

ADMINISTRATION

Honors Colleges Promise Prestige, but They Don't All Deliver

By Lee Gardner | MARCH 27, 2016



Mike Belleme for The Chronicle

Leslie Sargent Jones recently stepped down as director of the Honors College at Appalachian State U. She says the university has not provided the resources or support to make the college worthy of its name.

When the idea of starting an honors college at Western Carolina University first came up, in the mid-1990s, it seemed like a big leap to many people on the regional public campus. Maybe too big a leap, given the university's role in the state of expanding average citizens' access to higher education.

But to John W. Bardo, the chancellor at the time, the idea held too much promise to pass up. Like many public colleges over the past 25 years, Western Carolina was looking for a way to raise its academic profile and attract a kind of student who had seemed out of reach: the high academic achiever. An honors college, the thinking went, would expand recruitment, raise academic standards, and elevate the entire university's reputation.

Nineteen years later, the honors college at Western Carolina is considered a success. It now enrolls more than 1,300 students, and some of the college's programs, such as research grants for undergraduates, also benefit students who

aren't part of the honors college. The college has even attracted an advisory board of local residents who help support it financially.

Many other institutions would love to recreate some of the success Western Carolina has had, but a strong honors college comes with costs. With administrative support and an ample budget, an honors college can build a community of high-achieving scholars within a midtier public college or a big state university. Without devoted leaders and a steady funding stream, honors colleges sometimes struggle to offer more than occasional add-ons to a standard education.

It can be hard for prospective honors students to tell the difference between the two. The effectiveness of the honors college isn't clearly measured on many campuses, and no national body sets rules for what programs and colleges must demonstrate before attaching "honors" to their name. Among the many dozens of honors colleges created by public colleges since the 1990s, a wide range of quality exists.

Having reviewed about 40 honors programs and colleges, Gregory W. Lanier, director of the Kugelman Honors Program at the University of West Florida, said he's seen some that recruit the students but don't have a well-developed curriculum for them. Such struggles are usually the result, he says, of "not enough money flowing into the program to try to do the job that it's supposed to do."

The number of honors colleges at public institutions has grown significantly, according to data collected by Richard I. Scott, dean of the honors college at the University of Central Arkansas and past president of the National Collegiate Honors Council. In 1993 there were 23 honors colleges at nonprofit four-year institutions. Last year there were more than 180. (Some private institutions also

host honors colleges, but they are predominantly found at public institutions. There are more than 1,500 honors programs over all, including some at community colleges.)

Hallie Savage, executive director of the National Collegiate Honors Council and former director of the honors program at Clarion University of Pennsylvania, says she receives at least one request for information every week from a university asking how it can elevate its honors program into a full-fledged college. There are no hard-and-fast requirements, but the council offers best practices toward establishing one: An honors college enjoys equal standing with other, similar academic units, for example. It's headed by a dean who reports to the chief academic officer and sits on the council of deans. And it receives financial and staffing support comparable to other colleges of similar size.

What's in a Name?

Prospective students may not grasp the distinction between an honors program and an honors college, but it makes a difference in the education each offers, says Ms. Savage. Honors programs often nestle inside an existing college, such as liberal arts, and typically lack their own faculty, leaving directors to wrangle instructors from other departments each semester to teach honors courses. (Some honors colleges also lack tenured faculty.) Honors programs may have their own budgets, but those can be vulnerable to shifting institutional priorities.

An honors college, run by a dean, often enjoys more autonomy, which often results in higher quality, Ms. Savage says. "There's more of a cohesion around the curricular approach. There's more stability in terms of resources," she adds. "You don't have to negotiate those as you might at program status."

Honors colleges can not only help draw more high-achieving students to a university, they can help it shift its reputation.

That was the case for the City University of New York, which had been dubbed by a mayoral task force in 1999 as "an institution adrift." As part of its response, CUNY founded an honors college in 2001. The idea, says Mary C. Pearl, its interim dean, was to "recruit more of the city's most talented students and showcase the university's return to excellence." The college, now known as the William E. Macaulay Honors College, started with about 200 students. It now enrolls more than 2,000.

