

## Understanding **American Honors**: Student Selection, Key Program Components, and Stakeholder Impressions

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American Honors—a program operated in partnership between the for-profit company Quad Learning and a growing number of public two-year colleges—is designed to provide an honors curriculum and intensive wraparound advising for high-achieving low-income domestic students as well as for international students who study in the United States. The goal of American Honors (AH) is to help these students complete an associate degree, transfer to a selective four-year college destination, and be prepared for academic success at that destination. Community college faculty design and teach the Honors courses, while Quad Learning provides instructional design assistance; recruits, trains, and deploys advisors; develops relationships with admissions staff at selective universities across the country; and works with community college recruitment staff to recruit both domestic and international students into the program. To cover the cost of these services, the college charges AH students additional tuition and/or fees, and it splits the associated revenues with Quad Learning.

AH was established in 2013 when it was piloted at one community college district. The program expanded to several more colleges in 2014, and it now includes eight community colleges or multi-college districts in six states (Indiana, Michigan, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Washington). CCRC is conducting a mixed-methods study of AH in order to document key components of the program and to evaluate its effectiveness in terms of helping recent domestic high school graduates stay enrolled in college, graduate with an associate degree, and transfer to selective four-year destinations. This brief focuses on the nature of the domestic population currently served by AH; its key programmatic features; and community college student, faculty, and staff perspectives on the program. A final research report including findings on student outcomes and a cost-benefit analysis will be released late in 2018.

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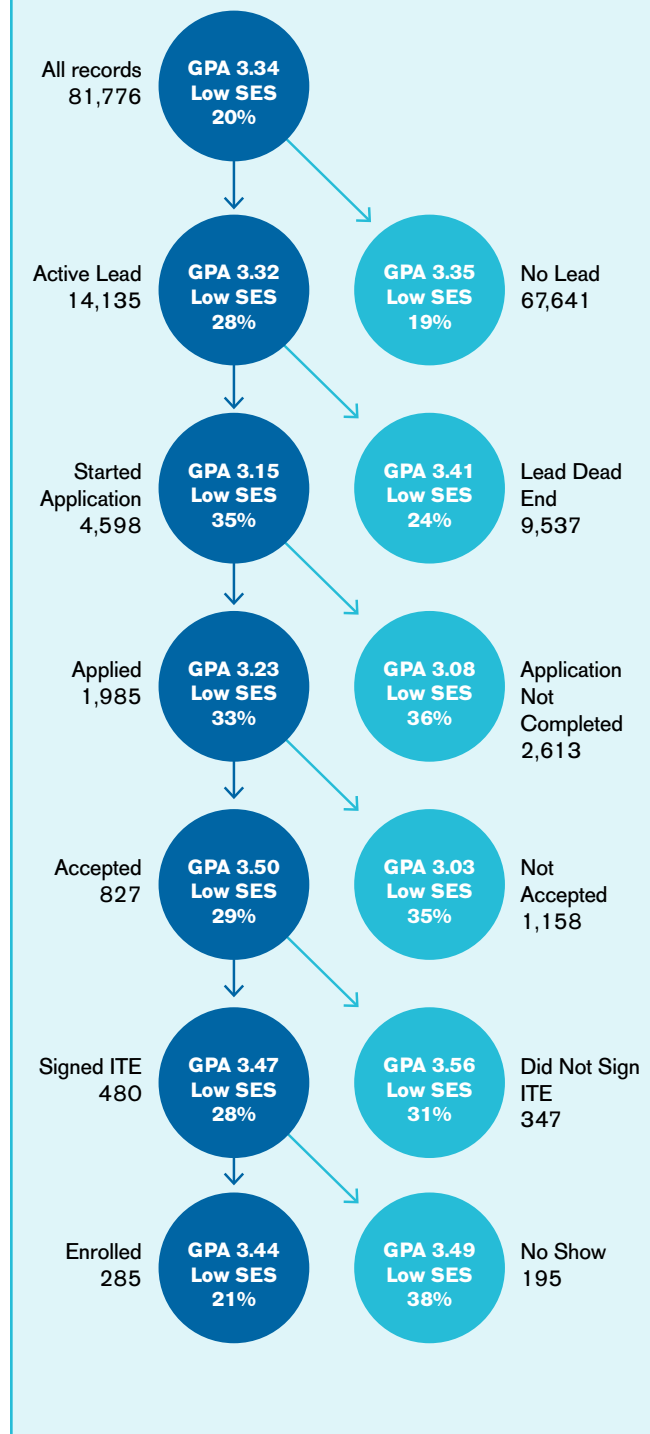
## About the Study

