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TEACHERS COLLEGE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

**American Honors:  
The Life and Death of a Public-Private Partnership**

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## **Abstract**

In fall 2012, a public-minded privately held firm, Quad Learning (QL), partnered with two community colleges to pilot a new program dubbed “American Honors” (AH), which was designed to help academically talented community college students overcome the challenges of transferring to more selective four-year destinations. By fall 2018, QL had dissolved the AH program for domestic students. This paper traces the components of the program’s socially conscious theory of change and its for-profit business model, and the tensions between the two. We explore the meaning of AH’s various components to students, faculty, and administrators, and we estimate its impact on students’ academic outcomes and offer takeaways for future public-private ventures.

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## 1. Introduction

Most degree-seeking community college students aspire to transfer to a four-year college and complete their bachelor's degree, but only 17 percent do so (Jenkins & Fink, 2015). These disappointing results are not fully explained by academic performance: Even among transfer-aspiring students who earn the equivalent of an associate degree, only 60 percent transfer to a four-year college (Monaghan & Attewell, 2015). Among community college students who do transfer, the majority transfer to less-selective institutions, even though many are qualified to perform well at more-selective institutions (Jenkins & Fink, 2015; Xu, Jaggars, Fletcher, & Fink, 2018). Compared to “native” four-year peers with a similar academic record, community college transfer students also take longer to graduate from their destination universities, primarily due to a loss of credits at the time of transfer (Monaghan & Attewell, 2015; Xu et al., 2018).

In fall 2012, a public-minded privately held firm, Quad Learning (QL), partnered with two community colleges to pilot a new program dubbed “American Honors” (AH), which was designed to help academically talented community college students overcome the challenges inherent in transferring to a more selective four-year destination. By fall 2014, the program had expanded to serve 650 students at seven community colleges and multi-college districts, and was aiming to serve 3,000 in fall 2016. After failing to meet those enrollment targets, in 2017 QL began to move away from the AH model for domestic U.S. students in order to focus more strongly on international student recruiting. By fall 2018, it had dissolved the AH program for domestic students, although it retained relationships with some of its community college partners in terms of international student recruiting and programming. In November 2018, QL was sold to Wellspring International Education: “A source close to the deal described it as a distress sale, worth ‘a small fraction’ of what Quad Learning had raised” (Wan, 2018). Today, the QL division of Wellspring maintains international recruiting and programming relationships with three community colleges.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All subsequent references to Quad Learning and American Honors are in relation to the business model as it existed prior to November 2018. For more information on the new iteration of American Honors, which focuses on international enrollment management services, see [www.quadlearning.com](http://www.quadlearning.com).

Despite the failure of its domestic business model, the original AH program did succeed in supporting many community college students in transferring to selective destinations, and its story provides a variety of lessons in how to structure honors programs and support transfer-aspiring students. More broadly, AH functioned as a “public-private partnership,” a fast-growing trend for innovative programs in higher education (Patrinos, Barrera-Osorio, Guáqueta, 2009; Redden, 2018a). This study provides a detailed examination of the pros and cons of one such partnership. In this paper, we trace the components of the AH’s socially conscious theory of change, its venture-capital-financed for-profit business model, and the tensions between them; we explore the meaning of AH’s various components to students, faculty, and administrators; and we estimate its impact on students’ academic outcomes.

### **1.1 The Theory of Change**

The AH theory of change included three key components: (1) building students’ transfer aspirations and facilitating the transfer process, (2) offering high-quality academic preparation to help students be accepted to and thrive academically at selective four-year destinations, and (3) providing wraparound supports to help students integrate socially and academically into the community college environment. Below, we summarize prior evidence regarding the importance of these components for community college transfer students, and we discuss how QL planned to implement each component as part of the AH program.

#### **Building students’ transfer aspirations and facilitating the transfer process.**

A goal of the AH program was to encourage its students to “dream big,” or to aspire to transfer to selective four-year colleges. Research indicates that low-income and first-generation college students—populations overrepresented in community colleges—have a tendency to “undermatch” by enrolling in colleges with selectivity levels below the students’ level of academic preparation (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Theokas & Bromberg, 2014). Due to the positive relationship between college selectivity, postsecondary attainment, and later earnings, undermatching is thought to damage students’ trajectories through higher education as well as their later labor market prospects (Belasco & Trivette, 2015). Low-income and first-generation college students seem to undermatch due to their relatively limited knowledge about the college sector,

including types of colleges and methods of financing college (Hoxby & Avery, 2013; Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011).

QL aimed to capture academically talented students from lower- and middle-income families—who often enroll in community college or a non-selective four-year college with minimal financial aid resources and experience low graduation rates—and set them on a community college pathway leading to transfer to a more selective four-year college with deep financial aid resources and high graduation rates. In order to do so, however, QL’s program would need to overcome the fact that many highly successful community college students never transfer to a four-year college. For example, among community college students earning 24 credits and at least a 3.0 GPA in their first year, only 53 percent transfer within six years (LaViolet, Fresquez, Maxson, & Wyner, 2018). And among community college applicants to the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation’s transfer scholarship (all of whom have earned sophomore status with at least a 3.5 GPA), only 80 percent of non-awardees transfer to a four-year college, and only one third of non-awardees transfer to a highly selective destination (Giancola & Kahlenberg, 2016; Glynn, 2019).<sup>2</sup>

In order to heighten students’ transfer aspirations and translate them into reality, QL knew the AH program would need to provide intensive advising and coaching to help students explore transfer destinations, develop transfer plans, stay on track academically, apply to their desired colleges on time, and prepare for the logistical challenges of moving to a new college context and location (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Bettinger & Baker, 2011; Jaggars & Fletcher, 2014; Kadlec & Gupta, 2014; Kadlec & Martinez, 2013; Karp, 2013). The program sought to fulfill this need through a dedicated transfer advising model paired with a mandatory transfer seminar.

To create strong transfer opportunities for AH students, QL also planned to create relationships with the admissions offices at some of the nation’s most selective universities, such that completion of the AH program might guarantee students admission, or at least provide students with an advantage in admissions (Perez-Pena,

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<sup>2</sup> Here, “highly selective” refers to the top two categories of Barron’s seven-category selectivity classification. More broadly, throughout the paper we use the terms “highly selective” or “most selective” to refer to elite colleges with national brand names, “more selective” to refer to colleges in the top category of the three-category Carnegie Selectivity index, “moderately selective” to refer to colleges in the middle category of the Carnegie index, and “selective” to encompass all of these colleges.

2013). QL was also concerned about research showing that credit loss at the point of transfer is a significant barrier to bachelor's degree attainment for students who transfer from community to four-year colleges (Monaghan & Attewell, 2015; Xu et al., 2018). Typically, individual community colleges address this problem by working closely with a local four-year partner college to create articulation agreements, which specify the particular courses that will transfer seamlessly from one college to another—and, ideally, the particular community college courses that will fulfill the requirements of specific bachelor's degree plans (Wyner, Deane, Jenkins, & Fink, 2016). Useful articulation agreements require an enormous investment of time during the initial design period, and they also require maintenance of a close relationship between the colleges over time, such that the agreements can be appropriately updated and communicated as curricular requirements change. As a result, community colleges typically embark on formal articulation agreements with only the colleges that represent the bulk of their four-year transfer volume. It would be prohibitively expensive to maintain such relationships with far-away or elite colleges, each of which may receive only a handful of transfers from the given community college across the span of several years. In order to support the seamless transfer of credits to multiple selective four-year destinations, QL planned to create an articulation framework resting on economies of scale. We discuss the planned model in more detail in subsection 1.2 below.

**Providing high-quality academic preparation.** Four-year college selectivity tends to be inversely related to the rate of community college transfer admissions (Glynn, 2019). Selective colleges' admissions officers and faculty may fear that community college students who “look good on paper” are not in fact prepared for the rigor of the four-year college experience, a concern bolstered by research showing that many community college transfer students experience a temporary drop in their grade point average (GPA) at the point of transfer (Bahr, Toth, Thirolf, & Masse, 2013; Xu et al., 2018). On the other hand, research also suggests that community college students who are admitted to a four-year college—even an elite college—ultimately perform as well as students who were admitted to the college as freshman students (Glynn, 2019; Xu, Jaggars, Fletcher, & Fink, 2018).



