MERIT SCHOLARSHIPS: ARE THEY ACCESSIBLE FOR *ALL* STUDENTS?

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Introduction

Four years ago, I interviewed for the top merit scholarship offered at East Carolina University. When I reflect back on this day, I remember several key details. The majority of us looked the same, came from similar backgrounds, and participated in almost all the same extracurricular activities. At the time, these realizations were nothing more than a stressor because I was trying to figure how I was going to stand out in a group of people that were all so similar to me. However, when I interned with the Marian Drane Graham Scholars program last summer and got to explore key issues facing public higher education, I began to look at this day a little differently. Now when I reflect back, I ask myself, were we all the same because we were the most qualified or were we all the same because merit-based scholarship programs are not accessible for low-income and rural students?

Higher education should be accessible to all who reach for it. However, it is often out of reach for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds largely due to the cost barrier. In 2021, a study was done on fourteen different universities. It was found that on average the percent of black students in the university population was 3.7% while the percent of black students in honors at the university was 2.5% (Cognard-Black, 2021). Similarly on average, the percent of Hispanic students found at universities was 19.1% while the percent of Hispanics in university honors education was 13.9% (Cognard-Black, 2021). The percent of pell-eligible students found in universities was 35.6% and the percent of pell eligible students in honors was 26.5% (Cognard-Black, 2021). Pell- eligibility is a way to measure income status. In North Carolina, the poverty rate for enrolled high school students is 19.5% (102, 652 students) which is higher than the national average of 17.7% ("Poverty In North Carolina"). To put this in perspective, the poverty line is an income of $12,880 for a one-person household and $26,500 for a four-person

household. The 19.5% is only including those that meet this poverty line- not other students who may not be in poverty but are very low income as well. Merit scholarship programs help make higher education attainable for students by eliminating this barrier. While need based scholarships do exist, most of them are not full ride scholarships and they do not eliminate the financial burden enough for students with limited resources. There is also more to a merit-based scholarship than just funding- you get networking, increased experiences, and automatic credibility on campus- it is a completely different kind of label to have. The purpose of this project is to highlight the need for increased initiatives and more inclusive requirements to make merit scholarships more accessible for low income and rural students.

There are several different barriers that contribute to making merit-scholarships inaccessible for some students including standardized testing requirements, exclusive language used during the admissions process, and limited opportunities dependent on what high school a student attends. Standardized test score requirements are included in numerous merit scholarship programs in the state. The NC A&T Cheatham-White Scholarship has the requirement of a 1280 SAT and a 28 ACT ("Cheatham-White Scholars"). Some programs do not have requirements for test scores but rather a suggested minimum to be a competitive applicant which serves the same purpose in creating a barrier for students. The NC State University Park Scholarship program says the most competitive applicant has a minimum of a 1330 SAT and 29 ACT ("NC State Park Scholarship"). The NCCU Cheatham-White Scholarship's incoming class have an average 1322 SAT and 28.8 ACT ("Cheatham- White Scholarship Program") and the Appalachian State University Chancellors Scholarship's incoming class have an average 1506 SAT and 34 ACT (Hudspethea, 2020). Standardized testing bias and the inability to afford SAT prep courses and/or multiple testing attempts makes the standardized testing requirement a huge barrier for

low income and rural students. Joseph Soares, a Wake Forest University Sociology Professor when asked about who is disadvantaged by these tests stated "Everyone who is not from a family in the top 10% of the income distribution. In addition, all blacks, Hispanics, and women are disadvantaged by this test. The test is a more reliable predictor of demographics than it is of academic performance ("Standardized Tests Discriminate Against Minority and Lower Income Students," 2015)." Thirty-six percent of economically disadvantaged students meet the minimum ACT score for admissions into the UNC system in comparison to the 67% of all other students ("Every Child NC," 2021). If a pattern is seen across a whole demographic of people, then it is likely due to an issue with the system, not with the people themselves. In 1926, the SAT was created and adapted from the US Army test. This is problematic because the US Army used aptitude test that would vary based on race and ethnicity so they could claim inferior intellect levels (improperly). The test has been revised since then, but some of the racial and cultural biases still remain. Inequitable funding to schools also allows some students to be more prepared than others. Not to mention, many families spend more than $3,000 paying for extra classes and tutors to raise test scores (Soviero et al., 2019). According to the Princeton Review, this number can now range anywhere between $1,000- $10,000. A price that low-income families can simply not afford to pay.