CCRC’s study focuses on six community colleges.<sup>1</sup> To understand the implementation of the AH program, in 2016 we visited each college, and at each we interviewed 15–20 students (about half AH and half high-achieving non-AH students), approximately 5–8 faculty, and approximately 5–11 staff, including college and AH administrators, AH advisors, and non-AH advisors, for a total of 181 interviews. To complement a regularly scheduled survey of AH students conducted by Quad Learning, we conducted a parallel survey with high-achieving non-AH students at each of the six colleges.<sup>2</sup> After discarding international students from each group, as well as discarding non-AH students who did not intend to transfer to a four-year college, the survey sample included 457 AH students and 461 non-AH students. To better understand the composition of the AH student population, we also analyzed approximately 82,000 recruitment records from AH’s fall 2014 recruitment cycle, focusing on recent domestic high school graduates. In 2018 we will match student recruitment records from the 2014–2016 cycles with National Student Clearinghouse data to determine whether AH students are more likely than similar students to persist and complete an associate degree, more likely to transfer (and transfer to higher-tier destinations), and more likely to persist and succeed at their destination four-year college.

## Selection Into the AH Program

To understand the admissions funnel into AH, we analyzed nearly 82,000 fall 2014 recruitment records from the six colleges’ service districts.<sup>3</sup> As Figure 1 shows, we divided student records into categories based on the depth of each student’s relationship with AH. Most records resulted in “No Lead” (for example, AH sent marketing materials to a student, but no further interactions occurred), or represented an “Active Lead” that turned into a “Lead Dead End” (for example, a student spoke with an AH representative at a college fair or visited the AH website but did not begin an application). Of the approximately 4,600 students that began an application to the AH program, most left the application “Not Completed,” and most of the rest were

**Figure 1. Flow of Domestic High School Graduates in the 2014 AH Recruitment and Admissions Pipeline: Number of Potential Students, Average High School GPA, and Percentage From Neighborhoods in Bottom Two Quintiles of SES**



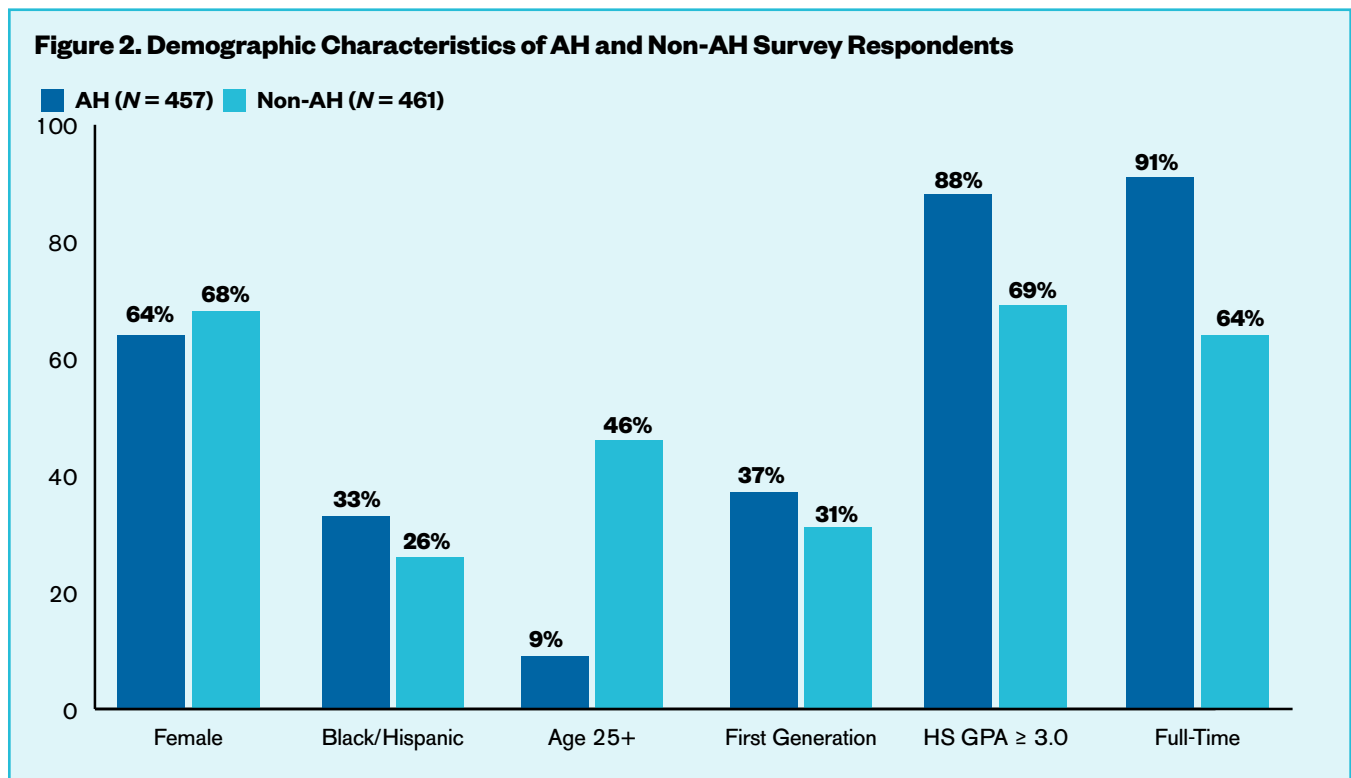
“Not Accepted.” Only about 800 students were accepted; of those, a little over half signed an Intent to Enroll (“ITE”), and of the ITE group, about two thirds “Enrolled” in AH while the remaining “No Show” students did not enroll in the program.