Selective four-year colleges may feel more comfortable admitting community college students who have demonstrated the ability to succeed in honors-level coursework, which is supposed to encourage “student creativity, collaboration, and leadership in the classroom and beyond” and to be “characterized by in-class and extracurricular activities that are measurably broader, deeper, or more complex than comparable learning experiences typically found at institutions of higher education” (National Collegiate Honors Council, 2018). And indeed, community colleges with honors programs are more likely to send students to selective transfer destinations, although this may be due to size: Larger community colleges are both more likely to host honors programs and more likely to send students to selective destinations (Glynn, 2019; Outcalt, 1999). While there is little rigorous research on the outcomes of community college honors programs, descriptive evidence suggests that compared to similarly high-GPA peers at the same community college, honors students are more likely to transfer to a four-year institution and less likely to experience a dip in GPA at the point of transfer (Phillips, 2003; Toso, 2018).

Based on such research, QL determined that in order to make their students appealing to selective colleges—and to ensure that those students would succeed in their chosen four-year destinations—its program should integrate honors-level assignments and activities that develop students’ critical thinking, self-directed learning skills, and other academic qualities prized by selective four-year colleges. Accordingly, they planned to design a curriculum in which each student would complete at least 24 credits (or nearly half the credits required for an associate degree) of high-quality “Honors” coursework.

**Providing wraparound supports.** Colleges often offer an array of disconnected courses, academic programs, support services, and transfer options that students are expected to navigate mostly on their own, leaving students lost, confused, and frustrated. Colleges and individual programs that create a coordinated package of structured pathways, proactive advising, high academic expectations, academic assistance, and social supports should have much stronger student outcomes than those that merely make services available a la carte (Bailey et al., 2015). QL aspired to create such a coordinated model by combining a flexible and high-quality Honors curriculum, proactive advising

and coaching, and a clear transfer pathway into a cohorted program. As each cohort of students took small-enrollment courses together, they would naturally build social support networks, which the program designers hoped to reinforce through a dedicated physical space (an “Honors Lounge”) as well as through social and community service activities (facilitated by the advisor). The program also incorporated a leadership course, which was designed to help students build identities as successful college students.

Overall, the AH program was designed to integrate key interventions in order to address the array of academic and nonacademic challenges that can thwart the progress of even high-achieving community college students. When we launched this evaluation project in 2015, we hoped that documenting the program’s components and estimating its long-term impacts would provide insight into how colleges can cost-effectively integrate interventions at scale.

## **1.2 The Business Model**

As a nimble education technology start-up, QL believed it could improve on the business model of postsecondary education in ways that would benefit students, its two- and four-year college partners, and investors. In the corporate world, colleges are perceived as pursuing an “antiquated” business model in which they overcharge for the value they provide, with excessive costs driven in part by “parallel development of standard curriculum (e.g., Economics 101) by 2,000 different U.S. colleges/universities” and “teaching standard lecture courses live on 2,000 campuses” (Hixon, 2014). QL aimed to improve on this business model, but it was not interested in the expensive and time-consuming proposition of creating a new accredited college that would compete with existing institutions; rather, the company wanted to work with public colleges to help improve the efficiency and outcomes of the sector. QL planned to accomplish these aims by partnering with existing colleges to create a program that would: (1) charge affordable prices, (2) leverage economies of scale, and (3) attract the large volume of students that would make the first two possible while still earning profits for its investors. Below, we discuss the approach QL planned to take in each of these three areas.

**Affordable pricing.** Given the goal of affordable pricing, community colleges represent a suitable partnership within the postsecondary environment. In 2018–19, the average annual full-time tuition and fees for a community college student was \$3,660, or

about a third of the \$10,230 average annual price of public four-year colleges (Ma, Baum, Pender, & Libassi, 2018). Given that the maximum Pell grant award was \$6,095 in the same year, the average community college student paid no tuition or fees—after taking financial aid into account—and received about \$400 to help cover other college-related costs (Ma et al., 2018). This price is still not affordable for all students, given that time spent on college coursework could otherwise be used to earn income through paid work. Even so, if additional AH program costs were modest, and were paid through tuition and fees (and thus eligible to be covered by financial aid), then most low-income students would still spend little or nothing on their community college enrollment.

In setting the price point for the program, QL understood that students might be willing to pay the community college a higher-than-usual price for a “premium” experience, but that if the price-point became too high, students might instead opt for a local four-year competitor. While the exact formula varied between its partnering colleges, based on the local economic context (including the prices of nearby less-selective four-year colleges), QL settled on a general approach in which a partner college would charge AH students approximately 150 percent of the community college’s regular tuition and fees, and the two partners would split the revenue, such that each would receive about 75 percent of the per-student revenue the college normally earned. Given that each partner would be receiving *less* than a full-time student would typically pay, the viability of the business model was dependent on reducing program costs through economies of scale, and on recruiting “net-new” students who would not otherwise attend the partnering community college.

**Economies of scale.** QL planned to create economies of scale by leveraging technology: The company would pair talented community college faculty with professional instructional designers to create a high-quality set of Honors courses, each of which could be delivered online to any community college in QL’s network—even to small rural colleges that otherwise could not afford to offer honors-level courses. Such an approach could solve two problems at once. First, an up-front investment in excellent course design would, in the long run, decrease overall course design costs, because each course would be developed only once rather than being developed in parallel by dozens of instructors at dozens of colleges. At small campuses, the approach would also decrease

instruction costs, because one instructor could teach the course to perhaps 25 students across multiple campuses, rather than four instructors each teaching the course to six or seven students at their own campuses. Second, a common curriculum would make it much easier to create and maintain a network of admission agreements and articulation agreements with four-year colleges across the country. As described in *Inside Higher Ed* in 2013, “Because students will take a common set of courses, and the programs will use a common set of learning outcomes, . . . four-year universities to which American Honors students might wish to transfer ‘will only have to articulate with one curriculum,’ potentially smoothing the path for them” (Lederman, 2013).

**Large student volume.** Given that QL and each partnering college would receive about 75 percent of the college’s regular tuition and fees per AH student, each college would recover its costs if at least a quarter of AH students were net-new recruits (i.e., students who would not have otherwise attended that community college). QL would make a small margin of profit on each AH student (whether or not the student was net-new to the college), but it would only begin to make meaningful profit for its investors when the program was operating at a large scale. This partnership model introduced a potential tension in terms of the two partners’ recruiting priorities: College administrators might be motivated to maximize the proportion of net-new students, even if that meant keeping the AH program small, while QL staff might be motivated to maximize the program’s size, even if only a small proportion of enrollees would be net-new. However, both partners believed that net-new student volumes would be large enough to obviate this potential tension. To recruit students into the program, the two partners would work together, with the community college leveraging its standard recruitment processes (e.g., visiting local high schools’ college fairs) and QL leveraging more expensive and large-scale recruitment tactics (e.g., purchasing recruitment databases from standardized exam providers).

To ensure college cost-recovery as well as to improve corporate profits, QL planned to supplement its public-minded focus on domestic low-income students by recruiting some international students into AH. Many international students who apply to selective U.S. universities are declined direct admission, due to limited English skills or slightly subpar GPAs (Redden, 2018a). An Honors community college pathway to a

selective destination would potentially appeal to international students who were interested in sampling the American student lifestyle, improving their English skills, and showing that they could successfully complete academically challenging U.S.-based coursework in order to earn acceptance to their universities of choice. International student recruiting would guarantee a flow of net-new students for the college, and because international student tuition at each community college was much higher than in-state tuition, these students would improve revenue for both partners.

**Business incentives for colleges.** If the AH program helped recruit enough net-new enrollees, then each college would benefit from a new flow of revenue, particularly if those students paid out-of-district, out-of-state, or international tuition rates. If the program brought in more high-achieving students to the college, or supported program participants to persist and graduate at higher rates, then the college's overall retention and graduation metrics might also improve. In performance-funding states, stronger success metrics would bring more financial support from the state (see Dougherty et al., 2016). In addition, AH's professional marketing strategies and superior outcomes could enhance the college's overall brand by, for example, highlighting the stories of graduates who went on to enroll at elite universities.