Exclusive language used in the admissions process also creates problematic scholarship requirements. Phrases like "commitment to community service", "be significantly involved in extracurricular activities", and "must show exceptional characteristics of leadership and service" are all used when merit scholarship programs are describing their ideal applicant. The language used to describe scholarship programs can be more inclusive to show that programs value diverse experiences. Community service is hard to accomplish when you live in the community that is

being serviced. The lack of extracurriculars available at underserved/ rural schools also make the significant involvement in extracurricular activities more difficult for some students to achieve. Schools that had over 99% of their students receiving free/reduced lunch had anywhere from 10-14 extracurriculars available to their students. Meanwhile, at a school with only 1.4% of students receiving free/reduced lunch, there were 77 extracurriculars available to those students. Even a school with 38.9% of students receiving free/reduced lunch had 45 extracurricular options ("North Carolina High School Rankings"). It is much easier to be heavily involved in extracurricular activities if you have 77 options to choose from instead of just ten. The ten highest spending counties in North Carolina spend an average of $3,200 per student while the ten lowest spending counties spend $755 per student ("Facts on Child Poverty"). Students at high poverty schools need extra support and resources and often times they are given just the opposite with less money to spend on materials, lower access to higher level courses, and less experienced teachers. Even if all schools did have the same access to extracurriculars, lack of transportation for low income/rural families will restrict some students from being able to participate. Other factors like the digital divide and having to work to support their families while attending school, makes good grades harder to achieve- making it harder to be competitive for elite merit scholarships. Approximately one in five teens cannot finish their homework due to the digital divide (Anderson, 2018). It has also been shown that a significant decline in academic performance occurs when students have to work over 11 hours a week (Kimberly, 2001). Being able to dedicate time to extracurricular activities that do not bring in any type of income is a privilege that some students do not have.

The income status of students applying to and receiving elite merit scholarships needs to be reflective of the university population the merit scholarships are housed at. There are several

different ways this change can begin to take place. Some successful initiatives have already begun like the Park Under-Resourced Assistance (PURA) initiative at NC State University. The PURA initiative was discovered during preliminary research done with the Marian Drane Graham scholars' program. This is a student run initiative that allows current Park Scholars to assist under resourced students in essay writing. This allows students who may not normally be able to receive feedback have the opportunity to get constructive criticism. This is important because it gives under resourced students someone to go to assist with their essays. Essays are often weighed heavily in the admissions process so having a reliable person to get feedback from is critical when creating a successful application. The idea was started in August and launched in October of that same year. No money was spent on creating this initiative, making it feasible to replicate at other campuses. PURA will be discussed more later but it is important to look at the feasibility of replicating successful initiatives like this one across other programs.

Literature Review

Strategies used to increase diversity in honors education can be translated to the merit scholarship programs. One article found six different themes that were the most closely related to recruiting and retaining diverse honors students. The themes are (in order from most prevalent to least) program-level improvements, inclusive community building, course level improvements, holistic admissions, recruitment practice, and study abroad/cultural immersion (Hilton, 2021). Slippery Rock University was able to substantially increase its minority and low socioeconomic background students by using these strategies.

Program-level Improvements/ Inclusive Community Building

Program-level improvements means focusing on service learning and social justice programming as a way to advertise the honors college- not just marketing it as a way to earn an

honors credential. Only advertising honors as a competitive advantage and a prestigious opportunity is an approach that mainly appeals to white females and is not enough to get underrepresented students to want to apply (Ticknor, 2020). Inclusive community building is another strategy that can be used to increase diversity and it means including mentoring, having a diverse honors faculty, and creating activities in honors surrounding social justice (Hilton 2021). Including these opportunities in an honors program is another way to advertise honors as something past just a prestigious credential.

Course Level Improvements

Course level improvements refers to creating outlets for self-reflection, service learning, and opportunities for social justice. Placing a high emphasis on social justice is a common theme that works to increase low socioeconomic students in honors. Additional coursework without these values is often deemed as nonessential/not relevant and therefore not worth the extra time investment of honors for underrepresented students (Ticknor, 2020). The assignments teachers give in their classrooms can also have a large impact on whether or not all students feel welcome. Being creative with classroom assignments can help encourage the success of diverse students. Specific assignments that are better for non-white students include slideshows, videos, museum exhibits, posters, and proposals- instead of research papers- because they involve original, real-world measures of learning (Yarrison, 2021).

