

**NCHC AD HOC COMMITTEE TO INVESTIGATE COMPLAINTS  
ABOUT AMERICAN HONORS AND QUAD LEARNING, INC.**

**June 22, 2017**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In January of 2017, the President of the National Collegiate Honors Council, Art Spisak, formed an ad hoc committee to investigate complaints about the for-profit company, American Honors/Quad Learning, Inc. (hereafter referred to as American Honors).<sup>1</sup> The committee is comprised of co-chairs Drs. Rae Rosenthal (The Community College of Baltimore County) and James Buss (Salisbury University), as well as members Andrew Cognard-Black (St. Mary's College of Maryland) and Elaine Torda (SUNY Orange County Community College). After five months of interviews and additional research, the committee has reached the following points of consensus.

American Honors offers benefits similar to those offered at most two-year honors programs in that:

1. Faculty on American Honors campuses are engaged in course design, the creation of learning outcomes, and the development of honors programs.
2. Students receive one-on-one advising that seems to aid in their success in applying to four-year schools.
3. American Honors fills a need at two-year institutions where honors programs do not already exist and where institutions lack financial or other resources to build honors programs on their own.
4. Some American Honors students are finding success in the transfer process.

American Honors raised several areas of concern with the committee in that:

1. The design of American Honors courses does not seem to engage national standards and characteristics for honors education, nor do American Honors courses appear to be viewed differently than non-American Honors sections on campuses where American Honors operates.
2. American Honors requires students to pay significantly higher differential tuition and fees and encourages institutions to establish differential tuition models so that students can use federal Pell Grant money to pay for the higher costs.
3. Up until December of 2016, shortly after an article about American Honors appeared in the *Spokesman-Review* newspaper in Spokane (WA), the American Honors website referred to approximately 20 four-year institutions as "assured" transfer admission partners in their transfer network, despite the fact that we found no MOUs that included language of assurance, and despite the fact that some high ranking officials in academic affairs at some of the four-year institutions reported having no affiliations with, or even knowledge of, American Honors.
4. The American Honors website is misleading to students and other visitors about the transfer access to partner institutions, in regards to cost, transfer networks, and university partners.
5. American Honors partner agreements with four-year institutions are inconsistent, opaque, and sometimes non-binding.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nchchonors.org/resources/newsletter/~post/news-from-nchc-january-2017-20170117>

6. Materials used by American Honors to attract students and potential partner institutions, as well as the use of the “.org” domain to house their web presence, obfuscate the fact that American Honors/Quad Learning is a for-profit company.
7. Many practices and claims made by American Honors seem entirely unrelated to its stated mission that American Honors is “designed to affordably serve students of high motivation.” Most significantly, American Honors uses its successes at recruiting international students to attract partnerships.
8. American Honors claims to save students money, but the majority of students who join honors programs at the nearly 200 NCHC member two-year colleges where they are available outside of the American Honors network do so with no additional fees. Moreover, many students who attend two-year honors programs outside of the American Honors network receive honors-specific scholarships that reduce the cost of attendance below the standard rate for tuition and fees.

## **EXPLANATION OF FINDINGS AND REPORT ON PROGRESS**

The following report details the points of consensus and describes what research aided the committee in reaching their conclusions. The committee drew information from a wide range of sources, including: (1) newspaper reports about American Honors available to the public, (2) documents related to a complaint filed with the Consumer Protection Division in the State of Washington, (3) interviews with officials from two-year and four-year institutions involved (or previously involved) with American Honors, (4) MOU agreements provided by American Honors and partner institutions, (5) American Honors PowerPoint and other marketing materials used to recruit potential institutional partners, (6) data about transfer success provided by American Honors, (7) snapshots of the American Honors website taken over the previous year to document changes, (8) miscellaneous other online articles, press releases, or university publications, (9) an interview with the Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs at American Honors, and (10) preliminary findings from a three-year research project on American Honors funded by the Gates Foundation and undertaken by the Community College Research Center at the Columbia University Teachers College.

## **PROCESS**

Beginning in January of 2017, the committee assembled a list of concerns drawn from communication with NCHC members, recent reports about American Honors in newspapers, and a complaint filed with the Consumer Protection Division in the State of Washington. This list of complaints and concerns was shared with the NCHC Board of Directors for their approval during the February 2017 board meeting (Appendix A). Once approved, the committee developed a series of questions for two- and four-year institutions identified on the American Honors website as participants in their community college and transfer networks (Appendix B). Questions were then sent by e-mail to the chief academic officers at each of the nine community college participants then in the American Honors program (one has since withdrawn as a member of the American Honors network) as well 32 (approximately a 50 percent sample) of the roughly three score four-year degree institutions identified on the American Honors website as partners in their transfer network (Appendix C). Nearly two dozen representatives from American Honors network institutions responded to e-mail inquiries, and in some cases recipients invited additional phone follow-up conversations. Following e-mail responses and interviews with most of the two-year programs in the American Honors network and more than two dozen four-year institutions, the committee developed questions for the Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs at American Honors (Appendix D). After conducting extensive interviews and collecting documents from all of these sources, the committee felt comfortable issuing the initial points of consensus articulated in the executive summary and explained in further detail below.