Overall, to deliver the AH program, QL and its partnering community colleges would split responsibilities. The two would work together on recruitment and admission processes. Community colleges would be responsible for recruiting faculty to design and teach Honors courses; organizing Honors student admission, registration, financial aid, tuition payment, scheduling, and other administrative processes; providing physical spaces for AH advisors, the Honors Lounge, and other face-to-face needs; and generally performing the ordinary business of the college. QL would provide instructional design assistance to Honors faculty; recruit, train, and pay the salaries of AH advisors; design and implement nationwide recruitment and marketing campaigns; and develop relationships and transfer agreements with admissions staff at selective universities across the country. It would also absorb the cost of some AH student activities, including student orientations and graduation dinners, the organization of an annual professional development conference, and the cost of travel to the conference for selected faculty.

### **1.3 Overview of This Paper**

CCRC conducted a mixed-methods study of AH in order to document key components of the program and to evaluate its effectiveness in terms of helping U.S. domestic students stay enrolled in college, graduate with an associate degree, and transfer to selective four-year destinations. Section 2 of this paper discusses the study setting and data in more detail. Section 3 discusses how students were recruited and admitted into the AH program. Sections 4 through 6 discuss specific components of the theory of change: building transfer aspirations and facilitating the transfer process, providing high-quality academic preparation, and providing wraparound supports. Section 7 discusses quantitative student outcomes, which demonstrate some (limited) success in terms of the program's theory of change. Section 8 discusses the AH program's domestic student business model, and how and why it failed. Section 9 concludes with a summary discussion of findings and implications.

## **2. Study Setting and Data**

CCRC's study focused on six community colleges and multi-college districts (hereafter referred to as "colleges") located in four states across the country. The six colleges' locations included a mix of smaller and larger campuses located in large-city, suburban, or small-city areas. Four of the colleges already offered at least some honors courses, but none offered a cohort-based honors program with dedicated advising. All six felt it was important for the college to develop a robust and well-known honors program, for a set of three interrelated reasons: to provide opportunities for local high-achieving but low-income students; to boost the institution's reputation for strong academics and transfer success; and to increase enrollments, retention, and graduation rates for the college in general. Thus the colleges were interested in establishing or expanding honors enrollments and offerings, adopting a cohorted model, adding an intensive advising component, and connecting their students with more elite college options.

In this paper, we focus on two key sources of data: interviews with community college students, faculty, and staff; and AH applicant data matched with the National Student Clearinghouse data.<sup>3</sup>

First, to understand AH program implementation at the six community colleges, in 2016 we conducted a total of 181 interviews with students ( $n = 58$  AH and  $n = 53$  high-achieving non-AH students), faculty ( $n = 33$  AH instructors), and staff ( $n = 37$  administrators and advisors). We also re-interviewed a handful of key administrators in spring 2018. Interviews were semi-structured, and each also included two questions (on transfer destinations and course quality) from which we gathered more structured responses, as discussed in the relevant results sections below. Student interviewees either were currently enrolled in AH or were enrolled at the same community college with an academic record that qualified them for entry to AH (though they had either not applied to the program or had declined an offer of AH admission). All our student interviewees would have initially qualified for four-year college entry; many had been accepted to local four-year colleges but chose to enroll in community college instead. Of student interviewees, 84 percent were attending college full-time, 64 percent were female, 17 percent were African American, and 8 percent were Hispanic; these proportions were roughly similar between AH and non-AH interviewees. Of faculty interviewees, 93 percent were full-time instructors at the college; they had been in their roles anywhere between 3 and 36 years, and some also had administrative responsibilities (e.g., as department chair or program director). We developed a coding scheme based on the emerging patterns of data, which included six parent codes (interviewee background, general AH program information, Honors pedagogy, transfer processes, advisement, and campus community/engagement) and 64 sub-codes. Twelve transcripts were test-coded by a team of researchers, and any coding discrepancies were discussed, resolved, and used to refine the final coding scheme.

Second, to understand the characteristics and outcomes of AH and similar non-AH students, we obtained electronic AH application records for the program's fall 2014 through fall 2016 admission cycles, which included nearly 12,000 domestic (non-

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<sup>3</sup> Also see a preliminary report (Jaggars, Grant, Fay, & Farakish, 2017), which included detailed analyses of AH's recruitment pipeline, and a survey comparing AH and non-AH students. "Community college staff" includes AH advisors, although these were formally employed by QL.

international) applicants. Applicant records included relatively complete information on the student's gender, first-generation college student status, neighborhood median income, and intent to attend college part-time versus full-time. Some records included academic information (high school GPA and standardized test scores), while others did not. The availability of academic information in the electronic record varied depending on how the student's record entered the AH system. Some applicants were recruited by AH via a database purchased from standardized test providers, and these students' academic records were relatively complete (e.g., see the recruitment pipeline analysis in Jaggars et al., 2017); other applicants were recruited at high school or community college campus events, and their academic records were often submitted to AH separately and were unavailable within the electronic application database. Supporting application materials such as recommendation letters and admissions essays were also submitted separately and were not available in our electronic database. We matched applicant records with National Student Clearinghouse data in early summer 2018, allowing us to track the fall 2014 cohort of AH students for nearly four years from their initial enrollment, the fall 2015 cohort for nearly three years, and the fall 2016 cohort for nearly two years.

### **3. Recruitment and Admissions**

After receiving a set of AH application materials, a QL admissions officer would reject students with very poor academic performance or essay responses. QL officers would also typically reject continuing community college students who had already completed most courses that would be offered through AH and who therefore would be unable to earn the minimum number of Honors credits (typically 12) required to receive an Honors designation on their degree. For two colleges, the QL officer would also automatically accept graduating high school students who were in the top 15 percent of their high school class.

After the initial screening, the QL officer would work with each college's AH dean or admission committee (typically comprised of a few Honors faculty and administrators) to make admission decisions. QL did not promote or enforce any



particular GPA cutoff, standardized test cutoff, or rubric for evaluating students' writing skills. Instead, QL encouraged colleges to determine acceptance based on a holistic evaluation of each student's high school record, standardized test scores, and other characteristics that might indicate a strong motivation to succeed academically, such as evidence of leadership skills, community service, overcoming an academic challenge, or "grit." In the absence of specific requirements, each college's AH admissions committee had to discuss "what truly is an honor student," as one interviewee put it. Some colleges were inclined to select only students with very strong past academic performance who were already Honors-caliber, while others believed AH's role was to identify students with strong academic potential and help them develop into Honors-caliber students. One admissions committee member explained:

We've rejected students with a higher GPA and we have admitted students with a lower GPA based on their essays, based on their community engagement. So it really is a very holistic process. What distinguishes them, I think, from the standard student population are, I hope, an interest in academic challenge. We are very focused on making sure that our cohort, whether they had it coming in, or whether we instill it, are very intrinsically motivated to learn.

Yet agreeing on objective criteria for student "potential" was challenging; as another interviewee said:

I'm on the admissions committee now, and we spend a lot of time talking about whether, to what extent, we should consider various factors in admission. Because the focus of American Honors is to bring in people who have potential, who are not necessarily right now the best students, and sometimes that works and sometimes it doesn't: How do you define potential? How do you know it when you see it?

The lack of formalized AH admission criteria resulted in widely differing practices and approaches from one college to another. For instance, some would only admit full-time students into AH, while others would accept part-time students. Typically, committees required AH students to be "college-ready" in reading and writing, but some offered conditional admittance to students who were slightly below college readiness standards in mathematics. As one college administrator said:

A lot of students who think they are Honors students, or who truly have high GPAs in most areas, don't necessarily have high math skills. . . . They might be an Honors student in this category, this category, and this category . . . but that doesn't necessarily mean I'm an Honors caliber student in mathematics. That's been the biggest challenge of all.

To address this issue, QL created a math boot camp, which prepared students to retake and pass their college's standardized math placement test. Some colleges required students to re-test and pass the math test before entering AH, while others provisionally admitted students into AH contingent on completing a developmental math course or otherwise passing the math test within a few months.