Holistic Admissions

Holistic admissions mean looking beyond GPA and standardized test scores for each applicant. A holistic admissions process is important because are several discrepancies associated with standardized tests, employment can impact GPA, and many students cannot afford to do extracurriculars that do not bring in income (Mead, 2018). Creating a transfer in

option and an open application process (not invite only) also contributes to a more holistic

admissions approach. A professor at Appalachian State University defined a more holistic

admissions process as not making decisions based only on standardized test scores and not

having minimum standardized test scores needed to apply to a program (Mead, 2018). Another

article found holistic admissions to be an important piece to the honors admissions process citing

that honors admissions is "historically narrow and restrictive- focusing on GPA, test scores, and

language around superiority" (Cognard-Black, 2021). Creating a more holistic admissions

process allowed one school to increase diversity from 12.3% to 22% (Cognard-Black, 2021).

However, to increase recruitment it needs to go beyond just holistic admissions. When white

people were asked what they thought the barriers for students of color were for participating in

honors they listed poor performance on standardized test scores and lack of honors recruiting

efforts (Cognard-Black, 2021). When nonwhite students were asked this same question, they said

it was due to a lack of diversity in honors, misperceptions of honors as an elitist organization,

and saw it as an unnecessary addition to their course load (Cognard-Black, 2021)- these factors

well beyond just holistic admissions.

Recruitment Practice/ Study Abroad and Cultural Immersion

Recruitment practice is another important piece to increasing diversity of honors.

Approaches such as word of mouth recruitment by diverse students and adding a financial

scholarship component helps to recruit diverse students. Study abroad/ cultural immersion is

another important factor and refers to creating study abroad opportunities for students and

including other cultural elements to increase student passion for education. One program

introduced a mentoring partnership with a school that had a large population of

underrepresented-minority students (90% were classified as low income) and they would recruit

members from this school (Cognard-Black, 2021). Another issue with recruiting diverse honors students is the lack of diversity in honors that starts well before students are even getting to college. Many underrepresented students perceive honors students as socially disconnected, people who do not have a balanced lifestyle, and people who spend the majority of their time studying. They do not believe that the honors college is a place of racial or intellectual diversity, and this is largely due to their negative experiences in honors/AP courses in K-12 education (Ticknor, 2020).

State Merit Aid Programs

Reviewing the structure of state merit scholarship programs can also promote insight into how to increase low socioeconomic representation in elite merit scholarship programs at universities. One article did an analysis of state merit scholarship programs in five different states (Alaska, Florida, Kentucky, Michigan, and New Mexico). The study showed that there are inequities among these scholarship programs that impact access to higher education for minority and low-income students (Farrell, 2004). White students (even those from high poverty areas) still had a better chance at receiving one of these scholarships than black or Hispanic students (Farrell, 2004). Several non-need, merit-based scholarship programs are only increasing access for students who were going to attend college anyways (Farrell, 2004). There were several recommendations given to help improve diversity in these state programs. One of these recommendations is to include a family financial requirement or need-based component. However, then the scholarship would no longer be considered a completely merit-based award. Changing scholarship eligibility requirements is another recommendation given since standardized testing requirements seem to be a big barrier (similar to what was found as a barrier in honors education). Other recommendations include redirecting funding to minority and high

poverty middle and high school students to improve middle/ high school resources and offer more college preparation (Farrell, 2004). This shows that scholarship programs at universities are not solely responsible to helping to increase access- changes will need to be made at the K-12 level as well. Working to improve K-12 education has been previously seen to increase access to honors education at the university level.

The Tennessee Merit Aid Program and the Georgia HOPE Program offer two different state merit scholarship programs. The Tennessee Merit Aid program includes a need-based component and has a more lenient criteria compared to many other state merit aid programs making it more accessible for low-income students. This program offers two separate ways for students to be eligible to earn a scholarship- either a 3.0 high school GPA *or* 19 ACT. This is the lowest standardized test score requirement out of all the state programs and having a GPA *or* test score qualification allows underrepresented students to be eligible in higher proportions (Ness, 2008). Making these state merit aid programs more accessible is important because merit aid awards play a large role in whether African American and low-income students decide whether or not to attend college (Ness, 2008).

