Campbell & Fuqua, 2008; Goodstein &Szarek, 2013; McDonald & Gawkoski, 1979; McKay, 2009; Savage et al., 2014), increasing the weighting of high school GPA led to increased retention from the first to second year and first to third year (Smith & Zagurski, 2013).

V. Theoretical Framework

A number of initiatives such as orientations, first year experience courses, and student organizations are used in community colleges to try to engage students in their environment and enhance learning and personal development. In a similar manner, honors educators focus on developing opportunities that engage students in intellectual and personal growth (Galinova, 2005).Honors courses and honors infrastructure provide students with opportunities for engagement including smaller classes and committed faculty (Treat &Bernard, 2012).

Astin's (1999) theory of involvement was used as a framework for this study. Involvement is defined as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 518). In the theory of involvement, Astin (1999) theorized that students grew and learned when they were engaged in their environment. Astin (1999) documented that involvement in honors programs was one of the areas which led to a higher level of retention and a higher than average change in student characteristics. According to Astin (1999), honors students, "…are more likely than other students to persist in college and to aspire to graduate and professional degrees" (p. 525). Therefore, honors courses may provide the opportunity to engage community college students in ways that are beneficial to student retention, transfer, and graduation rates.

VI. Significance of the Study

According to McClenney and Marti (2006), community college samples are used in less than 10% of higher education investigations. Within this body of work on community colleges, the current scholarship related to honors in community colleges is limited (Achterberg, 2004a; Holman & Banning, 2012). Achterberg (2004b) stated that, "…research that addresses questions about honors education is not only needed but should be a high priority within individual institutions as well as the general community of higher education" (p. 33). The most recent large scale study of community college honors students occurred in the late 1990s (Outcalt, 1999). Further, Holman and Banning (2012) recommended more quantitative or mixed methods research when examining dissertations and publications related to honors in higher education. Therefore, results of this empirical investigation may be used to enhance the understanding of educational leaders and policymakers regarding the demographic composition of students who have completed honors courses at the community college.

VII. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the demographic composition of students who had participated in community college honors courses. Through this study, the degree to which differences were present in community college honors course enrollment as a function of student gender and ethnicity/racewasaddressed.As such, the extent to which disproportionalities might be present in honors course enrollment by these two student characteristics was ascertained.

VIII. Statement of the Problem

The growth of community colleges has allowed more people to access higher education than ever before but has not had the envisioned effect of an educated populace (Bailey, Calcagno, Jenkins, Leinbach, & Kienzl, 2006; Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Bailey et al. (2006) stated that within 3 years of enrolling for the first time in college, 38% of full time students received a degree or transferred to a university. A lower than envisioned success rate occurs because the mission of the community college is to provide opportunities for all students, regardless of academic preparation, financial means, and knowledge or guidance in navigating entry to closed enrollment institutions (Treat & Barnard, 2012). Honors programs in community colleges, however,are patterned after universities and focus resources on a small cadre of high achieving students (Galinova, 2005). These programs, therefore, attract students who are atypical of the general community college student population (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016) in many facets such as age and

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academic preparation (Treat & Barnard, 2012).There fore,understanding the composition of students who have participated in honors courses can enable a deeper understanding of the influence of institutional policies and practices related to honors in the community college.

a) Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed in this study: (a) What is the difference in honors course completion as a function of gender for community college students?; and (b) What is the difference in honors course completion as a function of ethnicity/race for community college students?

IX. Method Participants

Participants in this study were students at community colleges who completed the 2014 Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE). The dataset acquired from the Center for Community College Student Engagement included 108,509 students. This group of over 108,000 students represented a 25% random sample of the full 2014 three-year CCSSE cohort dataset. For the purposes of this investigation, students who had participated in an honors course were relevant to the analysis. From this group of students who had participated in an honors course, 6,609 students indicated their gender, and 5,507 students indicated being in an ethnic/racial group on whom data were analyzed in this research study.

The data set includes 684 institutions from 48 states and the District of Columbia along with select Canadian provinces and three island nations (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, n.d.b.). Institutions varied in size, with 168 colleges classified based as small (i.e., enrollment less than 4,500 students) and 79 extra-large institutions (i.e., enrollment of at least 15,000 students) based on number of credit students. The gender of the CCSSE cohort student respondents included 43% male and 55% female (2% of data was missing).The ethnicity/race of the respondents included 56% White, 14% Hispanic, and 11% Black, with 19% of respondents choosing other categories or choosing not to respond.

X. Instrumentation and Procedures

The CCSSE survey is a 38 question instrument in whichLikert scales were used to gather information about student perceptions of the academic and nonacademic community college environment. The results of the survey can be used by researchers to gather demographic information about students and to measure students' academic and nonacademic perceptions (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, n.d.a). The instrument has been tested to, "…indicate that the instrument and the constructs derived from it are reliable and valid measures of student engagement in the two-year sector" (Marti, 2008, p. 13). Evaluation of the instrument's reliability demonstrated, "…a high degree of consistency between first and second survey administrations" (Marti, 2008, p. 12). For further information regarding the reliability and validity of the instrument, readers are directed to the CCSSE website at http://www.ccsse.org/aboutsurvey/aboutsurvey.cfm

Data were obtained directly from CCCSE as a comma separated values (CSV) file of CCSSE survey results. This file was imported into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software program for analysis. The CCSSE data file was then converted into a SPSS data file and relevant variables used for this study were labeled. After preparation of the data file in SPSS, procedures were completed and the resulting data was analyzed.