Most faculty interviewees were pleased with the quality of students admitted into the program; they told us that AH students “ask good questions; they're so curious”; “really care about their education, not just getting a grade to get by, but doing the work to become a better person”; “are generally more studious than my other students; they did the reading”; “wanted to dive deeper, their questions were not so much based on ‘Will this be on the exam?’ but they wanted to explore the ideas.” However, a few faculty interviewees were less enthusiastic. One said, “We are bending over backwards for students who don't act like Honors students. . . . A lot of them are pretty lackluster and we get a lot of pressure to, you know, ‘What else can we do to engage them?’ And we are meeting them so, so, so much more than halfway.”

As QL attempted to scale up the AH program across the 2014-2017 timeframe, its recruitment tactics were not yielding as many net-new domestic applicants and enrollees as both partners had originally hoped. As one college administrator said:

The domestic students who are in the Honors program are students who would have been here anyways. I think the Honors program gives them an opportunity and a pathway they might not have had available to them, but. . . . Very, very few come here because of the Honors program.

AH also recruited many of the college's own high-achieving continuing students into the program. Given that colleges were losing 25 percent of these students' revenue to AH, they were not necessarily interested in growing the program beyond the level required to fill a few Honors courses each term; meanwhile, QL was concerned with growing the

program large enough to make a profit, even if that growth was not always net-new. Perhaps as a result, some admissions committee members felt the QL officer was pursuing a somewhat different agenda during deliberations. As one explained:

If we're in the midst of discussing a candidate and we're sitting on the fence, [a QL officer] was always by phone in on these meetings. She's not trying to twist our arm, but she will certainly speak in favor of. She'll rarely say, "Okay I think you guys are right, you should not accept." She is always trying to get us to agree with why we should accept. . . . I'm like starting to pull back a little bit, and so I want to see the potential in the essay, but I also need to know that there is a certain level of proven academic performance in the classroom. And if I don't see that, I'm less inclined to vote "yea" now. But [the QL Officer] will kind of bring us back to the whole [holistic process], . . . so there is that subtle pressure there.

Many faculty interviewees felt that the pressure to increase enrollments—and thus to admit “lower-caliber” students—was increasing each year. International recruitments helped to fill the gap for some partnering community colleges, which were located in geographic areas appealing to the international population. For other colleges, however, the international strategy bore little to no fruit.

From the student perspective, interviewees first learned about the AH program via emails or phone calls, either while they were still in high school or after they had completed a successful semester or two at the community college. Students who joined the program said that their decision to do so was based on the impression that membership would convey one or more of the following benefits: an accomplishment to add to a resume, ease of transfer to four-year colleges, academic rigor, more academically focused peers, smaller class sizes, dedicated advising, and more activities and social engagement in college. The prestige of belonging to an honors program was one of the most frequently cited motivators. One student explained: “I just thought it would look really nice on a resume, and it would look really good when I go to transfer to a four-year school. ‘Hey look, I have this nice thing on my record that says I’m a good student.’ I mean, at the end of the day, even if it doesn’t do anything for me, it still looks nice.”

Typically, AH students were well qualified to enter a local four-year college but chose to enroll in the community college for financial reasons. One explained: “I didn’t

want to be like my brother and rack up \$100,000 in debt and be able to do nothing with it. . . . The class credits are pretty much the same, so might as well spend a little less getting those credits out of the way.” Many AH students also felt that joining an honors program in a local community college would be a more comfortable next step that would provide a supportive environment to discover what they wanted to pursue in terms of education and career. As one explained:

I actually was really nervous about transitioning, and I didn't know what school to go to. I didn't know what I wanted to be or anything, and it was really scary. And then, the only college that . . . made me feel like maybe I can do this was actually American Honors. It was so nice because I could stay in [community college] and go to [four-year college] and then save a lot of money, because I didn't know what I wanted to do, and I didn't want to waste time at an expensive university trying to figure out what I wanted to do.

For high-performing students, AH not only presented greater opportunities for academic rigor but also helped offset any disappointments or lowered expectations that might be associated with attending a community college. As one student recounted, “I obviously heard [community college] is a community college, so a lot of people probably think their classes are not as hard as in other colleges. . . . I think the same as well. But then, thinking about the American Honors program, I was like ‘well, maybe that's actually going to challenge me more.’”

AH students covered the program's extra expense through financial aid, grants and scholarships (including some AH-specific scholarships), support from family, by working part- or full-time to pay out of pocket, or often through a combination of all of these sources. Most AH students felt that the extra expense was worth it: “As far as value, I still find it worth it, whether or not it's more expensive. . . . I feel like I engage a lot more than I did in regular—in ‘general’ [community college] classes, I'm not going to say ‘regular.’ Yeah, so the benefits are worth the cost easily.” Indeed, many AH students pointed out that even with the additional expense of AH, it was still far less than they would pay at a four-year college.

Among non-AH student interviewees, some knew little or nothing about the program; most of these had been invited to apply but did not pay much attention to the

recruiting communications and consequently did not know enough about the program to explicitly decide whether to join it. For those who were fully aware of the program, some (primarily older students) felt it was a poor fit for their plans: They had already earned too many credits to join the program, AH did not offer enough courses in their major to make joining practical, they were no longer interested in transfer, or their transfer options were limited (due to work or family responsibilities) to an easily achievable local option. The large remainder of students chose not to join for financial reasons: They either could not pay the extra tuition or felt the program's benefits did not justify the added expense. Overall, 39 percent of non-AH student interviewees (19 of 49) specifically mentioned cost as barrier to AH entry. As one said, "Unfortunately I don't have enough funds to enroll in the program. That's why I just disregarded the idea. But I've thought about enrolling, joining the program, because they offer a lot of good things."

#### **4. Building Transfer Aspirations and Facilitating the Transfer Process**

In order to build students' transfer aspirations, AH required each student to complete a transfer seminar, which supported the process of applying to a range of four-year college destinations, and to meet regularly with a dedicated advisor, who would help keep them on track to transfer. At the same time, AH hoped to build a robust network of four-year college partners with strong admissions and articulation agreements. While this hope was never fully realized (for reasons we will discuss later in the paper), the first two requirements did indeed seem to heighten students' transfer aspirations and improve their confidence about the transfer process. In this section, we first discuss the transfer seminar implementation and experience; we then discuss transfer advising and how the experience differed between AH and non-AH student interviewees; finally, we discuss the distinct transfer aspirations of AH versus non-AH student interviewees.

##### **4.1 Transfer Seminar**

In order to earn an Honors diploma, AH students were required to complete a transfer seminar taught by AH advisors, typically in the first semester of the student's second year. Some colleges offered the course for credit, while others treated it as a

noncredit cocurricular experience. The course’s goals were to help students explore and identify potential destination colleges and help them to complete college applications, including drafting a personal statement, obtaining letters of recommendation, and applying for financial aid. As part of the seminar, one college also connected students with Honors alumni who had transferred to various four-year destinations.

Transfer seminar instructors asked students to research potential colleges of interest and identify factors—such as learning environment, location, and available majors—that would make a college a “good fit” for them, and then to consider their likelihood of admission at these good-fit colleges. Each student eventually identified six transfer destinations: two “solid” schools (likely to grant the student admission with little additional effort), two “target” schools (that might require a little additional work to attain admission), and “reach” schools (that might require the student to retake the SAT or certain courses in order to meet admissions benchmarks). Honors advisors encouraged students to think beyond the “usual suspects” and broaden their horizons to “dream big.” As one advisor explained: “Most of them have these dreams, these reach schools. . . . They are just like, ‘I don’t know [if] I can get in; I’m not going to apply to that school.’ And that’s when we say like, ‘Oh yes you are, because it’s your dream.’ And that’s our whole saying: ‘If your dreams don’t scare you, they are not big enough.’” Dreams were not necessarily about selectivity; they could also be about location, as this advisor explained:

The transfer seminar class, the good thing about that is we start to introduce them to the [AH transfer] network, and how you don’t have to stay in [state], you have the opportunity to go farther if you want to. . . . You can go to [out-of-state moderately selective college], you can go to [out-of-state flagship university] if you want to. Like, what are your dreams and what are your hopes? And that’s what they work on in transfer seminar, so we’re going to definitely change that culture mindset of them thinking [in-state flagship] is the only school they can go to, because all of them want to go to [in-state flagship]. All of them.

While the course was not useful for all AH students (some students had already applied to a transfer destination, or had a clear destination in mind), most appreciated the structured approach to identifying transfer colleges. As one student said: “Because I

guess without that seminar, you were just like a regular student. You wouldn't be thinking about those things until the very last minute, but that transfer seminar kind of put me on track and reminds me, 'Oh, this time is coming soon, so you need to start planning for it.'”