The Georgia HOPE Program gives students a scholarship who earn a 3.0 GPA or higher in high school. They do not have a standardized test score requirement as a way for students to qualify. Unlike most other merit scholarships, the Georgia HOPE Program has improved the quality of K-12 education and reduced racial performance disparities by motivating students/parents to put more effort into schooling (Henry, 2002). The data for this scholarship indicates that African American students respond the most strongly to this program. However, further study needs to be done on why the HOPE program produces these positive effects for typically underrepresented groups. The HOPE program does allow students who qualify for a

Pell Grant to use the HOPE scholarship for tuition, fees, and books and still use federal aid for other expenses (Henry, 2002). This could contribute to the positive effects this program is having on underrepresented students attending college.

National Merit Scholarship

Some recipients of the National Merit Scholarship were interviewed to get a glimpse inside the lives of academically talented students. Kenneth (2020) found that there are critical similarities between the home and school environments of the students who receive the National Merit Scholarship. It was found that most of the students had siblings and were raised in a two-parent home where both parents were well-educated. Parents also had a low level of involvement in their child's academic success (creating independence), and they all engaged in numerous after school activities (Kenneth, 2020). The study highlighted four main conditions and three sub conditions that contributed to academic excellence. The main conditions were getting an early start, mentoring, deliberate practice, and motivation. The sub conditions are individual aptitude, school/learning, and environment. The article states that "Bloom's study revealed exceptional conditions, not exceptional kids, and his resounding conclusion was: What these extraordinary performers accomplished most anyone could accomplish given the right conditions of learning." (Kenneth, 2002). Limitations of this study include that the case studies were only done on six different National Merit Scholars: two white males, two white females, one male of Indian descent, and one Asian female.

Research Questions

This literature review has led to the following research questions.

1. Are merit programs accessible for low income/ rural students?

2. Are merit scholarship programs successfully communicating their program values?

3. What are merit scholarship programs currently doing to help increase accessibility?

Methods

Previous research completed with the Marian Drane Graham scholars' program showed current initiatives that have been put in place to help recruit and retain more diverse students in merit scholarship programs. However, these preinterviews did not reveal programs directors' thoughts on accessibility of merit scholarship programs, how programs are promoting themselves, and the values of the different full ride merit scholarship programs. To gain this insight, a new protocol was developed, and IRB approval was secured. Nine program directors from different institutions in North Carolina, Georgia, and Virginia were contacted. These institutions included large research universities, a small liberal arts college, and an HBCU. These program directors were chosen due to contacts given from the Marian Drane Scholars program and EC Scholars program director at East Carolina University. The program directors were contacted via email. Out of the nine program directors that were reached out to, six responded and were willing to do interviews. The interviews took place over the phone and each one lasted approximately one hour. The following questions were asked during the interviews:

1. How long have you been working in the field of merit-based/full ride scholarships?

2. What is your current role?

3. Do you believe merit-based scholarships are accessible for low income, minority and/or rural high school students?

4. Do you believe these students are applying to and receiving full ride merit-based scholarships reflective of the state/ national population?

5. How are most applicants/ recipients hearing about your scholarship programs?

6. How are programs promoting their programs?

7. Do you believe these types of university programs value a diverse population?

8. Are these values communicated effectively?

9. Are these values communicated intentionally?

10. Are you aware of initiatives at yours or other universities that have helped increase accessibility?

11. What is the feasibility of replicating these initiatives?

12. How can initiative effectiveness be measured?

13. Are there other areas you think could help with this issue?

14. What change would you like to see implemented in the next five years with the merit scholarship program you are with? What is something you are working towards?

15. It has been found that program level improvements, inclusive community building, course level improvements, holistic admissions, recruitment practice, and study abroad/cultural immersion can all help increase diversity in honors education. Does your program implement these? How so?

16. Fostering relationships with community partners is something else that helps with diverse honors recruitment, does your program foster these relationships? If so, how?

17. Do you think universities can do anything to help with the perceptions of merit programs formed during K-12? If so, what?

18. Do you have any questions for me?

Notes were taken during the interviews and were later transcribed after the interview had been conducted. Different students were also consulted and about how they heard about their respective merit scholarship program and what was most effective in helping encourage them to apply. The goal in this phase of research was to focus on potential barriers making merit

scholarship programs less accessible for low-income, rural, and students from underrepresented populations. It also helped consider the feasibility of replicating successful initiatives at other universities. Through an analysis of the interviews, five themes emerged. These themes were accessibility, influence of the K-12 experience, recruitment, belief systems, and current successful initiatives.