XI. Definition of Terms

The focus of this study was the demographic composition of students who participated in honors courses at community colleges across the United States and beyond. Although honors courses are varied based on how they are defined by administrators at each institution, *honors courses*, "…should generally be small and seminar-based with active discussion" (Achterberg, 2004b, p. 4). Additionally, Achterberg (2004b) stated that, "the purpose of an honors course is to show students how knowledge in the field is discovered, developed, evaluated, argued, tested, compared, and applied" (p. 4).

The *Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE)* is a 38 question survey administered to students in community colleges. Likert scales are utilized for survey responses in order to gather information about how students, "…spend their time; what they feel they have gained from their classes; how they assess their relationships and interactions with faculty, counselors, and peers; what kind of work they are challenged to do; [and] how the college supports their learning…" (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, n.d.a, para. 1).

XII. Results

In this empirical investigation, the independent variables were gender and ethnicity/race of community college students. The dependent variable was whether or not students had participated in an honors course while enrolled in a community college.To determine whether gender or ethnic differences existed in honors course participation in community colleges, Pearson chi-squares were conducted. This statistical procedure was selected as the preferred statistical procedure because (a) frequency data were present for all variables, (b) all variables were categorical, and (c) the large sample size provided for a per cell size of greater

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than five (Slate & Rojas-LeBouf, 2011). Therefore, the assumptions for utilizing a chi-square procedure were met.

For the first research question regarding differences in community college honors course participation by gender, the result was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 2.45$, $p = .117$. Similar percentages of male and female community college students were enrolled in honors courses. Readers are directed to Table 1 for descriptive statistics regarding participation in honors courses by gender.

Table 1: Frequencies and Percentages of Community College Honors Course Participation by Gender

Gender	Participated in Honors *n* and %age of Total	Did Not Participate in Honors *n* and %age of Total
Female	(*n* = 3,778) 8.60%	(*n* = 40,124) 91.40%
Male	(*n* = 2,831) 8.30%	(*n* = 31,315) 91.70%

For the second research question regarding community college honors course participation by student ethnicity/race, the result wasstatistically significant, $\chi^2(2) = 95.31$, $p < .001$. The effect size for this difference was .04 (Cramer's V), a below small effect size (Cohen, 1988). As indicated in Table 2, slightly more than 69% of students who participated in honors course were White, which was less than the 72.5% overall percentage of White students in the sample. The percentage of Hispanic students who participated in Honors was slightly less than the overall percentage of Hispanic students in the sample. The percentage of Black students in the overall sample was 11.7% while the percentage of Black students who participated in honors represented almost 16% of all honors participants. Thus, Black students were overrepresented in honors in comparison to the overall sample of Black students by slightly more than 4%.

Table 2: Frequencies and Percentages of Community College Honors Course Participation by Ethnicity/Race

Ethnicity/Race	Participated in Honors *n* and %age of Total	Did Not Participate in Honors *n* and %age of Total
White	(*n* = 3,798) 7.67%	(*n* = 45,708) 92.33%
Black	(*n* = 866) 10.86%	(*n* = 7,111) 89.14%
Hispanic	(*n* = 843) 7.79%	(*n* = 9,984) 92.21%

XIII. Discussion

A subtext implicit when honors education is offered is that opportunities are increased for students to gain social mobility (Weiner, 2009). Thus, the composition of students who have the opportunity to participate in honors may increase in importance. If involvement in honors increases student engagement (Astin, 1999), increases transfer rates (Trucker, 2014), and decreases transfer shock (Hammond, McBee, & Herbert, 2007; Phillips, 2004), providing opportunities for diverse populations will increase retention and success and position students from underrepresented populations for success (Treat & Barnard, 2012). Ethnic, racial, class, age, and academic diversity can enrich an honors program (Herron, 2013) and the students within the program.

Due to the results not being statistically significant for gender, differences in honors participation based on gender were not conclusive. It may be beneficial to continue this line of inquiry and investigate other aspects of honors based on gender or gender disparity, as well as examine other facets such as gender and ethnicity. Honors course participation at the community college level may provide students with the opportunity to enter into more technical and rigorous fields that have had historical gender disparities, such as the natural sciences and engineering.

The differences in ethnicity/race were statistically significant and warrant further examination. Of particular interest is the percentage of Hispanic students who participated in honors which was slightly less than expected whereas the percentage of Black students was higher than expected. As honors courses have fewer students and provide students with the opportunity to develop closer working relationships with faculty, Black and Hispanic students may benefit from taking honors courses as these students historically have lower graduation rates (Bailey et al., 2006).

It is vital for administrators to examine policies related to honors education. Carnicom (2013) cautioned that administrators must be aware that developing policies intended to enhance student success in honors may have the unintended consequence of reinforcing homogeneity in several facets of honors, including various facets of diversity. Illustrating this concern, DeFrank-Cole, Cole, and Garbutt (2009) observed in a study of students receiving

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merit scholarships, that low income students were negatively influenced by honors entrance requirements, even though ethnicdiversity was maintained in the population of honors students.Therefore, it may be beneficial to conduct more in-depth inquiry on the composition of students, considering factors such as socio-economic status and parental education levels.

In conclusion, readers are urged to be cautious to the degree to which they generalize results from this study. More research studies are needed to determine whether these results are typical for students in individual community colleges. Longitudinal studies may provide stronger empirical evidence regarding the long term benefits of honors college enrollment for diverse populations.Given the documented benefits of honor course participation, educational leaders in community colleges are encouraged to diversify the composition of student enrollment in honors coursesto include diversity in areas such as socio-economic status, parental education levels, and first-time in college status.

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