One AH advisor explained that a main goal of the transfer seminar was to provide students with dedicated time to work on applications; in that sense, the seminar functioned more like a series of mandatory advising sessions than a course. The transfer seminar seemed particularly beneficial to students who had limited knowledge about the college application process, such as first-generation college students. One student recalled: “As someone from a family where no one else has gone to college . . . I was completely lost on [the college application process]. . . . I wouldn't have been as successful with my transfer if I had done it straight out of high school. I have nine colleges I'm applying to. I never would have applied to those.”

Many interviewees also felt that the four-year college application process was intimidating, and were comforted by going through the process in a group and learning from other students. For example, one student said the seminar was useful because: “I have a little bit more security in seeing that my peers are also worried about applying to the further school out, and that they should be doing it by now but haven't yet. They don't know what they want to do with their lives, so it's nice to see I'm not alone in that.”

#### **4.2 Transfer-Specific Advising**

Each AH advisor managed a caseload of approximately 100 Honors students and met with each assigned student one-on-one at least once per semester to discuss a variety of academic and nonacademic issues, such as program and course selection, work-life-school balance, and academic struggle. Many AH students also kept in frequent contact with their advisors through text messages, phone calls, or drop-in visits. Non-AH students had access to the college's regular advising services, with typical caseloads of about 1,000 students per advisor; these students were less likely to work with a single advisor throughout their time at the college and instead typically saw whichever advisor was available at the time of their advising appointment. Due to their lighter caseload, AH advisors were able to provide students with much more proactive and tailored guidance in terms of transfer. Surveys of AH and high-performing non-AH students at the same

college indicated that AH students felt that their advisors were easier to access and more knowledgeable about transfer processes and college options; they also rated the overall quality of advising more highly than non-AH students (Jaggars et al., 2017).

When student interviewees talked with us about their experiences with advising, transfer was a key theme: Approximately one third of the advising-related excerpts in our dataset focused on transfer issues. AH students typically reported that they went to their AH advisor for any transfer-related questions; in contrast, non-AH students typically said they knew the community college's advisors were available to support them with transfer, but they had not sought them out. Instead, non-AH students conducted their own research on transfer destinations and credit articulation, by using online resources or by reaching out to advisors at four-year colleges.

All student interviewees were asked how difficult they anticipated that the process of applying, being admitted, and transferring to a four-year college would be. Both AH and non-AH students raised many of the same concerns regarding logistics and paperwork, transfer of credits, moving away from home, and starting over at a new institution. However, AH students believed there were people and structures in place to help them address those concerns. As these two AH students explained:

Me having an advisor in the American Honors program is so much easier because I know all my required courses. We have scheduled meetings. I know what I have to do. Like a lot of my friends aren't—they are not in American Honors—they are confused. They don't know if they should take this course, or they found out that they had to take another semester because their college doesn't accept these three credits.

I think it's going to be difficult, but not too difficult, because I know the advisors for American Honors, they are here to help you so that you can transfer smoothly to a four-year university. And with the transfer seminar next year, they're going to teach us how you can transfer with all the credits that you have.

Non-AH student interviewees were more likely to express concern that the process would be difficult or present serious challenges, and they were more frequently worried about credit transfer and anticipated costs. As one mentioned: "That is the



biggest fear I have, the whole transferring credits part. Simply because I know horror stories of people who are like, ‘Only 30 of my credits transferred.’” Non-AH students were more confident when they intended to transfer within the state (particularly those in states with laws guaranteeing credit transfer) or to destinations with direct transfer agreements with their community college. Non-AH students who were in special programs or services (such as TRIO) where they received transfer advice also expressed a stronger sense of confidence about transfer.

Compared to AH students, non-AH interviewees were also more likely to express concern about writing their admissions essay; these students were unsure how to write the essay, when to get started, and whether they would have the motivation and time-management skills to complete it in time. In contrast, AH students benefited from the structure of the transfer seminar as they worked through this process. As one AH student observed: “I already got a head start on it. [In the] transfer seminar, she already told us how to structure essays, what things to look for, and [how to get] letters of recommendation. She had us on that as soon as we started the semester, of how to go about asking your teacher for letters of recommendation.”

In general, while both AH and non-AH students anticipated challenges with transfer, AH students expressed less anxiety and uncertainty about these challenges, because the program provided support structures to navigate them. AH students also believed in assurances from their advisors, or had faith in the value of transfer agreements within the American Honors network, and thus were confident that all their credits would transfer to the four-year destination of their choice. It is important to note, however, that because we interviewed students while they were still enrolled at community college, their confidence about transfer could have little bearing on the eventual realities they would face at the point of transfer.

### **4.3 Transfer Considerations and Destinations**

Quad Learning believed that one of AH’s key purposes was to help students “dream big” in terms of transfer. In this section, we draw on student interview data to understand whether AH students indeed had higher-level transfer aspirations compared to other high-performing students at the same community college. During each student interview, we asked the respondent to discuss their transfer plans, including the list of

specific four-year destinations they were considering and the reasoning behind those choices. Some students in each group were not yet at the point of considering specific destinations, and two non-AH students had decided not to transfer (at least, not within the next few years); accordingly, the dataset for this analysis consisted of  $n = 53$  AH and  $n = 43$  non-AH students who discussed 176 unique destinations, for a total of 246 combinations of student and destination (hereafter termed “mentions”).

In general, AH students mentioned a larger number of potential destinations, including substantially more out-of-state and more-selective destinations. Below, we discuss differences in the number of institutions to which students planned to apply or had applied, themes in terms of transfer considerations, and differences in the characteristics of the colleges that students identified as possible transfer destinations.

In terms of the number of destinations to which they had already applied or planned to apply, 33 percent of these students identified one destination, 24 percent identified two, 17 percent identified three, 13 percent identified four, and the remaining 13 percent identified more than four (with the maximum being eight). AH students typically identified more destinations than non-AH students, with an average of 2.9 versus 2.2 ( $t = -2.14$ ,  $df = 94$ ,  $p < .05$ ). In particular, Honors students were more likely to identify four or more destination colleges.

When discussing the reasoning behind their choices, students focused on the availability or quality of particular programs or majors, college costs, proximity, ease of transfer, or selectivity. The most common factor by far was the availability and quality of programs or majors, cited by 58 percent of AH and 47 percent of non-AH students. Cost was the second most important factor, particularly for non-AH students (cited by 9 percent of AH and 42 percent of non-AH students). Third, some students focused on proximity (21 percent of AH and 16 percent of non-AH students), including those who wanted to remain close to their family and those who wanted to remain within the state (often for reasons of cost and ease of transfer, in addition to proximity). Fourth, some mentioned ease of transfer as an important factor (4 percent of AH and 19 percent of non-AH students). Finally, a few cited the selectivity or reputation of the college as an important factor (8 percent of AH and 5 percent of non-AH students).

In terms of characteristics of the  $n = 246$  mentions of destination colleges, 57 percent were in-state, 53 percent were public, 46 percent were private non-profit, 1 percent were for-profit, 61 percent were “more selective” according to the Carnegie classification, 31 percent were “moderately selective,” and 8 percent were “inclusive.” Out-of-state destinations were more popular among AH students: 52 percent of colleges mentioned by AH students were out-of state, compared to just 27 percent of those identified by non-AH students ( $\chi^2 = 15.26, df = 1, p < .001$ ). The institutional sector (public versus private) of destinations was similar between AH and non-AH students. However, AH students were much more likely to consider more-selective destinations: 71 percent of colleges mentioned by AH students were more selective, compared to 45 percent of those mentioned by non-AH students ( $\chi^2 = 17.34, df = 2, p < .001$ ).

College selectivity is highly correlated with graduation rates; that is, four-year colleges that admit the majority of applicants tend to have lower graduation rates than colleges that admit a smaller proportion of applicants. To determine whether AH students were more likely to consider colleges where they would have a high likelihood of graduation if accepted, we used IPEDS graduation rate data to divide colleges into three categories: low graduation rates (less than 50 percent), moderate graduation rates (between 50 percent and 75 percent), and high graduation rates (above 75 percent). Among mentions of destination colleges, 46 percent had high graduation rates, 37 percent had moderate graduation rates, and the remaining 17 percent had low graduation rates. AH students were much more likely to consider destinations with high graduation rates: 60 percent of colleges mentioned by AH students had high graduation rates, compared to 31 percent of colleges mentioned by non-AH students.