Across the original set of nearly 82,000 records, the recruitment dataset was moderately selective: The average high school GPA in this group was 3.34, and only about 20 percent of students lived in neighborhoods that fell within the nation’s bottom two quintiles of socioeconomic status (SES).<sup>4</sup> An examination of differences in student profiles at different points in the recruitment and admissions pipeline shows that students who were attracted to the program sufficiently to start an application were, on average, lower in income and GPA than the original pool of students, whereas students who were accepted into the program were higher in income and GPA than the typical applicant. Standards for acceptance into AH varied across community colleges; most colleges established an AH admissions committee<sup>5</sup> that determined acceptance based on a “holistic” evaluation of each student’s high school record, standardized test scores, and other characteristics that

might indicate a strong motivation to succeed academically. Typically, admissions committees required AH students to be “college-ready” in reading and writing but sometimes offered conditional admittance to students who were slightly below college readiness standards in mathematics.

Among those accepted into AH, the students with the highest GPAs and lowest incomes were the least likely to eventually enroll in the program. The highest-GPA students were more likely to enroll instead in a four-year college, perhaps because they received financial aid offers that covered much of the additional cost of that college. The lowest-income students were more likely to enter the regular community college, perhaps because they were unwilling or unable to pay the extra cost of the AH program.

Overall, as Figure 1 shows, competing forces of negative and positive selection operated at different points in the recruitment and admissions pipeline, which resulted in a pool of AH enrollees who were fairly similar to the overall profile of the original recruitment dataset: Among AH enrollees, the average high school GPA was 3.44, and



about 21 percent of enrollees lived in neighborhoods that were in the bottom two quintiles of SES nationally.

In addition to examining how GPA and SES varied throughout the recruitment and admissions pipeline using the recruitment dataset, we also used our survey data to compare the demographic composition of AH and high-achieving transfer-oriented non-AH students enrolled at the same community colleges (see Figure 2 on p. 3). AH students were slightly more likely to be Black or Hispanic, slightly more likely to be first-generation college students, more likely to have had a strong GPA in high school, and much more likely to be young and attending college full-time. Interviews with students and administrators also suggest that, among the college's high-achieving population interested in transferring to a four-year college, AH was more appealing to recent high school graduates who were attending college full-time.

## Key Components of the AH Program

According to interviewees, the AH model varied somewhat across colleges, but incorporated several key components, including (1) the Honors curriculum and associated supports for faculty; (2) intrusive student advising and associated seminars or workshops; (3) the development of a community ethos among AH students; and (4) infrastructural supports to the college from Quad Learning. Colleges also provided AH students with a dedicated student lounge and/or computer lab, and some colleges also emphasized hybrid-online or synchronous-online coursework as part of the program.

### Honors Curriculum

In order to earn an associate degree with an Honors designation, AH students must earn at least 24 credits of Honors courses; along the way, they must maintain an overall GPA of 3.25 while enrolled in a transfer-oriented degree program. At some colleges, AH students are required to attend full-time, and some colleges also offer the option of an Honors certificate, which requires 12 credits of Honors courses. While the specific Honors course offer-

ings varied across colleges, they typically consisted of general education credits for courses such as English composition, college algebra, speech, U.S. and world history, micro and macro economics, philosophy, and sociology; due to small projected enrollment sizes, most colleges offered few STEM or program-specific Honors courses, and some non-AH students told us they had declined the opportunity to enroll in AH based on a lack of Honors coursework in their major.