## EXPLANATION OF FINDINGS

### BENEFITS OF AMERICAN HONORS

The committee discovered several positive aspects about American Honors programs at two-year institutions and commends faculty and staff at those institutions for working to develop student-centered learning experiences for American Honors students. The committee also recognizes the added benefit of having American Honors advisors work alongside students in preparing them for transferring to four-year institutions. The committee further finds that students both perceive that American Honors advising aids in their success rate in applying to four-year schools and has tangible benefits in preparing students for four-year programs. This is most prevalent where the American Honors programs have direct links to in-state institutions that have long histories of recruiting students from two-year colleges.

American Honors offers benefits similar to those offered at most two-year honors programs in that:

**“Faculty on American Honors campuses are engaged in course design, the creation of learning outcomes, and the development of honors programs.”**

Our conversation with the Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs about the creation and administration of American Honors programs at two-year institutions made clear that American Honors works with two-year institutions and their faculty members in developing honors programs on their campuses. This follows best practices and fulfills some of the basic characteristics of honors programs, as established by NCHC. In particular, American Honors works with two-year institutions to encourage proper leadership positions for honors program heads. Interviews with two-year programs supported these claims.

**“Students receive one-on-one advising that seems to aid in their success in applying to four-year schools”**

Testimonials from American Honors students on the American Honors webpage (and online video interviews with American Honors students), as well as initial data collected and reported by the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at the Teachers College at Columbia University support this statement. In a March 2017 presentation, researchers from the CCRC stated that American Honors students reported that American Honors advisors were more available than non-American Honors advisors and that students perceived that they gained more “transfer knowledge” than non-American Honors students.<sup>2</sup> While these studies merely measured student perception, they provide initial indications that American Honors advising provides some advantages to the alternative on campuses where American Honors has established programs. According to interviews with representatives from American Honors and the administrators at two-year schools where American Honors operates, the advising counselors work on two-year campuses and work alongside local advisors to aid students in preparing to transfer to four-year institutions.

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<sup>2</sup> According to a report of findings from a survey conducted by the Community College Research Center, 89 percent of American Honors students reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that American Honors advisors were available for them to discuss transfer options, as opposed to 61 percent of non-American Honors students who reported the same for non-American Honors advisors. Likewise, American Honors students perceived that their knowledge of the transfer process had been aided by their meetings with advisors more so than non-American Honors students (90% of AH students agreed or strongly agreed, while only 49% of non-AH students answered the same). Shanna Smith Jaggars, Negar Farakish, Markeisha Grant, and Maggie Fay, “American Honors Evaluation Study: Early Findings” (Presented at the annual conference of The League for Innovation in the Community College, San Francisco, March 13, 2017). Provided to committee by authors.

**“American Honors fills a need at two-year institutions where honors programs do not already exist and where institutions lack financial or other resources to build honors programs on their own.”**

For two-year institutions that did not have existing honors programs, American Honors has been able to help begin to develop honors education on those campuses. In some of these cases, representatives at the institutions reported that they did not have resources to offer additional advising or personalized instruction within the existing budgetary constraints. American Honors provides an alternative to those institutions by helping to establish a differential tuition model in which individual students pay for the added costs of honors education.

**“Some American Honors students are finding success in the transfer process.”**

Anecdotal student testimonials posted online by American Honors credit American Honors and its advisors with aiding students in completing successful transfer applications. According to the American Honors website, their own internal surveys indicate that 91 percent of American Honors applicants were admitted to four-year institutions and 68 percent were admitted to their “dream school.”<sup>3</sup> No methodological detail is provided online regarding the response rates or the numbers of responses for these surveys, and so it is difficult to evaluate the accuracy of these claims. However, the Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs at American Honors did provide detailed information about where their students have received admission. Since 2014, American Honors students have received 962 acceptances from 286 different four-year institutions.<sup>4</sup>

The American Honors network has seen the most success in one state: Indiana. With more than 200,000 total students, Ivy Tech Community College is the largest singly accredited statewide community college system in the country and is the community college system in the State of Indiana. American Honors has launched honors programs at several Ivy Tech campuses. Students who attended these programs had success in transferring to other Indiana four-year universities. In fact, ten of the sixty-four institutions listed in the American Honors network are in the state of Indiana. Of the 133 acceptance letters that American Honors students have received from schools within the American Honors network, 25 percent have been from schools in the state of Indiana.<sup>5</sup> Outside of the network, students received 88 letters of acceptance from ten additional schools in the state of Indiana. It’s clear that in such a closed network of state community colleges and partnerships with Indiana universities, students have been successful in transferring to four-year institutions.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://americanhonors.org/content/program-overview>

<sup>4</sup> Data provided by the office of the Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs at American Honors, via e-mail to Jim Buss on May 11, 2017. The data were organized by transfer institution rather than by student, so it is impossible to determine from those data precisely how many students have transferred on to four-year institutions or the number of schools to which the average student is accepted or to which university the student ultimately transferred. It is possible, however, to identify which schools in their transfer network have accepted any American Honors students, and how many American Honors students have been admitted to those schools.

