

Attitudes of Black and White Students in an HBCU Honors Program: A Case Study

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Abstract

Research on the characteristics of honors programs and honors students at institutions of higher education overwhelmingly address concerns within the environment of predominantly white institutions (PWIs). How black students particularly navigate honors programs at white institutions has received attention in honors research. But increasing numbers of white and other racial and ethnic groups in honors programs at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUS) call for further focus on diversity in honors education. This case study gathered responses from a group of black and white students in an honors program at a historically black university in northeastern North Carolina to assess racial differences in student responses about the quality of the honors program. A qualitative analysis of the student responses found that, regardless of race, both black and white students valued the honors program's content. Black and white honors students, however, did identify different program elements that addressed student needs.

Keywords: PWI honors program, HBCU honors program, honors attitudes, black and white students, minority honors students

1. Introduction

Historically black colleges and universities (HBCUS) in the 21st century are challenged by the need to bolster enrollment numbers in order to maintain financial stability and sustainability. As such, the student populations at those institutions are becoming more diverse. Since the 1980s, White, Asian, Latino and other racial and ethnic groups are enrolling at HBCUs (Gasman, 2013; Butrymowicz, S. (June 27, 2014)), as minority-serving institutions are expanding their recruitment efforts. While increasing the number of different racial and ethnic groups can be a concerted effort in HBCU recruitment, attracting high academically performing diverse students can also be a challenge.

At many HBCUs and Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), top students are invited to enroll in university honors programs, honors colleges and honors schools (Gasman, Fluker, et al., 2014; Arendt C. and Dohrman R. (June 2016). As HBCU honors programs increasingly reflect the same racial diversity of their universities as a whole, many questions are unanswered about how those programs address cultural differences that inevitably exist. Black and minority students at predominantly white institutions report their difficulties and challenges when trying to find comfort zones while enrolled in the honors programs. Not much is known about the attitudes of white students in honors programs at HBCUs. This is a case study that focuses on honors education at an HBCU in northeastern North Carolina and differences in the attitudes of honors students based on race.

2. Literature Review

An extensive history of research on honors education at HBCUs is conspicuously lacking in the literature on honors programs in general (Dula, 2016; Davis and Montgomery; Gasman et al., 2014). However, two recent studies establish a framework for contextual exploration of honors programs at HBCUs. Davis and Montgomery (2011) conducted a study of HBCU honors education in terms of core values, best practices, and challenges. In assessing the attitudes of HBCU honors program administrators, they saw several consistencies. For example, one of the values of HBCU programs is affiliation with national honors associations, such as the National Association of African American Honors Programs (NAAAHP) and the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) (Davis and Montgomery, 2011). HBCU honors programs were more inclined to be active in their involvement with NAAAHP. One benefit of such affiliations, Davis et al. noted, is professional development beyond campus for HBCU honors students. Those professionally oriented experiences are often actualized by honors conference participation.

A somewhat surprising note of the study was that debate, a mainstay in many HBCU honors program, was ranked third behind leadership development and mentoring as strengths of honors programs. Research focus was mentioned by the administrators responding to the study as a salient offering at HBCUs, but not as the most important core value.

The second study of note regarding HBCU honors education is Gasman et al. (2014). In response to the Davis and Montgomery study, they cite its “low survey response rate and sample size,” making results difficult to generalize. Gasman et al. sent a survey to the 45 (of 105) HBCU institutions that offer honors programs. From the responses of honors program directors, the Gasman study collected data on a number of program categories, including honors faculty, student outcomes, curricular matters and budgets. Among their findings were similarities in the mission, purpose and outcomes for honors students; that some programs are “suffering due to a lack of university support;” the significantly varying numbers of honors courses offered and required by different programs; and varying requirements for admission into the programs (from 3.0 GPA to 3.75). Among the recommendations emerging from the Gasman et al. study were that future studies should survey HBCU college presidents as well as the HBCU honors students. The study also recommended the examination of honors programs at other minority-serving institutions and stronger communication between the honors programs of HBCUs. Further, institutions should do a better job of telling more fully their honors program story, and honors programs at public institutions should seek ways to “incentivize” honors education through their educational structures. The Gasman et al. and Davis and Montgomery studies appear to provide the most comprehensive data on HBCU honors education with respect to a broad range of current program attributes.