At most colleges, individual faculty “honorized” their own existing courses by selecting from a set of Honors-specific learning objectives that the college developed in consultation with Quad Learning. To meet these additional objectives (which typically revolved around critical thinking, research, leadership, or community-based learning), the instructor may have redesigned the course to include more primary source materials, presentations or peer teaching, research projects, or in-class discussion. To accomplish the redesign, each instructor could call on the services of an assigned Quad Learning instructional designer, and they also had access to Quad Learning's online faculty resources. Honors class sizes tended to be small (typically enrolling about 10–20 students), which made faculty feel more comfortable with redesigns that might necessitate a high level of guidance and feedback on student projects or papers.

Early in the partnership process, Quad Learning encouraged colleges to offer their Honors courses online and to share these online courses with other colleges in the AH network. However, AH students were often uninterested in online courses, and most AH colleges now offer the majority of their Honors courses face-to-face. Two colleges in our sample still offer a large proportion of their Honors courses in an online format. The first college has a general culture of offering hybrid-online courses and thus offers several of its Honors courses in that format. The second college has multiple campuses (many of which are quite small), and would be unable to maintain separate AH programs at each campus; accordingly, the college uses a synchronous online format to enroll students from multiple campuses in the same Honors course section.

In terms of faculty and student perceptions of Honors coursework, both groups enjoyed the courses: Faculty enjoyed

teaching them, and students appreciated the in-depth and student-centered nature of the courses. When asked to rate the quality of their Honors courses, AH students rated them highly; however, non-AH students also rated regular courses at the same college similarly highly. For example, Figure 3 shows a negligible difference between AH students' ratings of Honors courses and non-AH students' ratings of regular courses, in terms of the extent to which each course was engaging and encouraged critical thinking. However, older survey respondents tended to rate their courses more highly than younger students did, and the non-AH group included a much higher proportion of older students. After controlling for student age and other background factors, AH students rated Honors courses slightly but statistically significantly more highly, compared to non-AH students' ratings of regular courses.<sup>6</sup>

In interviews, both AH and non-AH students were very complimentary about their instructors and about the academic quality of coursework at their colleges. The survey of AH students did not ask them to make a direct comparison between Honors and regular (non-Honors) courses at each college. However, the interviews allowed AH students to make that comparison; and in that context, AH students described their Honors courses as more in-depth and more student-centered than the college's regular courses (see textbox).

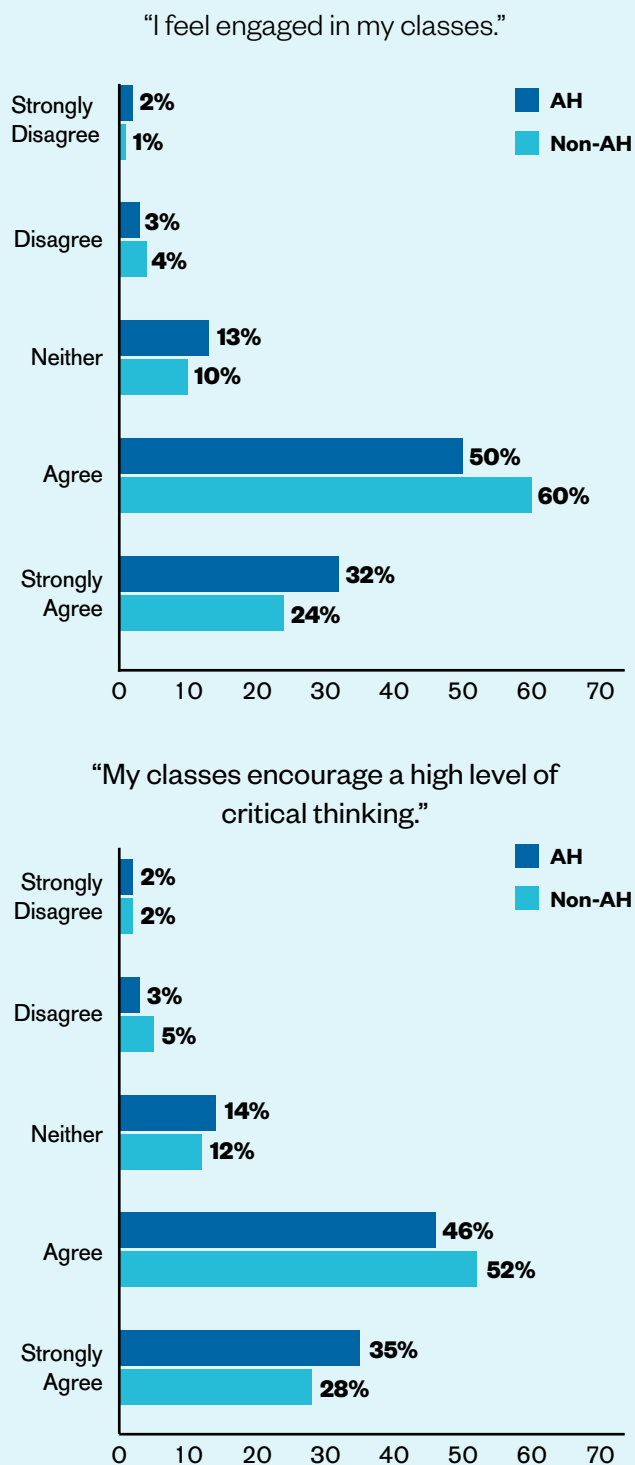
### Student Remarks Comparing Honors and Regular Courses