<sup>5</sup> Of the sixty-four universities named in the American Honors network, the following are in the state of Indiana: Calumet College of St. Joseph, DePauw University, Hanover College, Holy Cross at Notre Dame, Indiana Tech, Marian University, Purdue University, Taylor University, Trine University, and Valparaiso University. Since 2014, students have received 45 letters of admission to these schools as compared to 180 letters of admissions to all schools within the American Honors network. Admissions data gleaned from *ibid*.

## CONCERNS OF THE AD HOC COMMITTEE

American Honors raised several areas of concern with the committee in that:

**“The design of American Honors courses does not seem to engage national standards and characteristics for honors education, nor do American Honors courses appear to be viewed differently than non-American Honors sections on campuses where American Honors operates.”**

This statement is not meant to reflect upon the faculty members at the American Honors campuses; rather, it addresses the claims by American Honors to engage in best practices without actually consulting national educational networks that establish best practices in honors education. In the earliest years of American Honors (2012–2013), representatives from American Honors claimed that American Honors faculty members would have opportunities to teach courses from home, or even deliver courses to international students in China.<sup>6</sup> Much of this language had little to do with national discussions about honors education, particularly as the National Collegiate Honors Council began developing definitions for honors education and suggested honors learning outcomes. Instead, American Honors emphasized the use of the Quad Learning “AH Virtual Campus” as a means of facilitating classes.

American Honors includes proposed learning outcomes as part of “American Honors Program Guide.” These include the following categories: Effective Communication and Collaboration, Critical Thinking, Knowledge Application, Global Awareness and Cultural Sensitivity, and Self-Awareness.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, on the Help Desk site for American Honors faculty members related to “Pedagogy Techniques and Best Practices,” only one link out of more than 30 includes any information about honors education. Most of the links are about general best practices in higher education rather than research conducted about best practices in honors education.<sup>8</sup>

According to surveys administered by researcher from the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at the Teachers College at Columbia University, 81 percent of American Honors students believed that their American Honors courses emphasized and enhanced their critical thinking skills, but this number is so close as to be statistically indistinguishable from the 80 percent of non-American Honors students who reported the same about their non-American Honors courses. In that same study, 83 percent of American Honors students believed that their American Honors teachers were supportive, compared to 79 percent of non-American Honors students who reported the same about non-American Honors professors. An equal proportion of American Honors and non-American Honors students perceived that their classes were challenging (78% for both groups), but more non-American Honors students found their non-American Honors classes engaging (85%) than American Honors students who reported for their American Honors classes (82%).<sup>9</sup>

While slightly higher percentages among American Honors students reported stronger agreement to questions about challenging and engaging coursework, promotion of critical thinking, and supportive teachers, no tests of significance are provided, nor is there sufficient detail provided to conduct those test independently. However, the differences generally are so small so as to be meaningless even if they chance to be statistically significant. The CCRC report provides some limited evidence from student narrative data that the experience of American Honors classes is qualitatively different, but the

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<sup>6</sup> American Honors, “Delta College Presentation (PowerPoint),” November 18, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> <https://americanhonors.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/205768085-What-is-Honors->

<sup>8</sup> <https://americanhonors.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/categories/200377065-Pedagogy-Techniques-Best-Practices>

<sup>9</sup> These percentages include students who answered “agree” and “strongly agree” for each of these questions. Shanna Smith Jaggars, Negar Farakish, Markeisha Grant, and Maggie Fay, “American Honors Evaluation Study: Early Findings (Presented at the annual conference of The League for Innovation in the Community College, San Francisco, March 13, 2017). Provided to committee by authors.

quantitative summaries from the preliminary findings raise serious questions about whether American Honors is providing meaningful curricular or experiential benefits outside of advising and assistance through the process of transfer application.<sup>10</sup>

**“American Honors requires students to pay significantly higher differential tuition and fees and encourages institutions to establish differential tuition models so that students can use federal Pell Grant money to pay for the higher costs.”**

The Community College Research Center reports that students typically pay approximately 50 percent above and beyond typical tuition and fees for the community college where they enroll.<sup>11</sup> At least one two-year American Honors program hopes that the added tuition and fees provided by their revenue sharing agreement with American Honors will enable the honors programs to generate “enough revenue to offset the costs of the program.” Consequently, students in the American Honors programs are often asked to shoulder the financial burden of their enhanced honors education.