2.1 Challenges and attitudes of black and minority students at PWIs

Black and minority students at PWIs have dealt with a myriad of issues on a daily basis that negatively affect their success. Among these are racism, alienation, cultural insensitivity, limited financial assistance and stereotypes, and the diversity of program curriculum (Fleming, 1985; Hopson, 1991; Johnson, 1993; Benton 2001; Chang, Hall and Bottoms, 2016). Willie and Cunnigen (1981) compiled well over 100 studies between 1965 and 1980 that focused on black students in white colleges and universities and how they confronted exclusion, racism, racial stereotypes, and destructive racial climates. Harper (2015) referred to the Willie compilations as well as others as he reviewed research that addressed racial problems black students face at predominantly white institutions and how the students manage to be productive in the racial environments. But the literature on high-academically achieving Black students at PWIs also addresses qualities intrinsic in the students that influence their success (Fires-Britt, 2004; Harper 2005; Griffin 2006), such as student goals and motivation. Black students in honors programs at PWIs have faced the same struggles and concerns as their counterparts at PWIs who are non-honors Black students (Cook 1999; Ford 1999). For example, perceived hindrances to involvement of African American students in an honors program was the focus of a qualitative study at Western Kentucky University. Rigsby et al. (2012) found that low levels of involvement of African American honors students were related to perceived lack of diversity in the honors college, lack of diversity in honors college recruitment and information, feeling not accepted by Caucasian peers, and, generally, a lack of identification with the university honors college compared with their Caucasian counterparts.

2.2 Differences in PWI honors students based on race

In the Rigsby et al. (2012) study, only African American honors students were asked to participate. But, there also have been efforts to assess differences in white and non-white honors students on a range of attitudes and behaviors. Some notions of racial differences in higher education are grounded in racial identity development theories, such as those advanced by Cross (1991), Helms (1992) and others. Those theories try to explain how psychological factors mediate the ways in which students of different races respond under certain social conditions, including when they are in the minority in schools. Brian Harper (2010) compared the intelligence-related beliefs, efficacy beliefs and academic goal orientations of African American and white students from honors-level language arts classes at three Midwestern high schools, which are natural feeders for college honors programs. He found no significant differences in efficacy beliefs or goal orientations of the different racial groups. African American students more than white students in the study, however, had stronger beliefs that were consistent with an entity view of intelligence (unchangeable or fixed internal characteristic) (Dweck, 2005).

While Harper may have observed generally more homogeneity in responses of honors high school students along racial lines of influence, Noldon and Sedlacek (1996) saw clear differences in college-level honors students' responses based on race. They assessed attitudes, skills and behaviors of Asian, black and white honors students in a first-year seminar at a large university and found that the Asian students differed from white and black students on all issues observed. Noldon and Sedlacek (1996) concluded that racial groups within honors programs have special needs requiring different programs and services.

Pittman (2001) found that there were clear delineations between white and non-white students in their perceptions of barriers that may prevent students of color from participating in honors programs at the University of Connecticut. In a qualitative study, non-white students in the honors program saw both lack of diversity and misperceptions of honors as an elite organization as barriers for students of color. Non-white students also tended to see honors as an unnecessary addition to their course loads. White honors students in the Pittman (2001) study said poor performance on standardized tests by students of color and lackluster recruiting efforts on the part of the institution were barriers to participation of students of color in the honors program. These findings were consistent with that of studies mentioned earlier that addressed non-honors racial differences. The Pittman study at the University of Connecticut led to the university creating a series of initiatives designed to address concerns that surfaced in the honors program. Feedback such as these also can inform honors associations and PWI institutions with honors programs to address more formally diversity and multiculturalism. The NCHC, for example, has established a Diversity Committee whose charges include, among others, developing strategies to increase diversity in the NCHC and to increase the visibility of diversity issues in presentations at the NCHC annual conference (<https://nchc.site-ym.com/general/custom.asp?page=diversity>).

2.3 White honors students at HBCUs

The focus in most of the literature, therefore, is that of black students' experiences (honors or otherwise) at PWI institutions. But the attendance of white students at HBCUs is also a subject often addressed (Hall and Closson, 2005; Peterson and Hamrick, 2008; Carter and Fountaine, 2012). For example, Carter and Fountaine (2012) relied on existing NSSE (National Survey of Student Engagement) data that served as a foundation for identifying factors that influence the engagement of white undergraduates attending public HBCUs. They arrived at three primary conclusions. The first was that student interactions with faculty and staff played a major role in the engagement of white undergraduate students at HBCUs. Second, white students reported that they were at times reminded of their whiteness, and finally white students' awareness and utilization of available resources and opportunities were also a significant aspect of white students' perceived engagement. The extent to which such findings can be considered the norm for white students attending HBCUs, including those enrolled in honors programs, can inform the results of the current study. As such, these studies tend to support the proposition that there are differences in the attitudes of black and white honors students about a range of honors program attributes and characteristics.