"[Honors courses] don't ask you to do more; they ask you to dive deeper into the material. ... Instead of just reading it and memorizing, [the courses require you to] think about your opinions and how you feel about it."  
(AH student)

"[With the regular courses], the teacher is sort of controlling the flow of what ideas we are talking about, what people should think, and then we write notes about that. With these Honors courses, I do feel that it's more student directed."  
(AH student)

"[Teachers of all courses at this college] have been attentive to me—I guess Honors more than non-Honors because the class sizes are smaller."  
(AH student)

**Figure 3. AH Students' Ratings of Honors Courses Versus Non-AH Students' Ratings of Regular Courses (Survey Results Without Controls)**



In addition, AH students appreciated that their Honors course peers came to class prepared to participate; they felt that this “peer effect” supported their own motivation and in-class engagement. In the college that offered most of its Honors courses in a synchronous online format, students and faculty were generally positive about the courses. While they felt that the synchronous online format had some drawbacks, most felt it was “worth it” in order to allow the college to offer Honors courses to far-flung campuses.

Our study does not compare colleges implementing the AH program against other non-AH colleges. Accordingly, we cannot judge whether the AH curriculum and pedagogy is similar to or different from other non-AH honors programs. However, one college participating in the study replaced its previously existing honors program with AH in order to incorporate more intrusive advising for its honors students. The previous honors program required students to first “prove themselves” at the college before being admitted into the program, while the AH program recruits most students directly from high school; as a result, some faculty felt that the quality of AH honors students was less strong than in the previous program. Aside from that, however, faculty reported the AH curriculum and pedagogy to be fairly similar to that of the previous honors program.

### **Intrusive Student Advising**

At each college, each AH advisor managed a caseload of approximately 100 students, whom they advised on a wide variety of academic and nonacademic issues, such as program and course selection, work-life-school balance, and academic struggle. In addition to scheduled one-on-one meetings each semester, many AH students kept in frequent touch with their advisors through text messages, phone calls, or drop-in visits. AH advisors also taught a leadership seminar (typically taken in the student’s first semester) and a transfer seminar (typically taken in the student’s third semester). The nature of each seminar—including whether it was a for-credit or noncredit offering, and how many hours it required—varied across colleges. In general, however, the leadership seminar covered similar

content as a college success course, and it typically also included a service learning component. The transfer seminar focused on researching potential transfer destinations; identifying “safety,” “target,” and “reach” schools; and preparing materials for a transfer application.

Figure 4 shows that AH students were much more likely to agree that it was easy to access their advisors and that their advisors were “extremely knowledgeable” about transfer processes and college options, compared to non-AH students, whose advisors typically had caseloads at least 10 times as large as AH advisors. After controlling for student background characteristics, AH students rated the AH program’s overall advising quality more highly than non-AH students rated non-AH advising quality.<sup>7</sup>

In interviews, AH students cited more numerous and varied examples of how they interacted with their advisors, and it was clear that their advisors personally kept track of each student’s progress. While non-AH students appreciated the college’s advising services, the relationships they had with their advisors were much less personal (see textbox). Indeed, as Figure 4 shows, 8 percent of non-AH survey respondents did not know about advisor availability, and 18 percent did not know whether their advisors had strong knowledge about transfer.