**“Up until December of 2016, shortly after an article about American Honors appeared in the *Spokesman-Review* newspaper in Spokane (WA), the American Honors website referred to approximately 20 four-year institutions as “assured” transfer admission partners in their transfer network, despite the fact that we found no MOUs that included language of assurance, and despite the fact that some high ranking officials in academic affairs at some of the four-year institutions reported having no affiliations with, or even knowledge of, American Honors.”**

One of the most disturbing things that we encountered is the way in which American Honors market to potential students and institutions; much of that marketing appears to us to mislead consumers in overstating their relationship with four-year institutional partners. Prior to December of 2016, American Honors used the terminology of “assured” transfer admission for many of their four-year institution their transfer network. While that language has been scrubbed from their website, there are still digital shadows of that usage that persist until today, including the Quad Learning Wikipedia entry, which appears to have been curated by Jared Thomas Meyer, a freelance “content strategist” also responsible for preparing the American Honors Style Guide as well as several of the American Honors viewbooks used at their community college partner schools. We found no evidence of any such transfer assurances for American Honors student in any of our communication with four-year partner schools. For some institutions, the transfer admission standards for American Honors students and non-American Honors students was identical, meaning that American Honors students were given no preference over other transfer students. More disingenuously, prior to December 2016, the American Honors website listed institutions with which, according to officials at those schools, it had no affiliation or transfer agreement.<sup>12</sup>

**“The American Honors website is misleading to students and other visitors about the transfer access to partner institutions, in regards to cost, transfer networks, and university partners.”**

American Honors continues to obscure details about its partnerships with four-year institutions to the extent that some institutions are still unaware that their logos and institution names are being used to recruit students on behalf of American Honors. The Academic Operations Officer at Smith College

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> See Complaint Case #4992436, Seattle-Consumer Protection Division. In addition, the committee contacted the Washington state Attorney General’s Office, who provided additional insights into its interviews with four-year institutions that had raised concerns about their logos and names being used by American Honors. These institutions included UCLA and Louisiana State University—both of which have been subsequently removed from the American Honors website.

responded to our inquiry with this statement, “Our Admission Office . . . advises us that Smith College has no affiliation with American Honors, and is not interested in pursuing one at this time.” As of June 1, 2017, Smith College was still listed as an “Affiliate Partner” on the American Honors website and named as an “Affiliate Partner” in documents provided to the committee by representatives of American Honors. According to those documents, Smith College offers a fee waiver to American Honors students, despite the Office of the Provost and the Admissions Office at Smith College denying any relationship exists.

According to American Honors’ own records, their success in placing students at partner institutions is quite poor. According to records provided to the committee by American Honors, American Honors students have received 962 acceptances to 286 different institutions since 2014. However, only 184 (or 19%) of these acceptances were to institutions in the highly advertised “American Honors Network.” Of the 66 four-year institutions named in the American Honors Network, students have not received admissions from some of the most notable. No students have reported being accepted to Amherst College, Claremont McKenna College, Denison University, Duke University, Georgetown University, Massachusetts Institute for Technology, Middlebury College, Occidental College, the University of Mississippi, or Wellesley College. In fact, 28 of the 66 (42%) institutions listed on the American Honors website as part of their transfer network have admitted no (zero) students from American Honors programs, according to the documents provided to the committee by American Honors. This is consistent with reports of few or no American Honors students transferring that we heard from several representatives from academic affairs and/or admissions at the sample of four-year schools that we contacted.

Representatives at the Cornell University College of Agricultural and Life Sciences told us that they have discontinued their affiliation with American Honors because they felt that the American Honors website “was misleading about assurances of admission.”<sup>13</sup> In addition, their admissions office reported fielding complaints from families who were getting the “hard sell” from American Honors to join or their children wouldn’t have a chance at being admitted to schools like Cornell. Ultimately, according to the CALS representative with whom we spoke, no American Honors students transferred to Cornell University College of Agricultural and Life Sciences because those students that had applied did not have the preparation they needed to be successful in the programs to which they applied.

American Honors claims that it, “is the only global honors program at 2-year colleges with a national transfer network. Top 4-year colleges and universities make special arrangements that ease the transfer process for qualified American Honors students,” yet four-year partners told us again and again that a student’s participation in American Honors provided them no special consideration at the time of admission. For example, New York University is listed as a “member institution” on the American Honors webpage, yet officials at NYU were quick to point out to us, “The agreement is basically an articulation agreement. As such, it is to allow students a more clear pathway to earn a B.A. degree. What American Honors offers the students (and this is certainly not exclusive to them) is college counseling, a close connection to us so that we can help them better understand who is best suited for NYU and the articulation agreement that gives students the pathway to continuing their education.” As such, students through American Honors are required to meet the same requirements as any other transfer student entering the university.

