

Houston Chronicle

**HCC honors college will cater to the best
School hopes university-level classes, free tuition draw more top students**

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Matthew Tresaugue

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Community colleges have long provided a refuge for unprepared students and adults seeking new job skills.

But now Houston Community College is making plans for an honors college that would offer a university-level core curriculum to the best and brightest.

HCC leaders envision the honors college as another option for those talented, mostly black or Latino students who cannot afford rising tuition costs or are not ready to leave home.

The primary recruitment tool will be scholarships that cover tuition and fees.

Although HCC accepts any Texas resident with a high school diploma, the proposed honors college would emulate the admissions policies of selective universities by putting a new emphasis on grades and test scores.

Some educators question whether community colleges, often overextended and underfunded, should be in the business of educating students who earned good grades in high school.

Chances are that the honors students could go elsewhere, but HCC officials want them to help improve the intellectual atmosphere at the nation's second-largest community college.

"Community colleges have very often been thought of as less academically rigorous," said Jay Aiyer, chairman of HCC's governing board, who proposed an honors college. "Part of this is to dispel that notion."

Several public universities have established honors colleges during the past decade to help improve their rankings, but the idea is relatively new to community colleges.

Following Miami's example

By the National Collegiate Honors Council's definition, honors colleges are more comprehensive and possess greater control over their own management than "honors programs."

Honors programs, which vary in size and scope, can be found at more than one-third of the nation's 1,173 community colleges, including HCC and the five-campus North Harris Montgomery Community College District.

HCC leaders intend to copy Miami-Dade College's 4-year-old honors college, which has sent several Florida students to Ivy League and other elite institutions.

Students need a minimum 3.7 grade point average, a score of 1800 on the new three-part SAT and three letters of recommendation for admission into Miami-Dade's honors college. To remain in the college, they must maintain a 3.5 GPA while taking at least 12 units per semester.

The honors college offers smaller classes, priority registration, seamless transfer agreements with about 90 universities and opportunities for internships and study abroad. Students receive scholarships that cover the costs of tuition, fees and books.

Academically richer

Officials at Montgomery College in suburban Washington, D.C., said they are trying to compete with top research institutions, such as Cornell University, for ultra-bright students from the area's high schools.

The two-year college's recruiters offer free tuition and an opportunity to study at the University of Cambridge in England for a few weeks at almost no cost to the student.

"We're trying to create a better learning environment," said Sherman Helberg, director of enrollment management at Montgomery College.

"It's a different kind of diversity. By having all types of people in the classroom, not just by race or gender or age, but by academic ability, we're richer for it."

HCC leaders said they do not expect to compete with the University of Texas at Austin or Texas A&M University for students, but think the opportunity for two years of free, rigorous education could sway some students who are on the fence.

Trend raises concerns

Supporters say the growing number of such honors programs is encouraging because they see community colleges as a rich, untapped source of Latino and black students who can be cultivated for university-level work. Too few students transfer and earn bachelor's degrees, education analysts said.

"Students start at community colleges for a variety of reasons, but that doesn't mean they are not talented," said Kay McClenney, director of the Community College Survey of

Student Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin. "There is a real need to provide opportunities for students to succeed and move on."

But the emerging trend raises some concerns about how honors colleges fit into the traditional role of community colleges, which provide the bulk of training for nurses, technicians and welders, as well as remedial courses to undergraduates who arrive on campus without the skills needed to do university-level work.

Richard Romano, director of the Institute for Community College Research, questioned whether honors programs eventually might divert resources from other needed programs at two-year colleges, which are more dependent on state funding than big universities.

"I would rather beef up remedial programs than honors programs," Romano said. "Honors programs make us look good, but they do not serve the populations we were created for. We can't be all things to all people."

Fall 2007 debut

It's unclear how expensive HCC's honors college will be. Planning is in the earliest stages, but officials said they expect to launch the new college in fall 2007 with 30 students.

Miami-Dade enrolled about 400 honors students and spent roughly \$1 million on the program last year.

Maria Straus, coordinator of learning college initiatives at HCC, said the school intends to raise money for honors scholarships from foundations and through private donations.

A year of tuition and fees at HCC costs about \$1,500.

Another challenge, Straus said, is establishing more agreements for seamless transfers to top universities.

"Our mission is to educate the community, and we have to take the community where it is at," Straus said. "Houston is a diverse community, and that includes diverse academic abilities.

"To stereotype a community college as a place to train auto mechanics is not a true picture. We are more than that."

matthew.tresaugue@chron.com

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