<div align="center">Findings</div>

These interviews revealed that the six themes identified in the literature review as key ways to recruit and retain diversity in honors colleges were items already being implemented in the majority of these merit programs. Program level improvements being implemented also include a summer enrichment and seminar series. The seminar series includes academic advancement, a community service project, preparation for post undergraduate life, and preparation for graduate school. Other programs don't have requirements, but the students are exposed to multiple opportunities and decide which ones they want to engage in. For example, a student is exposed to several extracurricular activities but is only expected to participate in at least one- the decision of which one is completely up to them. Inclusive community building is also implemented with faculty mentors being provided for the students and some having the students live in a living- learning community. Course- level improvements being used include first year seminar courses and required honors courses. These courses include finding solutions to wicked problems in the community, discussion about identity/ success, exploration of the city the students live in, and information about national/ international nonprofits. A more holistic admissions process has been implemented across programs as well allowing a wider range of students to be eligible to apply for these merit scholarships. The standardized testing requirement was removed this past year (mostly due to COVID). One school also looks at the student's

common application which gives them access to more information and provides more context for the student regarding family, high school, and background. Current students are also used to recruit at high schools- a recruitment practice previously shown to help recruit/ retain diversity. Most of the merit programs also have a required study abroad component which is critical because it pushes students outside of their comfort zones and allows them to immerse themselves in a completely different culture.

Accessibility

Most of the interviewees believed that merit scholarships were accessible for all students but there is not always an equal playing field for them when they are applying. The students applying to and receiving these full ride merit-based scholarships are not reflective of the state/ national population. However, the more immediate goal of these programs is to get the demographic of the scholarship program reflective of the demographic that can be found at the university. The demographics that seem to be missing the most are rural students, African Americans, Hispanics, and males- specifically African American males. Economically disadvantaged students are often overlooked because people don't want to talk about money. However, most of the time wealthy people have access to these scholarships regardless of race or ethnicity.

Influence of the K-12 Experience

High schools advertise different post-graduation opportunities for their students. Some high schools encourage community college and trade schools, while others advertise four-year universities and merit scholarship programs. The high school that students attend can have a large impact on the opportunities they are exposed to for higher education. The high school is also critical to look at for the merit scholarship programs that require a nomination to apply.

Often times students that would be competitive applicants for the scholarship are overlooked because high school counselors think that programs are looking for the cookie cutter student who looks perfect on paper. This is often not the case and prevents some merit programs (that require nominations) from receiving applications from students with more diverse backgrounds. One of the recommendations offered to help with the transition from high school to higher education involves universities getting in front of students as soon as possible (as soon as eighth grade but definitely by at least ninth grade). However, this is difficult for merit programs to do because they are more focused on the students already ready to apply. By the time students reach their junior year, it is more about hoping that the demographic you want to apply is there and qualified- and this isn't always enough. This leads to a bigger issue of there being some students who are competitive for the merit scholarship, and they never apply, but there is a larger number of students who face too many barriers before ever getting to that point.

Recruitment

When asked how most applicants/ recipients are hearing about merit scholarship programs it was stated that high school counselors, websites, social media, word or mouth, and general admissions people all played a role in this process. One of the more surprising recruitment practices that has been effective is utilizing the mailing system. Students seem to respond well to receiving a letter in the mail from merit scholarship programs despite being so plugged in to social media and online resources. Some programs believed that high school counselors are a big part of the puzzle while others believed that word of mouth played a larger role. Some of the ways schools are currently promoting their programs includes traveling around to recruit people, having listservs to send general information and timelines to students, do events with counselors, do joint recruitment efforts with other merit programs, and promoting the

university on social media. One strategy universities use it to have current students in the program travel back to their high school to help promote the program. Programs also make a specific emphasis to work closely with admissions to cover the state as broadly as possible. This means even going to counties where students typically don't apply from. It is important that in these recruitment efforts the programs are delivering a consistent message. Often times this message consist of their not being an ideal type of student that the programs are looking for but rather emphasizing the importance and value of having students of different backgrounds there to help improve the program.