**“American Honors partner agreements with four-year institutions are inconsistent, opaque, and sometimes non-binding.”**

American Honors does not fully articulate the details of these agreements online. While they have discontinued the language of “assured” admission since December 2016, the new terminology of “Member” and “Affiliate” is still confusing. What can be gleaned from the website does not fully explain

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<sup>13</sup> <https://americanhonors.org/transfer-network/our-4-year-transfer-network>

the details of these agreements. For example, according to the American Honors website, New York University is a “Member” institution. As stated above, administrators at NYU told us that this did not provide American Honors students with any special treatment in the admissions process. Moreover, the agreement between NYU and American Honors is limited to articulation within the NYU School of Arts and Sciences, thus limiting students who might be interested in their schools of business, nursing, dentistry, social work, education, engineering, or the performing arts. None of this is made clear on the American Honors website. In fact, American Honors violates one of the basic principles in its agreement with NYU. According to the agreement shared with us by representatives from NYU, “American Honors will work with the University to create a web page within the American Honors site that highlights the key features that make the University attractive to transfer students. This page will include a link to the University’s web landing page for prospective transfer applicants.” In what appears like an intentional act in defiance of existing MOUs, the American Honors website does not link to ANY web pages at the four-year institutions that they identify in their transfer network. Similar language for internal and external websites can be found in the agreement between American Honors and the University of Rochester. We find these omissions curious.

Other partner agreements are non-binding, do not exist in writing, or are so insignificant that they don’t really merit the label of partnership. For example, Swarthmore University officials informed us, “We are ‘partners’ in that we can say that we will accept and consider applicants who are affiliated with American Honors programs, but we have no formal articulation agreement with them or any other two-year college.” Massachusetts Institute of Technology admits only 25–30 total transfer students per year, which is clearly not explained on the American Honors website. Their agreement with American Honors merely waives the application fee and promises that the university “make a good faith effort to ensure that receive credit as appropriate.”

Because the details of the transfer agreements are unclear (whether intentional or not), it fails one of the basic characteristics of an honors program as established by NCHC: “A clearly articulated set of admission criteria (e.g., GPA, SAT score, a written essay, satisfactory progress, etc.) identifies the targeted student population served by the honors program. The program clearly specifies the requirements needed for retention and satisfactory completion.” Nowhere does American Honors clearly articulate admission standards for entering students. In fact, links on the website that promise more information simply lead back to the form to apply for American Honors. Nowhere does the website specify the requirements to stay in the honors program nor the specific requirements to be admitted to four-year partners. While such information may be available to students once they are admitted and pay into the program, the lack of transparency likely encourages students to be dependent on the advising that appears to be the singular benefit of participation in the program.

While some of this information can be discovered after contacting an admissions officer, best practices clearly favor having the information posted in a public manner. The Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs at American Honors reported in a phone conversation with the Ad Hoc Committee that the marketing teams of American Honors operate independently from those individuals participating in the academic programming for American Honors. This might explain why the marketing and advertising for American Honors appears disingenuous and misleading, while conversations with academic faculty and administrators of programs seem otherwise.

**“Materials used by American Honors to attract students and potential partner institutions, as well as the use of the “.org” domain to house their web presence, obfuscate the fact that American Honors/Quad Learning is a for-profit company.”**

The American Honors website and marketing materials do not clearly indicate that American Honors and Quad Learning are for-profit enterprises. In fact, a visitor to the website needs to dig pretty deep to find



references to American Honors as for-profit.<sup>14</sup> In fact, several of the four-year transfer network institutions with whom we spoke as part of our research were unaware that American Honors was a for-profit enterprise (and some explicitly said that they had been operating with the belief that American Honors was a nonprofit organization).

**“Many practices and claims made by American Honors seem entirely unrelated to its stated mission that American Honors is ‘designed to affordably serve students of high motivation.’ Most significantly, American Honors uses its successes at recruiting international students to attract partnerships.”**

According to their website, “American Honors is a 2-year honors program offered through the collaboration of Quad Learning and leading community colleges. It is designed to affordably serve students of high motivation and ability for the first two years of their college education.”<sup>15</sup> In recruiting students and community college partners, American Honors emphasizes the reduced cost of its programs, although it provides no data to support these claims. Furthermore, they obscure the validity of the claim by omitting any point of reference that would make it possible to make that comparison. In fact, it is difficult to ascertain whether American Honors numbers are comparable to other institutions. First, many two-year and four-year honors programs and colleges offer automatic scholarships to incoming students which means that published tuition and fee schedules overstate the true costs of attendance. Regardless of whether American Honors students pay less for their baccalaureate degrees compared with students pursuing degrees at a four-year college or university, American Honors uses its success at recruiting international students to attract institutional support and partnerships.<sup>16</sup>