Highly selective colleges also tend to have higher costs. Based on IPEDS cost data, AH students selected in-state colleges that were more expensive (with average in-state total costs across all destination mentions of \$45,150 for AH and \$39,502 for non-AH students,  $t = -3.34, df = 245, p < .001$ ), and they also selected out-of-state colleges that were more expensive (with average out-of-state total costs across all destination mentions of \$53,375 for AH and \$49,820 for non-AH students) ( $t = -4.29, df = 245, p < .001$ ). Thus, in addition to choosing more out-of-state colleges, AH students were more likely to choose colleges that had intrinsically higher sticker prices. At the time of our

visits, student interviewees had either not yet applied or not yet heard back from their colleges of choice, and were not sure what to expect in terms of financial aid offers. It was clear, however, that finances would be a strong driver of both AH and non-AH students' eventual choice of four-year destination. As one student put it: "I mean, I would want to say that I have options, but my big issue is money. Whoever can get me in for the least amount would be where I would end up going."

#### **4.4 Did the Program Build Aspirations and Confidence?**

Overall, the AH program did seem to heighten students' transfer aspirations and their confidence that they could successfully navigate the transfer process. However, it also increased the likelihood that they would apply to more-costly colleges, where if accepted, they might or might not receive a financial aid package sufficient to support their attendance and completion at that college. In interviews, some AH students and faculty expressed concern about whether AH students could afford to attend costly colleges if they were accepted. For example, one administrator recalled several AH students who were accepted to highly prestigious institutions, but said that:

A lot of times, they can't afford it. They can't afford to go.  
. . . I would hope eventually that American Honors students would have the currency in the four-years to, you know, "get scholar-shipped." Or, I know all of them can't be, but I'd love to hear there is an American Honors scholarship at "X University."

In fact, QL worked hard to convince four-year partners that AH graduates were worthy of targeted scholarships; for example, top QL executives made personal calls to vice presidents at highly selective universities to argue for the value of their students. In some cases, QL's advocacy was successful: AH was able to document multiple cases of program graduates who were accepted to highly selective universities with full scholarships. Overall, however, QL was battling against universities' disinclination to allocate scholarship money to transfer students; it also had limited leverage as a new start-up. The company hoped that after it had established a track record of supplying universities with a strong pipeline of excellent students, those universities would provide stronger financial support to AH graduates. In the meantime, however, several

stakeholders expressed skepticism about the value of “dreaming big.” As one faculty member put it:

We can get our students into those [selective] programs [without AH]. [But] we don’t have any money. And American Honors have not found money to support these students once they get there. And so what I feel is that we almost do our students a disservice in that we tell you, “Yes you are bright, but you can’t go because we won’t take that extra step and find money for you.” So we have a lot of bright students that could be representing the world that end up at [regional state university], and there is nothing wrong with [regional state university] except they would have ended up there anyway. I feel we have made a lot of false dreams and a lot of false promises.

Students also believed that AH’s transfer relationships would help ensure that their chosen four-year destinations would accept all of their credits, and this faith was not necessarily based in reality, as we will discuss later in the paper.

## **5. Providing High-Quality Academic Preparation**

Across the six colleges, four already offered at least some honors courses prior to their relationship with Quad Learning, and two of these offered enough honors courses to characterize it as a fully developed program. QL originally envisioned that its instructional designers would work with colleges to create a common AH curriculum, including a shared version of a given course (such as English Composition or General Chemistry). All course materials would be available within QL’s online course management system, which would allow the course to be shared and taught by other community colleges in the AH network. However, as discussed in more detail in section 8, QL quickly abandoned the idea of having a common curriculum and shared version of each course. Instead, QL worked with each college’s AH director or dean to develop overarching learning objectives for the program, which would be developed through each college’s AH courses and co-curricular activities. Each college determined which specific courses to offer as part of its AH curriculum, while QL created a set of guidelines for how community colleges could “honorize” existing courses and offered

professional development and instructional design assistance to help faculty implement those guidelines. In this section, we first discuss how each college created and staffed its Honors courses and then discuss the pedagogical experience from the student and faculty perspective.

### **5.1 Selecting, Staffing, and Designing Honors Courses**

The AH program required students to complete 24 Honors credits to receive an AH diploma and 12 Honors credits to receive an AH certificate. AH students layered their Honors course requirements on top of the requirements for the particular major they wished to pursue. Accordingly, administrators felt it was infeasible to require AH students to take any particular Honors course; instead, for example, AH students enrolling in Chemistry could decide whether they preferred to take an available Honors version or the college's regular version. This presented a logistical challenge in terms of course planning: Administrators needed to offer enough Honors courses to fit AH students' various program and scheduling needs, but few enough that each Honors course would enroll a sufficient number of students.

To manage this balance, colleges devised various strategies, including: (1) focusing only on general education courses, which would be applicable to the majority of AH students; (2) offering Honors courses in an online synchronous format, in order to combine enrollments from multiple campuses into a single course section; (3) allowing AH and non-AH students to enroll in the same course section, with the AH students completing additional or more in-depth assignments for an Honors designation (often as part of a separate laboratory meeting); or (4) offering each Honors course only once a year. Due to these efforts, after the first year or two, most Honors course sections were enrolling a sufficient number of students.<sup>4</sup> However, math and science Honors courses often struggled with very low enrollments or suffered from last-minute cancellations, and some colleges offered few or none of these courses. Thus student interviewees in STEM majors commonly voiced complaints about course availability. A physics major who was struggling to take enough Honors credits for an AH diploma said, "I have no flexibility in my schedule, and now with that additional requirement of 50 percent of my credits

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<sup>4</sup> Honors course caps varied across colleges and courses from around 15 to 30, but were typically around 20, often one half to two thirds the size of that college's typical course cap.

coming from Honors courses, I have to take Honors courses that are not even tied to my Gen Ed requirements in the first place, but they're just courses I'm taking solely for the reason they're Honors."

After selecting courses to honorize, administrators needed to find faculty to design and teach them, which was not necessarily easy, because few faculty had "bought in" to the program at the outset (see section 8 for more details). Even after a core group of faculty had committed to the program, recruiting instructors remained a challenge in some subject areas, in which last-minute cancellations of low-enrollment courses created faculty frustration and anxiety about committing to teach the courses. Some colleges struggled to meet a self-imposed requirement that only full-time faculty could honorize and teach Honors courses; to avoid this problem, other colleges also allowed a few carefully selected adjunct faculty members to develop and teach Honors courses.

All six colleges established a standard process and set of criteria, which were informed by (but did not strictly adhere to) the guidelines provided by Quad Learning. In general, standard and Honors courses had the same learning objectives, although the Honors version might have a few additional objectives. The primary differences between standard and Honors course designs were in instructional delivery (e.g., less lecture and more interactive learning), types of assignments and activities (e.g., more research papers, presentations, projects), selection of more rigorous material (e.g., primary sources, higher-level textbooks), and deeper learning of the subject matter (e.g., analysis, interpretation, application of information). To ensure that courses were sufficiently Honors-level, course proposals often included a comparative table, indicating how the honorized course would differ from the standard version. Course proposals were reviewed by a faculty committee at the college (e.g., an Honors advisory board, task force, or administrative committee); depending on the college, some committees provided detailed feedback on proposals, and others merely approved proposals that appeared sufficiently strong.

Despite each college's guidelines and criteria, a few faculty members articulated confusion about how to differentiate honors and regular courses. As one said:

It's very hard for me to pinpoint a set of skills that seem to me to be Honors versions of the course I'm already doing. I have a hard time distinguishing between, you know,

“Here’s a first year of college-level Philosophy course; here’s a second year of college-level Philosophy course,” and trying to make that first year into something more rigorous, but not making it altogether a different kind of course. . . . And that’s in part because it’s hard to gauge what’s appropriate, but also it’s hard to know what students are prepared to do.