Belief Systems

The program directors all expressed that their programs valued a diverse population. Schools utilize target marketing to reach certain demographics of people in different geographical regions and different marketing strategies are used in different areas in order to most effectively get the message across. It was also noted that often times merit scholarship programs reflect what is going on at a university wide level. If certain students don't feel welcomed at the university as a whole, then they aren't going to feel welcomed within the scholarship program either. This is why some directors work to promote "Hispanic day" or "multicultural day" at the university level. Most programs said, "what you enroll in your program should be similar to what you enroll at your university". The goal of most programs is to get their merit scholarship program reflective of the demographic seen at the university.

Current Successful Initiatives

Several universities have implemented new initiatives that have started to help recruit and retain diversity. One school has launched an initiative where current students in the scholarship program give feedback and constructive criticism to under resourced students applying to the

program. This initiative started in August of 2020 and was launched that October. It was created to help underserved students be more competitive for the top merit scholarship at the university but also to help students get into the university itself. The honor system was utilized when determining if a student was underserved or not. In order words, nobody was double checking to make sure the students who were submitting their essays for review fit the underserved criteria. It was assumed that people from better off areas most likely already have access to someone to edit their essays so they would not have a need for the service. They defined under-resourced applicants as including but not limited to "applicants who are first- generation, from low- income backgrounds, from rural areas, attend overpopulated schools, and/or who identify with marginalized populations." In its first year, 49 students utilized this tool. Out of the students who ended up applying 25 students were admitted to the school, 11 were enrolled, 3 were denied, and 3 were waitlisted. They also had one student successfully receive the top merit scholarship. This tool was created using google classroom making it accessible to students using a Chromebook. The student submitting the essay chooses the one editor they would like to review their essay. The options for editors were displayed in a PowerPoint with bios about each of them- allowing the applying students to pick the editor they felt like they could relate the most to.

Another program only uses the common application to admit students to their scholarship program so there isn't an extra step in the application process. This same program requires a virtual presentation, but every student must get feedback on their presentation before presenting it. They also pay for all expenses if the student makes it to the final round of interviews which eliminates a cost barrier, and they allow the student to still compete if they cannot make the interview process in person. The nomination process for this program was also eliminated (students became allowed to nominate themselves). The nomination process was scrapped for

several different reasons. One of them being the nominations the school was getting from high school counselors didn't end up being the students that the merit program was looking for. Each high school was also only allowed up to three nominations (depending on the school). This limited the number of students that were allowed to be considered for the program. Eliminating the nomination allowed everyone to start being considered for the program and high school counselors were okay with this because it gave them one less job.

One of the directors interviewed recently realigned their admissions strategies. If students qualified for the full ride merit scholarship at the school, then that student's application was flagged, and they were immediately sent an email asking if they wanted to apply to a scholarship. This one change helped triple their applicant pool for the scholarship this year. Not all these students ended up completing their application so the applicants that ended up being considered didn't quite triple.

Some other initiatives that have helped increase diversity within merit scholarship programs includes making sure the people reviewing applications are diverse, having a diverse faculty within the program, doing joint recruitment with other merit scholarship programs, and going to professional development training/ conferences to get ideas from similar programs. Bringing nationally recognized scholarship programs to campuses has also been shown to increase diversity. For example, the STAMPS program, Coca Cola scholarship, and Posse program are all programs that have helped increase diversity in college education. College advising CORPS is another effort that can help move the needle for some students. College advising CORPS is a program that is dedicated to increasing the number low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented high school students the attend and graduate college. One big successful recruitment strategy for many schools is using current diverse students to help recruit

other underrepresented students. This shows that the program values diversity rather than just saying it.

Discussion

Merit programs are currently implementing the majority of the successful practices used in honors colleges to recruit and retain diverse students. However, merit programs are still struggling to recruit diverse students. This shows that the successful strategies used to recruit diverse honors college students are not transferrable or all that needs to be done to recruit these students into full ride merit scholarship programs. This highlights the need for more research to be done specifically for merit programs on how to get more diverse students into their programs. In many cases, underrepresented students struggle to see the benefit of being a part of a universities' honor college, but this is not the case for full ride merit scholarship programs where the benefit is obvious- not having to pay for college. Though merit programs only encompass a small number of students, the impact they have is undeniable which is why focusing on increasing diversity within them is an important initiative. While programs directors of merit programs are thinking about diversity, the current lack of research of merit programs specifically shows that it isn't being considered on a large enough scale. Most of the research is centered specifically on increasing diversity in honors education but it is now known that these same practices are not the only limiting factors within merit programs.