In several interviews between the committee and four-year institutions, university administrators stated that American Honors promised to help them recruit more international students. In a 2013 PowerPoint circulated among possible partner institutions, American Honors claimed that one-third of its student recruits would eventually be international students. In that direction, American Honors has launched two programs, “American Honors High School” and “American Success.” According to the American Honors website, “for international students who need additional academic and/or English support, American Success provides the supplemental preparation to ensure successful transfer to a US university. American Success is a two-year college program where students earn an associate degree and prepare to transfer to a US university for their junior and senior years to complete a bachelor's degree.”<sup>17</sup> American Honors admits on its website that the financial savings at the core of its purported mission does not apply to international students. In a disclaimer at the bottom of the homepage, American Honors states, “References to savings percentages are based on recent American Honors in-county program tuition and fees compared to average public 4-year in-state tuition, fees, room and board. Assumes two years at community college in American Honors and two years at a public 4-year in-state institution. Not applicable for international students.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> One reference could be found buried in a FAQ sheet under the About Us—For Educators tab of the website ([https://ahc-assets-website-wsp.s3.amazonaws.com/AmericanHonors\\_FAQ%20August%202015.pdf](https://ahc-assets-website-wsp.s3.amazonaws.com/AmericanHonors_FAQ%20August%202015.pdf)). Even here, the answer to a “Frequently Asked Question” about the for-profit status of American Honors is not fully answered. “American Honors is a for-profit company. Is a public-private partnership appropriate for an academic institution?” American Honors has an innovative business model that is also a social mission: helping more students afford, prepare for, and attain a 4-year degree. Success is predicated on building a trusting relationship with not for profit schools and aligning their needs with American Honors’ goals.

<sup>15</sup> The mission is posted at the bottom of the main page at <https://americanhonors.org>

<sup>16</sup> Researchers with the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at the Teachers College at Columbia University discovered a similar perception, as they noted that “revenue increase from international recruits” was one of the benefits perceived by administrators. Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> <https://americanhonors.org/international#additional>

<sup>18</sup> <https://americanhonors.org>

Moreover, American Honors uses dubious statistics in recruiting international students. In its handbook for potential international students, American Honors claims that the “Typical US University” has more than 200 students in “entry level class[es]” and that typical faculty interaction is “Limited; mostly one-way lecturing.” Moreover, American Honors claims that the “Typical US University” advisor ratio is 300 students to 1 advisor.<sup>19</sup> These claims are made with no source citation nor supporting documentation. In fact, they seem incredibly hyperbolic. Although advertised concurrently with the American Honors program, it is unclear how the American Success program is related to honors education.

In order for an international student to be admitted to American Success, students need merely to have completed year 12 of school and attain a 2.0 GPA. With such low admissions standards, it is hard to see how the campaign to recruit students from abroad is anything more than an unscrupulous way to bring in more revenue by enrolling students charged at higher rates. Given the unimpressive numbers revealed in the CCRC report about student experience with American Honors courses vis-à-vis non-American Honors courses, we are left wondering whether Quad Learning and its American Honors branded programming will provide the additional resources necessary to help those students be successful once they arrive to the United States from abroad.

**“American Honors claims to save students money, but the majority of students who join honors programs at the nearly 200 NCHC member two-year colleges where they are available outside of the American Honors network do so with no additional fees. Moreover, many students who attend two-year honors programs outside of the American Honors network receive honors-specific scholarships that reduce the cost of attendance below the standard rate for tuition and fees.”**

While program cost information is provided on the American Honors website, differences in nomenclature and fee categories, variation in cost structure, and differences in actual cost from two-year partner to two-year partner obscure precise cost comparisons, averaging, and the like. While costs for institutions and students are not immediately transparent from the American Honors website, from what we have been able to determine from our conversations with representatives at the American Honors two-year college network, from several online sources, and by comparing data on cost of attendance from the U.S. Department of Education Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System with cost information posted on the American Honors website, the cost per student of the American Honors program typically is not less than \$1,000 per year, and probably is closer to \$1,500–\$2,000 per year. Consistent with these figures, the Community College Research Center reports that the standard American Honors financial model is such that students pay about 150 percent of standard tuition and fees at their respective institutions.<sup>20</sup> While a number of the two-year college partners were enthusiastic about their arrangement with American Honors, some of that enthusiasm seemed to derive from the fact that those costs are borne largely or entirely by students.

While American Honors has set up a charitable foundation (The American Honors Foundation) with the stated purpose of providing scholarships for American Honors students, they reported giving out just over \$51,000 in scholarships in 2015.<sup>21</sup> We do not know precisely how many students there are in American Honors or how scholarship money may have been distributed across those many students. However, to put some context with these numbers, if there were, say, 250 students participating in American Honors in

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<sup>19</sup> “American Honors: Prepare for a Leading US University,” page 17: <http://go.americanhonors.com/rs/519-TZQ-838/images/American%20Honors%20-%202017%20View%20Book%20DIGITAL%20Dec%2019%202016.pdf> (accessed June 1, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> Shanna Smith Jaggers, Negar Farakish, Markeisha Grant, and Maggie Fay, “American Honors Evaluation Study: Early Findings (Presented at the annual conference of The League for Innovation in the Community College, San Francisco, March 13, 2017).

<sup>21</sup> The American Honors Foundation IRS 990 Forms for reporting of nonprofit finances are available online at [Publica.org](http://Publica.org).

2015, that scholarship money would have averaged out to \$204 per student. While it is possible that smaller numbers of students were given larger scholarships, it seems likely that most American Honors students are still paying substantial sums to claim their status as honors students.