Once the proposed courses were approved at the institutional level, a QL instructional designer offered one-on-one assistance to each interested faculty member to help convert their course, and in most cases technologically enhance them. Early on, when QL’s vision for online course scaling was still at least partially alive, QL designers seemed to focus heavily on the incorporation of instructional technology. After the AH vision for online courses was scaled back (a development we will discuss in section 8), working with AH instructional designers became optional, and the nature of assistance was dependent on the technical or pedagogical needs of the given faculty member. While not all faculty were interested in QL’s instructional design assistance, most utilized the support to at least some extent, and several were deeply grateful for the opportunity to work one-on-one with a professional designer for an entire semester or year. However, some faculty expressed concerns about the lack of consistency in the QL instructional design team, which experienced high staff turnover, or were skeptical about the designers’ qualifications, as some designers seemed more focused on technical than pedagogic design.

In order to provide AH faculty with continuous professional development, QL also created a web-based Teaching and Learning Center to offer webinars and other instructional resources. However, most AH faculty interviewees did not take advantage of these resources, either because they did not have time to review the materials or because they felt the resources were too generic and non-specific to their particular discipline. Additionally, QL organized an annual AH conference and covered the travel costs for selected groups of faculty from each college to attend and present. Initially, the AH conference was not particularly engaging. As one faculty member recalled:

I found the training uneven, and they were pretty much insulting—or at least, I walked away feeling insulted by some of the ideas. It was like, we were to use all these MOOCS and things, and that we were lowly community



college instructors and not worthy, not on the level of someone from [selective four-year universities]. And there may be a little anger in that.

However, as more institutions joined AH and more Honors faculty started sharing their best practices, the annual conference became more productive and useful for the attendees. As a faculty member who attended a later conference described it: “It was actually a rewarding experience, and I got to meet a lot of other people. And there were some really good sessions.” Administrators also felt the conference was useful in onboarding instructors into Honors teaching; as one said of the prior year’s meeting: “We sent new people out there, and everybody that went out came back just feeling very good about having had that experience, and very clear about what American Honors was and what their role in that program is.”

## **5.2 The Pedagogical Experience of Honors Courses**

When faculty interviewees articulated how their Honors versions were different from their regular versions of the same course, they typically referred to elements of deeper learning. For example, various instructors said they aimed for students to do “more analyzing rather than understanding a concept” or “really think about asking how and why questions beyond just the question at hand” or “interpret scientific literature and data,” and ultimately to do more “application to the real world.” AH student interviewees agreed: “We’re set basically at a higher caliber, so we’re expected to do more . . . [and be] on the top of our game basically.” Students felt they were expected to engage in higher levels of critical and analytical thinking in their Honors courses. One student said that in Honors courses “you can’t just say, ‘That’s what it is because the book said.’ You have to actually have an understanding of why, instead of saying, ‘Because I read it.’” Another student said that Honors courses “don’t ask you to do more work, they ask you to dive deeper into the material. . . . Instead of just reading it and memorizing the material and spitting it back out onto an essay, they really want you to think about it, and think about your opinions and how you feel about it.”

To accomplish their aims for deeper learning, faculty required higher-level readings and more complex assignments and projects, which often went hand-in-hand with a more student-centered approach to pedagogy. The successful implementation of

these approaches seemed supported by smaller class sizes and positive peer effects. Overall, student interviewees rated Honors courses as higher-quality than the community college's regular courses; however, at a college that delivered its Honors courses in a virtual format, students and faculty expressed mixed feelings about the format.

**Materials and assignments.** Many Honors faculty adopted higher-level textbooks, included primary sources, and required additional readings. Some chose more challenging topics (for example, the meaning and implications of censorship) and asked students questions that required research and critical thinking. Students were expected to conduct more research, write papers, present ideas, and complete projects. Most assignments were application-based and helped the students develop their problem-solving skills. One of the participating faculty underscored that in Honors sections “the problems that I might assign and the test questions are different. They’re deeper. I would say ‘more difficult’ for the average student; but because we talked about them, and we had time to talk about them, then the Honors students by and large are pretty successful.” Students said their Honors classes required more frequent or lengthy writing assignments, more projects, and more challenging exams. One student recalled, “I think my first class was Intro to Philosophy 101 fall last year, and we wrote an essay a week, like [a] two-page essay. Crazy, at least for a 101 class, kind of crazy. I remember being so engaged with the material and wanting to take more of his classes, so I am in 120 now and I am enjoying that.” AH assignments encouraged students to do research, synthesize information, and draw conclusions on their own. As one of the AH students explained, “You still have to be prepared for connecting all sorts of different ideas. You need to be able to explain, like, this thing that was given in lectures compared to this thing that we read in the article—that’s compared to this thing that’s happening in the real world. And we learn a lot more.”

**Student-centered instruction.** Faculty interviewees reported that in their Honors courses, they minimized the amount of lecture time and covered material at a faster pace when they did lecture. Several said they taught their Honors courses using a “flipped” classroom model, in which students completed readings and assignments in advance of each discussion- or project-based class session. They encouraged students to work in groups and to engage in peer-learning and evaluation. One AH instructor articulated, “I

serve as more of a facilitator and participant rather than the director of that whole learning experience. So students are in charge of assuming more direct control of their own learning. And it's amazing what has come out of that." Another instructor felt Honors courses were different because "the emphasis is on interaction between the students. I give them a prompt, a question based on primary source readings or on current events, and they just answer the questions and they respond to one another." Another instructor explained how class activities included peer feedback activities: "Half of them speak, the other half listens, and they have to fill out peer critiques, and everybody has to do two."

AH student interviewees agreed that Honors courses were noticeably less lecture-heavy and more discussion-oriented than other courses at the same community college. As one AH student said, "[With] American Honors courses, it is more student-led, and the professors are just [there] to kind of guide you. And then for non-American Honors courses, it is just sitting there staring at a PowerPoint or a screen, just losing your mind." Another student characterized the typical non-Honors course as: "You walk in. [The instructor] talks, he talks, he talks. He doesn't slow down on the slide. You don't get the information. He's like, 'The slides are on [the learning management system]. Just go re-look at it.' Nobody talks. Nobody really asks questions." In contrast, in Honors courses students were more likely to serve as "facilitators . . . basically lead[ing] the discussion." One AH student praised their Honors instructor for not simply providing answers to students' questions, but instead giving them tools to arrive at the answers on their own: "[AH students are] learning different ways on how to get to certain answers. I think that's what makes education successful—giving a bunch of different ways to get to different answers, different perspectives on everything, and with American Honors you get that."

**Smaller class sizes.** Honors courses had smaller class sizes, which often served as an incentive for the faculty to teach the courses and for students to join the program. AH faculty believed that small class sizes (with an average of 15 students in each class) allowed them to foster a more collaborative learning environment, incorporate interactive strategies into their instruction, and provide more individualized attention to students. Emphasizing the importance of class size, one AH student said:

When you're sitting in these bigger classes with like 30 to upward 40 people sometimes, you just become really

distant. . . [But in] a smaller Honors class, you will get called on, or you will be able to get the chance to speak up, compared to a bigger class where they just kind of go through the class. Like the students really don't get an opportunity to speak up or interject.

AH faculty felt the smaller class sizes allowed them to get to know their students' weaknesses and strengths, monitor their progress, and provide them with more individualized and substantive feedback in class and on their assignments. As a result, AH students felt more supported and felt that in smaller courses faculty could "*care about every individual student's progress.*" Indeed, many AH students spoke about their strong connections with individual AH faculty and their continued relationships with them long after the students had completed the course.

In general, AH faculty believed the optimal course size for Honors pedagogy was somewhere between 10 and 20 students. In "larger" Honors courses of 20 to 25 students, faculty found it challenging to provide extensive feedback and facilitate collaborative learning. In very small classes of fewer than 10, some faculty felt they could not successfully implement collaborative learning activities. As one AH instructor said, "It's hard to have a lot of positive student interaction and participation when you don't have 15, 18, 20 students, when you have fewer than 10 students."