2.4 Qualitative Assessment of Honors Programs

Qualitative assessment versus quantitative assessment is an argument that can be extended to include evaluation of honors programs at colleges and universities throughout the country. Quantitative analyses have been used extensively in the assessment of honors programs, e.g., in graduation and retention rates and other quantitative measures (Gasman et al., 2014). Admissions criteria, such as high ACT and SAT scores consistently are used in determining who qualifies for honors programs.

Qualitative assessment can be valuable for in-depth discussions with both students and faculty about the effectiveness of honors program curricula (Lanier, 2008, in Gasman et al., 2014). Small sample sizes in qualitative studies continually are mentioned as limits of the studies. Yet, whether case studies (Herbert and McBee, 2007), pilot studies (Pittman, 2001), focus groups (Bentley, 2017), or some other qualitative assessment, these methods of inquiry are effective and acceptable tools for contextual reflections of honors students, faculty, directors and others who are involved in honors activities at HBCUs.

2.5 Honors program at Elizabeth City State University

Elizabeth City State University (ECSU), in northeastern North Carolina, offers high academically performing students from high schools and transfers from other colleges the opportunity for an honors education. ECSU offers honors students similar types of academic engagement as other honors programs, including critical thinking, leadership skill development, membership in honors associations, attendance at honors conferences, opportunities for research, an honors curriculum, and experiential and service learning. The program also offers other specialized curricula and co-curricular activities, such as requirement to complete the honors thesis, quiz bowl competition, debate competition, career development, honors-related travel and speakers. Emphasis in the curriculum is placed on the study of great books and authors, multiculturalism, analysis of popular culture, oral and written presentation, and topical issues. The minimum requirement for admission into the honors program is an un-weighted high school GPA of 3.5 and ACT and SAT scores of 21 and 1100 respectively. While in previous years, honors residential living was one of the benefits offered honors students admitted to the program, there were no residential living and learning communities for honors program participants at the time of this study.

The ECSU honors program generally reflects the overall demographics of the university at large. In the Institute of Education Sciences (INS) Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) report for fall 2016, Elizabeth City State University's total enrollment was 1,310 undergraduate students. Of that enrollment, 72 percent were Black or African American, 17 percent were white, 3 percent Hispanic/Latino, and 6 percent were race/ethnicity unknown. One percent of the undergraduate student population was two or more races (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics). Information from the University Fact Book show that the racial demographic of the student population for the period 2013-2016 remained proportionally similar (www.ecsu.edu).

Like the majority of students attending the university, students enrolled in the honors program are from the mostly rural communities in the 21-county service area surrounding the institution. Students also are from other regions throughout the state of North Carolina, nearby state of Virginia, and other states. Honors students at ECSU choose many of the 29 major academic programs offered by the university. They include the STEM areas, such as Math, Chemistry, Biology, Computer Science, and Aviation Science. Other major programs include Education, Psychology, Business, English, Communication, History, Criminal Justice, Music, Sociology and Social Work.

In the fall of 2017, there were 43 students enrolled in the University Honors Program at ECSU. Disaggregated by race, there were 11 white students (25.6 percent) and 30 African Americans (69.7 percent). Two students (4.6 percent) were other races/ethnicity. As such, the racial makeup of the ECSU honors program for that enrollment period was similar to the average ratio of black to non-black students per year for the university at large. In the spring of 2018, after fall 2017 graduation, attrition due to sub-par academic performance and decision not to return to the honors program, the number of honors students decreased to 36. All three (3) students who decided not to return to the honors program for their second semester were first-year white students. The three additional students who did not return because of poor academics were black. One white honors student completed the program and graduated in December 2017 with "honors designation."

3. Method of Analysis

A qualitative assessment was made of data collected through responses of white and black students enrolled in the honors program at Elizabeth City State University (n=15). All students in the honors program were given an open-ended questionnaire on how honors education is implemented at ECSU. Sixteen students in the honors freshman colloquium course were administered their questionnaire on Blackboard Learn as a course assessment tool. Upper class honors students were emailed the questionnaire in Word form and requested to complete and return it to the researcher via email. Of the total of 36 students who were given the questionnaire to complete and return, 15 (41.6 percent) completed and returned the questionnaire. Of the 15, five (33.3 percent) were white, nine (60 percent) were black, and one student (6.6 percent) self-reported as mixed race. For the purpose of this analysis, the mixed student's responses were not included in the summary. The literature reviewed in this study provided a basis for a focus on the types of issues that are relevant when exploring race as a factor in student attitudes about honors programs at HBCUs. As such, the questions asked in the study addressed the following variables.