This probability is in stark contrast to students who participate in the nearly 200 NCHC member honors programs at community colleges operating outside of the American Honors network. According to data from the 2016 NCHC *Census of Honors Programs and Colleges*, the vast majority of students at other community colleges pay nothing to participate in honors programs. Of the 97 associate's degree (i.e., community, technical, and other two-year degree focus colleges) institutions responding to a Census item asking about additional fees to participate in honors (only 2 of the 99 associate's degree colleges did not respond to this item), 94 reported that their honors students pay no (zero) additional fees above and beyond regular tuition and fees required to enroll at their institution. In other words, 97 percent (plus or minus a small margin of error) of two-year degree institutions charge their honors students nothing more than they would pay already to go to college. Of the small number that do charge additional fees, those fees average only \$125 per year—roughly one-tenth of the most conservative estimates of what students pay to participate in the American Honors programs. In this context, the American Honors financial model is both very unusual and very costly for students.

## APPENDIX A

### Complaints about American Honors and Quad Learning, Inc.

In the winter of 2016, the National Collegiate Honors Council created an ad hoc committee with the following charge: *“Investigate circumstances surrounding complaints against NCHC member American Honors/Quad Learning, Inc. with the purpose of informing the NCHC Board of Directors on whether American Honors/Quad Learning is following practices suitable and approved for honors education. Also, if necessary, draft a public statement that makes clear those relevant best practices in honors education.”*

The ad hoc committee has compiled a list of complaints derived from a variety of sources, including, but not limited to, 1) a formal complaint against American Honors/Quad Learning, Inc. (hereafter referenced as American Honors) filed in the state of Washington, 2) the statements of NCHC members raised at the annual meetings, 3) news reports about American Honors, and 4) statements made to members of the ad hoc committee by colleagues in honors education. The ad hoc committee seeks to file a formal report with the Board of Directors once an investigation and fair assessment of the evidence can be concluded. The following are a list of complaints:

1. Some of the American Honors claims are hyperbolic, such as the claim that they it offers services already provided by many institutions but for additional costs to the student and institution (i.e., transfer advising, access to volunteer activities, etc.)
2. American Honors courses do not differ significantly from similar courses that are available to non-American Honors students
3. Some of the four-year universities that American Honors, Inc. has claimed as partners for guaranteed admission or simply as partners/members have no affiliation with American Honors.
4. At least six of the universities that American Honors has listed on their website in the past claim no relationship with American Honors.
5. American Honors claims to have a transfer network of “more than 70 four-year institutions across the United States,” according to its response to the Washington Attorney General’s office complaint, yet students who have participated in an American Honors two-year program have no advantage in being admitted into many/most of those universities.
6. American Honors advertising dramatically overstates and over promises the financial benefit to students paying for their program.
7. Two-year partner universities have funneled public monies (i.e., Pell Grants) to the private company American Honors by packaging the honors experience as part of instructional costs.
8. Community College partners share private information with American Honors without consent of parents or students, particularly in case of minors.
9. American Honors does not follow best practices, as established by NCHC in the following areas:
  - a. A clearly articulated set of admission criteria (e.g., GPA, SAT score, a written essay, satisfactory progress, etc.) identifies the targeted student population served by the honors program. The program clearly specifies the requirements needed for retention and satisfactory completion.
  - b. The honors director reports to the chief academic officer of the institution.
  - c. The criteria for selection of honors faculty include exceptional teaching skills, the ability to provide intellectual leadership and mentoring for able students, and support for the mission of honors education.
  - d. The program has a standing committee or council of faculty members that works with the director or other administrative officer and is involved in honors curriculum, governance, policy, development, and evaluation deliberations. The composition of that group represents the colleges and/or departments served by the program and also elicits support for the program from across the campus.

- e. The program engages in continuous assessment and evaluation and is open to the need for change in order to maintain its distinctive position offering exceptional and enhanced educational opportunities to honors students.
- f. When appropriate, two-year and four-year programs have articulation agreements by which honors graduates from two-year programs who meet previously agreed-upon requirements are accepted into four-year honors programs.

**APPENDIX B**  
**Questions for Two- and Four-Year Institutions**

**Two-Year Schools**

1. Cost structure?
2. How much goes to American Honors?
3. Are students able to use Federal grants or other financial aid to cover AH program expenses?
4. What oversight does your institution or external entities provide to ensure that the program meets expectations?
5. How much extra do students pay above the institution's tuition to participate in American Honors?
6. How much of the honors curriculum is offered online vs. conventional in-person courses?
7. Why did you choose to contract with American Honors rather than build your own honors programs using your own faculty and (using NCHC as a resource)? Have they lived up to the promises that lead you to make the decision to go with American Honors?

**Four-Year Schools**

1. Do you, or have you, been engaged in an affiliation with American Honors?
2. If so, who initiated the conversation between your institution and AH?
3. If so, was your existing honors program or college director/dean involved in these decisions? Did they initiate these decisions?
4. If so, what agreements do you have with AH concerning transfer admission of honors students into your institution?
5. If so, do you engage in direct agreements with two year honors programs or colleges outside of your agreement with AH?
6. If so, approximately how many students have attended your university through the partnership with AH and how have those students done at your institution?
7. If not, are you or have you been made aware that AH listed your institution as an affiliated partner?
8. If not, do you have direct agreements with two year honors programs and colleges?