The college's creation caused controversy, with some faculty members and others arguing that the public university's limited resources should be devoted to helping students who need it the most, rather than to adding another opportunity for those who would be able to thrive at any number of colleges.

Questions over whether honors colleges further the mission of comprehensive universities are valid, according to Barmak Nassirian, director of federal relations and policy analysis at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. On the one hand, "Who can object to a public institution being as excellent as possible?" he asks. But on the other, he continues, is it a proper function of a publicly funded university to engage in "stratification," especially if it neglects its baseline responsibilities to all students in favor of the needs of a few?

Ms. Pearl said the college has helped CUNY preserve its access mission: Sixty percent of Macaulay students are immigrants or the children of immigrants, and more than 40 percent are eligible for Pell Grants.

But with many universities looking to cut programs and expenses, not add them, relatively few of the institutions that contact Ms. Savage every week are ready to make the commitment to an honors college.

Some honors-college leaders feel the stress of trying to provide an elite education with limited resources. Leslie Sargent Jones, a professor of biology at Appalachian State University, stepped down in January as director of its honors college after administrators declined to provide "the nationally recognized structure and resources that the name implies," she wrote in a Facebook post.

Ms. Jones says Appalachian State hired her in 2008 to build its existing honors program into an honors college. The university renamed its program the Honors College in 2010, but it did not promote Ms. Jones, or anyone else, to dean, citing post-recession financial woes. And the university continued to underfund the college, she says, making it a challenge to support programs such as student research and travel.

The faculty senate voted unanimously last fall that the university should elevate the honors college to full college status, but in January university leadership declined to do so. Ms. Jones resigned as director soon after.

The university has done what it could to help, says Darrell P. Kruger, the provost. State support for public colleges in North Carolina has stayed flat or decreased in recent years, and so have budgets for the various colleges within Appalachian State. The university's current spending priority is for 14 new tenure-track faculty hires, Mr. Kruger says.

Ted Zerucha, an associate professor of biology and the interim director of the Honors College, hopes to take advantage of a larger faculty to minimize some of the "scrambling every year" to arrange courses for honors students. "There's a commitment to honors students here," he says, "and I want them to know that." But the reality of higher education today, he continues, is that "every program in every college and every department on every campus in the country needs more resources."

A Draw for Donors

Money is such a critical factor in the success of honors colleges that many public universities look beyond state funds and tuition for support. Having an honors college can attract donors who want to support the best and brightest.

Barrett, the Honors College at Arizona State University, bears the name of Craig and Barbara Barrett, who endowed the college with \$10 million in 2000. CUNY's honors college operates with the help of a nearly \$14 million endowment, plus grants from charitable foundations.

The Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College at the University of Mississippi has received about \$30 million from the Barksdale family since 1997. James L. Barksdale, a former president of Netscape Communications and a Mississippi alumnus, "really wanted to make a difference in the academic profile of the university," says Douglass Sullivan-González, dean of the college.

More modest fund raising can also help bring stability to honors colleges and programs. The honors college at Western Carolina depends on an annual \$30,000 operating budget from its advisory board to pay for its students' study abroad and other expenses. Brian Railsback, a professor of English and the former dean of the honors college, first appealed to professionally successful local residents, many of them graduates of elite colleges, for advice on making the honors experience stronger. When the recession hit, the board members, now more involved with the college, turned to writing checks.

The University of West Florida landed an endowment for its honors program from a local philanthropist, Jane Kugelman, in 2013, says Mr. Lanier. But despite that, West Florida is one of many universities that aren't quite ready for an honors college. Mr. Lanier, who was one of the faculty members involved when West

Florida started its honors program in 1989, says that the program still lacks an honors faculty, which he considers necessary to make good on such a commitment.

With public universities often uncertain about state support, many are trying to get as many students on campus as they can, Ms. Savage says, and not only those students who are highly prepared for college, but also those who are not prepared. That has led to "a drive to provide programs for those students who have high retention risks," she adds, which can make it even more difficult for honors programs to count on steady funding.

One of the assumptions about honors programs that some administrators make, Ms. Savage says, "is that they're honors, they're very bright students, they can survive without the resources. And that's just not true."

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