- Strengths versus weaknesses of the ECSU honors program
- Barriers that hinder races from excelling in the honors program
- Fairness of the honors curriculum to the different races
- Adequate support for all students regardless of race
- Quality of participation in honors program activities based on race

The researcher coded the data based on similarity of responses and analyzed the data utilizing the NVivo 12 software.

4. Findings/Results

In the analysis of the texts of responses of black and white students in the honors program to questions in the case study, certain themes emerged. Regardless of race, the frequency of the occurrence of similar responses of black and white honors students were positive on all five of the variables of the questionnaire, including strengths versus weaknesses of the honors program, barriers to success for the races, fairness to race with respect to the honors curriculum, adequate program support for different races, and level and quality of participation of honors students of different races. Examples of positive expressions among black students on the variable "strengths vs. weaknesses" of the program were "diverse," "interaction with others," and "addresses needs of others." Positive expressions among white students on the same variable included, "focuses on current events and relevant issues," "racial equality," and "encourages participation." Other types of responses for all variables for both black and white students included "no real barriers to the races," "no hindrances," and "adequate support as well as resources" for all honors students, "activities are good for the program," "very comfortable with the honors program," and "honors professors know the answers to my questions."

While students of both races spoke very favorably about the honors program in all categories of the attitudinal assessment, there were some observable nuances in the responses that possibly can be attributable to race. For example, a theme that emerged among white students in their responses was "motivation to learn" or "navigate" the rigor of the program. White students also mentioned that some students "opt to leave" the program. But it appeared that those comments were based more on individual differences than negative responses to the honors program. For example, in addressing the variable "barriers that hinder the races..." a white student remarked, "...[L]ike black students, white students come and leave the program for different reasons. We are all given the same opportunity." Another white student reported, "Nothing is stacked against [students who are not black] if they are motivated and diligent." No black honors students commented in terms of issues of student motivation or students opting to leave the program.

Statements about the value of an Afro-centric focus of the program in terms of benefits for white students were included among the white student responses. This theme was not found in the black student responses. But there were both black and white students who expressed that a historically black college or university can be expected to offer an Afro-centric education.

As stated, both black and white honors students in the case study saw the honors activities identified in the questionnaire as program attributes. Black students, however, commented more in terms of the need to strengthen the honors activities and be more inclusive of white students.

For example, a black honors student commented, “There should be a more racially diverse debate team, quiz bowl team and travel team. I would like to see more and be part of a campus clean up team.” Another black student said, “It seems like the Black students are more eager to participate in the honors activities. I would like to see more activities dealing with the work force.” A white student stated, “It’s not hard to notice more black members in Honors Program activities than white. But I don’t find that in any way negative towards racial equality. Just a matter of who’s right for the job.” Both black and white students made comments suggesting they also wanted to see more information about the activities and activities that have a more practical purpose, such as for information on careers and jobs.

5. Conclusion/Limitations/Recommendations

The findings of this study are not intended to immediately infer to or predict the responses of a population of black and white honors students at a historically black college or university on the variables addressed in the study. Yet, the findings can be useful for honors program design and assessment at HBCUs that take into consideration racial and cultural differences among honors students. The black and white students in this case study were all generally pleased with the honors program as a whole. As such, the results of this study could not differentiate the student responses to questions in the study based on the race of the students in the program. While differences in responses cannot be attributable to race, the study yielded valuable comments about the honors program at ECSU from both white and black honors students. The honors program at ECSU has noted student comments in the study and begun to address them programmatically.

In terms of how the study might inform modifications in other honors programs, a strong emphasis on equity in the engagement of all students can be effective. Additionally, HBCUs should not be hesitant to include or emphasize Afro-centrism in the honors curriculum and overall honors experience. Such a focus can be valuable and generally might be expected by honors students at HBCUs, regardless of race. Finally, co-curricular activities at honors programs that are similar to ECSU should be meaningful, diverse, available to all students, and widely promoted within the program.

Future studies might forego the inferential limitations of a case study and utilize a larger sample of respondents for quantitative analysis. A larger HBCU or multiple HBCUs with honors programs might provide a sufficient pool of students that would lead to a reliable quantitative analysis. Future studies also should strive to achieve a more balanced racial demographic of the sample.

6. References

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