**APPENDIX C**  
**American Honors Network Schools Listed on the American Honors Website**

**Two-Year Schools Working with American Honors**

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1. Community College of Philadelphia          | 6. Union County College                       |
| 2. Shoreline Community College <sup>1,2</sup> | 7. Mercer County Community College            |
| 3. Kilgore College                            | 8. Ivy Tech Community College <sup>2</sup>    |
| 4. Jackson College <sup>2</sup>               | 9. Community Colleges of Spokane <sup>2</sup> |
| 5. Pierce College                             |   |

**“Assured” Four-Year Schools (listed as “Member” since December 2016)**

- |  |                                      |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| 1. Alma College                            | 12. Purdue University                |
| 2. American University                     | 13. Queens University of Charlotte   |
| 3. Baldwin Wallace University              | 14. Royal Roads University           |
| 4. Colorado State University Global Campus | 15. Shimer College <sup>1</sup>      |
| 5. Cornell College <sup>1</sup>            | 16. Stockton University              |
| 6. Hanover College                         | 17. University of Idaho <sup>1</sup> |
| 7. Holy Cross                              | 18. University of Rochester          |
| 8. Illinois Institute of Technology        | 19. Valparaiso University            |
| 9. Louisiana State University <sup>1</sup> | 20. Western Michigan University      |
| 10. Marian University                      | 21. Whittier College                 |
| 11. Michigan State University              | 22. Whitworth University             |

**“Competitive” Four-Year Schools (listed as “Affiliate” since December 2016)**

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 1. Amherst College   | 17. Minerva Schools at KGI                 |
| 2. Brandeis University   | 18. Mt. Holyoke College                    |
| 3. Claremont McKenna College                                     | 19. New Jersey Institute of Technology     |
| 4. Connecticut College   | 20. Occidental College                     |
| 5. Cornell University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences | 21. Ohio State University                  |
| 6. Cornell University's School of Human Ecology                  | 22. Pitzer College                         |
| 7. Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations | 23. Smith College                          |
| 8. DePauw University   | 24. Swarthmore College                     |
| 9. Drew University <sup>1</sup>                                  | 25. Taylor University                      |
| 10. Duke University  | 26. The University of Texas at San Antonio |
| 11. George Washington University                                 | 27. Thomas Edison State College            |
| 12. Georgia Institute of Technology <sup>1</sup>                 | 28. Trine University                       |
| 13. Lafayette College  | 29. Trinity College                        |
| 14. Liberty University   | 30. University of Mississippi              |
| 15. Massachusetts Institute of Technology                        | 31. University of Puget Sound              |
| 16. Middlebury College   | 32. Wabash College <sup>1</sup>            |
|  | 33. Watson University                      |
|  | 34. Wellesley College                      |
|  | 35. Wesleyan University                    |

**New “Member” Four-Year Schools (new schools added since late 2016)**

- |                               |                        |
|-------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Allegheny College          | 6. Indiana Tech        |
| 2. Austin College             | 7. Kean University     |
| 3. American College of Greece | 8. New York University |
| 4. Binghamton University      | 9. SUNY-Old Westbury   |
| 5. Denison University         | 10. Widener University |

**New “Affiliate” Four-Year Schools (new schools added since late 2016)**

- |                                  |   |
|----------------------------------|---|
| 1. Calumet College of St. Joseph | 3. Georgetown University School of Continuing Studies |
| 2. Drew University               |   |

<sup>1</sup> Appears to have been removed from the listing on the American Honors website sometime in the last six months.

<sup>2</sup> Current NCHC two-year college member institution.

## **APPENDIX D**

### **Questions for the Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs at American Honors**

1. Which four year schools in your network have guaranteed admission for AH students?
2. What, specifically, is guaranteed by the four-year school agreements? For instance, is this a guarantee of acceptance into the four year institutions' honors program or the college in general?
3. Where and how is that guarantee documented?
4. Can you provide us with documentation about those guarantees?
5. How do you ensure that the four-year schools listed on your webpage are accurate and have existing relationships with American Honors?
6. Would you provide statistics on the number of AH students who have graduated from four year (honors) programs?
7. Do you have statistics on the time to completion once students have entered their four-year programs? (Here, I'm interested in whether or not it took more than two years to graduate. If that's the case, then it would be the strongest evidence that the transfer model is not cost effective, as it takes longer (in total) to graduate with a four-year degree.)
8. Can you tell us anything about sources of revenue for the American Honors Foundation and what the relationship is between AH/QL, Inc. and the American Honors Foundation?
9. Who serves as instructional designers to aid in creating "honors" courses? What are their qualifications? What defines an honors course for AH?
10. What type of training do honors advisors receive?