### **Student Remarks About Advising**

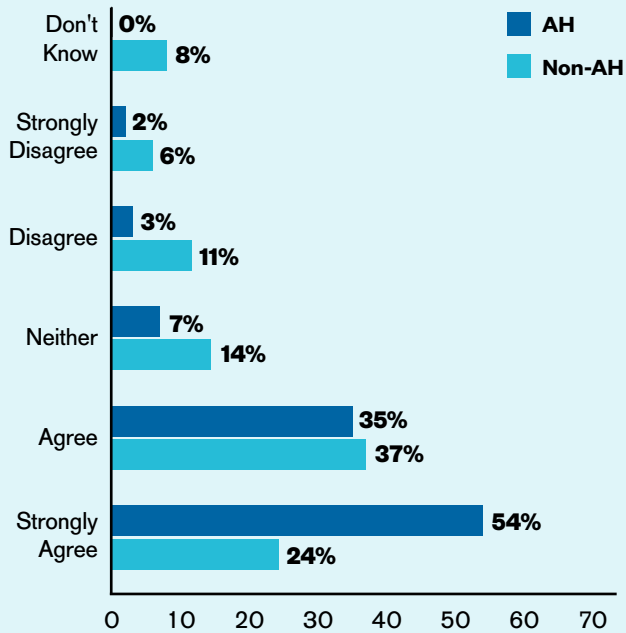
“I do get a lot of interaction with [AH advisor], and when I email, she responds quickly. She’s very interactive with all the students, and I can even text her or call her.” (AH student)

“The Honors advisor told me the right pathway. My [non-AH] ex-housemate doesn’t have any idea about transfer credits; he took three years to graduate. That was awful. But I’ve got an advisor.” (AH student)

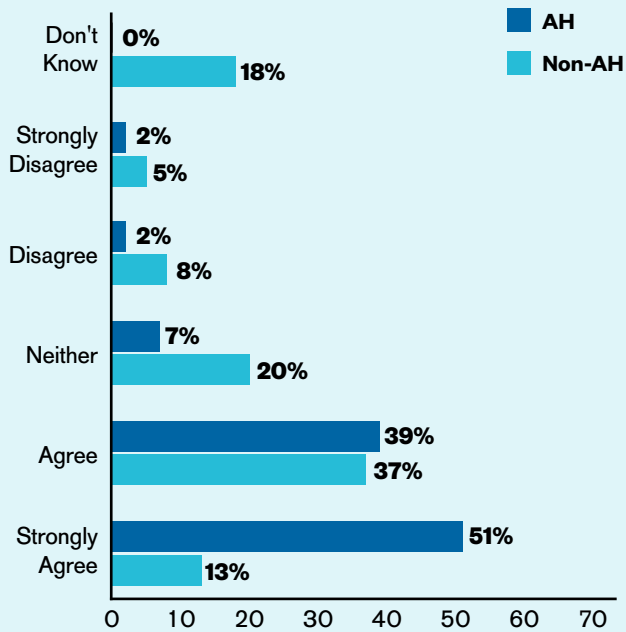
“I really like [non-AH advisor], but she is blatantly and obviously overwhelmed. Every time I go in, it’s a clean slate and I have to remind her of everything.” (Non-AH student)

**Figure 4. AH Students' Ratings of AH Advising Versus Non-AH Students' Ratings of Non-AH Advising (Survey Results Without Controls)**

"It is easy to schedule an advising meeting. (Advisors have times to fit my schedule.)"



"Advisors are extremely knowledgeable about transfer processes and college options."



## Student Community

In addition to advising students and teaching seminars, AH advisors organized social events for AH students and pushed them to get involved in campus and community activities. Because most AH students attended college full-time, the leadership and transfer seminars created a sense of community among AH students and a sense of being part of a cohort among AH students who entered the program at the same time. Moreover, AH students saw each other regularly in their Honors courses and in the AH lounge. In interviews, AH students reported that the program provided a built-in network of friends. Survey results indicate that while 65 percent of non-AH respondents were involved in no campus activities whatsoever, all AH respondents were regularly involved in campus activities through the program. In interviews, AH students were also more likely to say that they had someone on campus to support them in case of an academic or nonacademic crisis. On the other hand, some non-AH interviewees were highly involved in campus and community organizations, and other non-AH interviewees (particularly older students) indicated that their relative lack of on-campus connections did not pose a problem in terms of their academic success (see textbox).