The goal of getting merit scholarship programs to reflect the demographics seen at the university as a whole shows how much work there is still left to be done in creating an equitable education system. Higher education itself is very inequitable so the demographics seen at the university level is not reflective of the state or national population. The fact that merit programs are still more exclusive than the university shows how inaccessible they can be. To aim for merit

programs to be reflective of the university is a great first step but many more steps need to be taken for them to be truly equitable. Even the HBCU program director interviewed has a hard time recruiting African American males into their program. This shows that the issue isn't just within PWI's but in all entities of higher education. If patterns are seen across a whole demographic of people, then it tells more about the system than the people themselves. If all higher education institutions are struggling to recruit the same demographics, then that highlights the need to rework the education system in a way that supports everyone. The same people are getting excluded time and time again.

Only one program director talked specifically about how economically disadvantaged students need extra support. Most of the time wealthy people have access to these scholarships regardless of race or ethnicity. Income status of students is not something that is currently tracked within most merit programs, and it should be. A class can look diverse on paper but without more information on income status it is unknown if the backgrounds of the students are diverse as well. This can be detrimental for economically disadvantaged students because it is making a scholarship *look* accessible for a wide variety of people, but it could in fact only be accessible for people who look different, but all still have resources. More initiatives need to be put in place for reaching low-income students because they often have a different mindset that involves feeling guilty for receiving so much money and not believing they are good enough. This is an important topic that needs to be explored but can only be investigated once income status of current students is actually tracked.

Due to COVID, programs over the past year removed their standardized test score requirement (only relying on GPA) making the number of students eligible increase significantly. The diversity of these classes in comparison to other classes needs to be

investigated. The success and retention rates of the students recruited during the test-blind admissions process needs to be measured as well. It is currently too soon to be able to measure these aspects but that is something to track in the future. It is also important to note the removal of this testing requirement had mixed reviews among the program directors interviewed. Some believed that getting rid of the test score requirement was probably the biggest change that helped bring in a more diverse population of students. It increased diversity in the applicant pool which therefore increased diversity in everything else. While others believed that dropping the test score requirement increased the applicant pool by too much and made too many people eligible for the scholarship. This program director also believed that more of these students were underprepared and unable to maintain the requirements of the program.

The different recruitment practices used show that merit programs are aware that they need more diverse students in their programs. They wouldn't use targeted recruitment practices if it wasn't apparent that they needed more representation from different geographic locations and demographics. It is refreshing that some programs are already making an intentional effort to target students in areas where there typically are not many applicants or recipients. Word of mouth recruitment can be beneficial, but it is also a practice that raises several barriers. Privileged parents talk in the same circle while parents from a lower socioeconomic background are not in the same loop. The conversations between these groups of people are not the same which means that opportunities exposed to the different parents are not going to be the same as well. This is significant because often times information from family and friends will hold more weight than a random admissions person coming to the high school to speak. This is also why the domino effect plays a large role in recruitment. Once the first person from a high school receives the scholarship, others will often follow in the years to come. Often schools will use their current

students to go back to their high schools to recruit more applicants. This can be a big reason why there are multiple people from the same high school in a merit program together. However, getting the first person to become a recipient can be difficult and if some high schools never get a recipient, then this recruitment practice is just another way that some high students aren't receiving the same opportunities as others- simply because of the school they go to. The domino effect can also play a role in families as some merit scholarships see siblings within their programs.

Program directors all said they value a diverse population. However, often times the value of diversity is not coming from the donors because they are typically not a very diverse group themselves. The value of diversity is rather coming from the students and the public eye. Programs can say they value diversity, but it can be unclear where this is coming from (the university or other political influences). A program can say they value diversity, but it is important to be able to identify *why* they value it. Also, while programs say they value diversity, it is a whole other question to think about if these values are communicated effectively and intentionally. If a program website states that they value a student who is heavily involved in community service (which most do say) then this is already eliminating a large group of people from thinking they would be competitive to apply. It is hard to do community service when one lives in the community that is being serviced. Making simple changes to language used on websites is one easy way to help encourage more diverse students to apply. For example, it can be listed that a student heavily involved in service is valued but it should also be included that work experiences, being a caretaker, etc. are just as valuable experiences. Some websites already do this, but others don't, and it is an easy, cost-effective way to make a program more inclusive.

The PURA initiative is an important initiative because a big barrier for underserved students is lack of resources. This initiative helps provide support and assistance to students who would otherwise not be receiving it from anywhere else. The essays are often heavily weighted on most college admittance rubrics so not having someone to go to for editing/ feedback can be a big barrier. This can especially be seen with first generation college students or students who don't come from English speaking homes. Even feedback as simple as grammar suggestions can go a long way in elevating an application essay. Two of the important aspects of this program are that it is a completely student run program and it does not cost any money to implement. This means that it is not needed to hire additional faculty members to help implement this and it is not a program that is only feasible to be implemented in some of the more well-funded merit scholarship programs. Any program has the ability to implement it if they put the time in to do so.

Using the Common Application allows all students who are eligible for the merit scholarship to be considered because it eliminates the extra steps that typically need to be taken to apply (additional essays, videos, etc.). The Common Application asks for information about the students' background like their parent's education level, siblings, what high school they attended, and more. These details give context about the student that wouldn't be revealed on other merit scholarship applications that are separate from the Common Application. Context about the student is extremely important because it allows a student to be fought for that may have less extracurriculars, but their background makes what they do have just as impressive if not more impressive than a student who may have more credentials. Requiring everyone to get feedback on their presentation helps level out the playing field for students who have never done a presentation like the one they are doing before. The most important aspect of all of the current

successful initiatives found during this interview is that none of them were initiatives that required additional money to implement. They are all cost-effective and subtle changs that have led to increased diversity and accessibility within programs. All they required were people willing to take the time to create some minor changes within the admissions process. This information will hopefully encourage implementation of programming leading to tangible change and access within programs.

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

More research needs to be done on how to recruit and retain diversity in merit scholarship programs. The themes found to recruit and retain diversity in honors education are already being applied in most of these merit scholarship programs (have classes that work on social justice issues, have professional development opportunities and mentoring, are working towards a more holistic admissions process, and offer study abroad). However, merit scholarship programs are still struggling to recruit/retain diversity, so this means aspects outside of these themes are contributing this issue. Communicating with students directly to ask about their perceptions of merit scholarship programs, barriers in the application process, and why they decided to apply (or not apply) to merit scholarship programs would be a great first step to start investigating this.

Getting the demographics of students within the merit programs to match the demographics of students at the university is a great first step. However, it can't stop there. Once this goal is reached, people in higher education need to look at how to get the demographics of merit programs (and the university population) reflective of the state and national population. Another important data point that needs to be collected is the income status of students. The income status of students isn't something that is currently tracked so there isn't as much data on this in comparison to race, ethnicity, and geographic location of students. This income status of

students is necessary to investigate because it will allow the question of "are merit scholarships accessible for low-income students?" to be answered better.

The impact of not using standardized test scores in the admissions process also needs to be tracked as the students admitted during these years start to matriculate through their undergraduate experience. The diversity, success, and retention rates of these classes needs to be investigated in comparison to their peers who had to use standardized test scores during the application process. The use of target marketing and word of mouth approaches are successful recruitment practices to help bring in diverse students. However, word-of-mouth can also create barriers because it is keeping opportunities (like merit scholarship programs) within the same circles of people. While target marketing works to extend outside of these circles', information coming from family or friends is going to hold more weight than a random admissions person coming to speak at a high school.

Program directors all value a diverse population but these values are not always translated effectively to school websites and other recruitment materials. Creating more inclusive language when talking about these scholarships could go a long way in recruiting a more diverse class. Other initiatives like the PURA initiative, flagging applications, using the Common Application, using a self-nomination process, etc. are current initiatives that are being used that have been successful in helping to recruit a more diverse class. These initiatives are all cost-effective and feasible for other programs to implement if the time is willing to be put in to start them.

Limitations of the study includes only being able to interview directors from six different institutions. The time the interviews were conducted was the same time as most merit programs were in the middle of their selection process (around January/February). This made it harder to

reach and find time to get an interview from a wide variety of schools. If done again, it would be better to conduct the interviews during a different time of year as this would most likely yield a higher response rate. Most of these interviews were also done with program directors from institutions in North Carolina. To see a more diverse perspective, it would be beneficial to interview more out of state schools, along with schools in different regions of the United States.

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