### Student Remarks About Campus Activities

"The [AH] lounge [is where] students just get together, discuss their classes. Sometimes we do math problems or any science-related problems on the board and explain to other students. ... I feel like it's a great way for [AH students] to get to know each other." (AH student)

"My first semester here I did really well and I was invited into Phi Theta Kappa. I was inducted and from that point on everything just clicked. ... So because of that, I always had something good to look forward to." (Highly involved non-AH student)

"I don't have any friends here. Not saying that I'm not open to be friends with everybody, but when I'm 26 and I'm busy seven days a week, an 18-year-old doesn't understand my commitment to life to be that busy." (Older non-AH student)

## Infrastructural Supports

Quad Learning contributed a variety of infrastructural supports to ensure that the AH program ran smoothly at each college. First, Quad Learning recruited, trained, and paid AH advisors. After a rocky start at some colleges in terms of recruiting and deploying advisors, by the time of our visits college stakeholders typically reported a high level of satisfaction with the AH advising staff and their practices. Second, Quad Learning collaborated with each college to recruit potential AH students, and to brand and market the college's AH program. For example, Quad Learning and college recruiters sometimes jointly attended college fairs at local high schools. A few colleges experienced challenges in having to coordinate recruitment, branding, and marketing with an external entity. At the same time, some colleges interested in recruiting international students felt that Quad Learning's experience and connections in the international market were a strong asset. Third, Quad Learning worked to establish relationships with a network of selective four-year transfer destinations. While these transfer destinations did not necessarily give an admissions "edge" to AH students compared to honors students at other community colleges, AH advisors seemed very familiar with the transfer requirements of each school and well prepared to help their students navigate applications and transfer processes at selective institutions across the country.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, non-AH advisors seemed deeply familiar with only the key transfer destinations within their own state or geographic region. Of course, not all talented students are interested in transferring outside their region: Some non-AH interviewees we spoke with declined to enroll in AH because they had already decided on a local destination four-year college, and felt they did not need much assistance in navigating the transfer process to that particular destination.

## Costs and Benefits of the AH Program

From the perspective of the college, the program's primary cost is borne by the revenue-sharing arrangement with AH, which covers the cost of AH's infrastructural supports. While the exact nature of the arrangement differed from

college to college, in a typical case the college might charge AH students an additional 50 percent in tuition or fees, and then provide half of the entire revenue generated by that student to Quad Learning; as a result, the college would receive about 75 percent of the revenue they would normally receive from a student, while Quad Learning would also receive about 75 percent.

Outside of revenue-sharing costs, college administrators reported very little operational cost associated with the AH program. Accordingly, the typical revenue-sharing arrangement would be revenue-positive for the college if: (1) at least a quarter of AH enrollees would otherwise not have attended the college (these might be international students, local students who would have attended a four-year college, or students outside the immediate service area interested in an honors community college experience); or (2) AH students took more credits at the college than they would have without the honors program. While it was difficult for administrators to judge the extent to which these two factors were occurring, most felt the program was approximately revenue-neutral.

Colleges without a previous honors program appreciated the minimal start-up effort associated with AH, which could be established and fully functioning with very little lead time. Administrators felt that the establishment of an honors program helped boost the institution's reputation for strong academics and transfer success; for example, the program allowed colleges to identify and profile high-achieving students who were bound for selective universities. Academic administrators also noted that many faculty enjoyed teaching in the program and considered doing so to be a perk. On the other hand, some faculty were initially resistant (or continued to be resistant) to the program. Faculty resistance was most salient at colleges where a top-level administrator decided to join AH without first getting buy-in from faculty. Many faculty interviewees initially worried that the program would be run and controlled by Quad Learning, but once faculty realized that they themselves had strong control over the college's AH admissions, curriculum, and pedagogy, they became much more positive about the program. Some faculty continued to have mixed feelings because they were philosophically opposed



to students paying more, or to partnering with a private entity; but most of these believed that, on balance, the program's benefits to students outweighed these considerations. Only at one college—where a well-liked existing honors program was replaced with AH by administrative fiat—did a majority of faculty we interviewed continue to have negative perceptions of the program.

From the perspective of students, most AH enrollees considered the program to be worth the extra financial cost and would recommend it to friends, for at least one of three reasons: (1) It provided more challenging courses than the college's regular curriculum; (2) it provided focused advising, transfer support, and institutional relationships with top transfer destinations; and (3) it provided a built-in network of friends. However, there were some caveats to this general message we heard from AH students. At colleges with few Honors courses in STEM or other popular majors, AH students said they might recommend the program only to liberal arts majors. Other AH students noted that the program might not be “worth it” if one planned to transfer to a less-selective regional four-year destination.

### **Student Remarks About the Advantage of AH for Transfer**

“[Honors courses] look good whenever you transfer somewhere. You say, ‘I’m going to be graduating with an Honors diploma.’ That looks good no matter where you go.” (AH student)

“I would definitely recommend American Honors, but I would have to ask a student, ‘What are you looking for American Honors to do for you as a student?’ Maybe it’ll be better for students that want to transfer out of the state.” (AH student)

“I think [AH] was more for transferring students that wanted to get into really good, really big colleges, and it would help them a lot more. But I was planning on transferring to smaller ones. ... I don’t want to go to a different state. I don’t want to have to drive more than an hour away.” (Non-AH student)

AH students covered the extra financial cost of the program in a variety of ways, including Pell grants, loans, scholarships (some of which were provided by the AH program), and out-of-pocket payments. Many viewed the program as a good bargain because it was less expensive than a four-year destination they had also considered attending.

Most non-AH students we interviewed were aware of the program and spoke highly of it, but felt they could not afford the additional cost, or felt that the program's structure or goals were not appropriate to their own circumstances. For example, some felt the program did not offer enough coursework in their major. Some older students felt the program was more compatible with the lifestyle of young full-time students. And some believed the program was not necessary in order for them to be accepted into and to be successful at their local or regional public four-year university transfer destination.

## **Summary of Initial Findings**

The AH program seems most appealing to recent high school graduates who are attending college full-time and interested in transferring to selective or out-of-state destinations, and who want to (or need to) save money by attending community college first. AH students felt that it was worth paying more for the program than the regular community college's tuition or fees because it provided more challenging courses, more intensive advising support, and a built-in network of friends. From the perspective of colleges, the program seemed approximately revenue-neutral, yet provided benefits in terms of reputation and faculty morale (particularly if faculty buy-in was sought early in the process of program adoption).

Overall, community college stakeholders were positive about the program, and felt that it helped prepare community college students to successfully transfer to, and succeed at, selective four-year destinations. It is important to note, however, that we cannot verify these qualitative impressions until we complete our final quantitative analysis in 2018.

## Endnotes

1. The six “colleges” represent a mix of single-campus colleges, multiple-campus colleges, and community college districts that include multiple colleges.
2. About one fourth of the survey sample consists of students who were accepted to AH but who declined the program and entered the regular college; the remainder of the sample consists of other students at the college with a cumulative GPA above 3.0.
3. Most recruitment records were initially purchased by Quad Learning from national test providers or the National Research Center for College & University Admissions; these included records of all recent test takers within the six service areas who had a high school GPA of B- or above, or those with an SAT or ACT score in the top third of test takers. Some additional recruitment records came via outreach efforts (e.g., high school and college fair visits), community colleges’ admissions offices, or students’ direct applications to the program. The original recruitment database ( $N = 98,377$ ) included all students in the fall 2014 recruitment cycle who entered AH, some of whom were international students. Our focus on recent domestic high school graduates reduced the dataset to  $N = 81,776$ , and reduced the number of AH enrollees in the database from 499 to 285. Note that the recruitment database did not contain records for continuing AH students (e.g., those who enrolled in the program in fall 2013) who were continuing into 2014. High school GPA was typically available for those who at least started an application, but was less often available for “No Lead” and “Lead Dead End” students, based on students’ voluntary self-reports when taking the ACT and/or SAT.
4. Student SES was estimated by matching each student’s recruitment address to U.S. Census tract information on neighborhood income, education, and professional status.
5. A typical committee included several faculty teaching Honors courses, an AH advisor, and one or two administrators who helped oversee the program. A Quad Learning representative often pre-screened the applications and divided them into those who almost certainly merited admission, those who almost certainly did not, and those in the middle, and the college’s admissions committee focused most of its time and attention on the middle category.
6. Controlling for age, gender, race/ethnicity, high school GPA, first-generation status, and college of attendance, the unstandardized coefficient for AH versus non-AH students was  $b = 0.17$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $p < 0.01$  on a 1–5 scale of course quality derived from an average of the following four items: “I feel challenged in my classes,” “I feel engaged in my classes,” “My classes encourage a high level of critical thinking,” and “I feel supported by my teachers.”
7. Controlling for age, gender, race/ethnicity, high school GPA, first-generation status, and college of attendance, the unstandardized coefficient for AH versus non-AH students was  $b = 0.78$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $p < 0.001$  on a 1–5 scale of advising quality derived from an average of the following three items: “Advisors are extremely knowledgeable about academic policies and procedures, degree programs, and graduation requirements,” “Advisors are extremely knowledgeable about transfer processes and college options,” and “It is easy to schedule an advising meeting. (Advisors have enough times that fit with my schedule.)” “Don’t know” responses were coded as missing.
8. This study’s methods include qualitative data collection from only two-year colleges; accordingly, our understanding of American Honors’ relationships with four-year colleges reflects only the perceptions of two-year college stakeholders and not those of four-year transfer destinations’ admissions offices.

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