**Positive peer effects.** AH students told us that a key benefit of Honors courses was working with other "Honors-level" students. Almost all felt that non-Honors courses could be frustrating because they were working alongside other students who were less motivated, would come to class underprepared, and were not equally committed to learning, which negatively impacted the quality of the classroom learning experience. Comparing AH and non-AH courses, a student explained, "When I was in the regular classes, yeah, we had class discussions, but a lot of the people didn't really do the work. And so it was limited. [But in] the Honors program . . . a lot of them do the work. So when we have a class discussion or we have a debate or something. It's completely different. Like everyone is engaged." Some students noted that peers were particularly important in courses in which students tend to struggle; as one student said, "For math and science classes . . . [you] can learn more from it, because Honors students are good at it and we learn from each other, and it's like the atmosphere is great. But for regular

classes, like for math, a lot of students struggle in that course. So you may not learn a lot because the professor sometimes has to slow it down and put less content in that course because some students can't catch up.”

**Overall perceptions of quality.** In a preliminary report, we presented the results of a survey of AH and high-performing non-AH students at the same college, in which AH students were asked to rate the overall quality of their Honors courses, and non-AH students were asked to rate the overall quality of their regular courses at the college (Jaggars et al., 2017). In that analysis, we found that both groups of students believed their respective sets of courses were high-quality; after controlling for student age and other background factors, AH students rated Honors courses slightly but statistically significantly more highly. The survey did not allow AH students to make a direct comparison between Honors and regular (non-Honors) courses at each college. However, some students made those comparisons in their interviews.

In discussing specifics of courses with AH and non-AH students, interviewers asked them to list the courses they were currently taking. Students then chose a common general education course to focus on, with AH students typically selecting an Honors course. After describing the course’s assignments, activities, and environment, students rated the selected course on a scale of 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent). Students sometimes described the characteristics of their selected course by contrasting it to another course; in these cases, they provided a separate rating for each course. Students rated a total of  $n = 150$  courses, including  $n = 61$  Honors and  $n = 89$  regular courses (with the latter made up of 67 ratings from non-AH students and 22 ratings from AH students). Table 1 summarizes these ratings:

**Table 1**  
**AH and Non-AH Interviewees’ Ratings of Selected Honors and Regular Courses**

Rating	Honors Courses		Regular Courses				
			AH Students		Non-AH Students		Both
5 (excellent)	30	49%	6	27%	29	43%	
4 (very good)	23	38%	5	23%	19	28%	27%
3 (good)	4	7%	8	36%	10	15%	20%
2 (fair)	2	3%	1	5%	4	6%	6%
1 (poor)	2	3%	2	9%	5	7%	8%
	61		22		67		

Students' ratings of specific courses within the interview reflected the results of our original survey: Both groups rated their respective courses highly, with AH students rating Honors courses slightly better (e.g., AH students rated 87 percent of Honors courses with a 4 or above, while non-AH students rated 71 percent of regular courses with a 4 or above). However, when AH students discussed their regular courses, they were not complimentary: They rated only 50 percent of them highly. Thus it seems AH students held courses to a higher standard of quality than did non-AH students, due to their exposure to Honors-caliber teaching. When articulating the difference between Honors and non-Honors courses, AH students tended to describe Honors courses as more challenging, enjoyable, and supportive. For example, one AH student said:

I take non-Honors classes as well, so I definitely see a difference there. I typically tend to actually perform better in my Honors classes than I do in my non-Honors classes. You know: class discussions, class projects, like all that collaboration.

As a result, Honors courses could convert students from skeptics to enthusiasts about a course topic. As one said: "I loved my English 102 class. But I hate English. I'm a science person, I hate English. But, [the] professor made that class totally something I didn't expect it to be. . . . I really enjoyed that class."

Even so, a small proportion of Honors courses were rated as only "fair" or "poor." In these interviews, students tended to say the course was taught badly due to the particular instructor, regardless of whether the instructor was teaching a regular or Honors version. As one AH student recounted, the Honors and regular version of one course "were the same. The big exams were all the same. I had a friend that was in the regular section, . . . she was just as confused as I was. So we had that in common, because we had the same professor."

**Special considerations of synchronous online courses.** QL had originally hoped to create an online Honors program, which would allow the program to expand to small institutions that would not otherwise be able to offer Honors-level courses. QL planned to use a proprietary platform to deliver synchronous online courses (which they termed "virtual" courses), in which faculty and students log in at the same time from different

locations to conduct live class sessions. The virtual course model was enthusiastically adopted by one partner institution with multiple campuses that were geographically apart, but it was generally discarded by the other colleges (for more details, see section 8).

At the college that adopted the virtual model, one administrator explained, “Most of the [Honors] classes are offered virtually, and part of that has to do with enrollment for us. . . . So if you have a Honors calculus class, for example, you might have three students from [city A], but then a couple students from [city B], a couple students from [city C], and that allows us to fill classes that we might not otherwise be able to fill.”

At the college with virtual Honors courses, faculty and students had mixed feelings about the synchronous online format. In general, faculty felt the virtual Honors courses were inferior to face-to-face discussion-based Honors courses but still better than face-to-face lecture-based regular courses. As one faculty member described, a virtual course:

is not as exciting as being in a face-to-face class. Seeing a dozen of them in Skype in their bedrooms across the state is not the same as having them in the room. And I can't be spontaneous. And while they have the opportunity to collaborate, I don't think it's as meaningful as if they are sitting in a room together.

Another instructor concurred:

The main thing was, [in] Philosophy, there's a lot of discussion. It's important that students are able to freely express themselves as they need. And the [learning management system] kind of hampered that, because they would have to turn on their microphone before they could speak, and they just couldn't speak out. Running discussions, I found, was very, very difficult.

Instructors worried about keeping virtual students engaged and on-task; as one instructor said, “It's hard for [students] to pay attention, even the Honors ones. . . . You can see Facebook reflected in their glasses on the Skype session,” although she also acknowledged that “I'm sure that would happen in a face-to-face classroom” as well. To help keep students engaged, the college encouraged students to log into their Honors courses from each campus's dedicated AH Lounge; accordingly, some clusters of

classmates were located in the same physical space. Although attending from the lounge was not a requirement, many AH students preferred to “go to class” in this way.

When asked about their experience, some AH students felt synchronous online courses were no different from face-to-face courses. One student said, “It was just like a classroom. American Honors uses this [learning management system] which works so seamlessly for online, it is really nice. You don’t even consider it online.” Another said that in “a virtual classroom, you’re still there, you’re still present, the professors are there, and we’re all still talking and having discussions, and you can raise your hand and everything, but it just takes place in a digital world.” On the other hand, some students found the synchronous courses “disorienting” or complained that the format inhibited discussion. Overall, however, when students were asked to rate synchronous online Honors courses, they typically rated them as a 4 (“very good”), which was fairly consistent with the rest of the Honors course ratings.

## **6. Providing Wraparound Supports**

Quad Learning aspired to create a coordinated model of wraparound support by packaging its activities within a cohorted program, with AH advisors serving as built-in mentors. To facilitate student support and personal growth, AH maintained a small ratio of students to advisors and included a leadership seminar in its standard curriculum. Moreover, as each cohort of students took small-enrollment courses together, QL hoped they would naturally build social support networks, which the program designers hoped to reinforce through a dedicated physical space (an “Honors Lounge”) as well as through social and campus activities (facilitated by the advisor). In this section, we discuss how each of these components worked in practice.

### **6.1 Intensive Advising**

In an earlier section, we discussed the experiences of AH and non-AH students in terms of transfer advising; here, we discuss the other aspects of advising. In general, AH students said they met with their assigned advisor regularly to discuss issues such as course selection and major selection, and many felt a strong sense of personal connection



with, and personal support from, their advisors. In contrast, most non-AH students did more self-advising, did not have a personal relationship with any particular advisor, and sometimes had negative perceptions of advisors.

**Major and course selection.** In interviews, all students were asked if they had selected a major, how they had selected that major, and from whom they received advice regarding major selection. AH students typically reported that their advisor had provided them with guidance, including how to evaluate whether a particular major was a good fit for them—for example, by encouraging students to reflect on their interests and passions, or by connecting students with people working in that field. One student recounted how his AH advisor encouraged him to re-evaluate his major choice: “He pointed out, ‘Your heart doesn’t seem in it, and you have to do some soul searching and see what you want to do.’” AH students also worked with their advisors each semester to select and schedule courses that were aligned with their career and transfer goals.

In contrast, non-AH students typically selected their major and courses on their own. If students felt they needed advice, they had to seek it on their own. One student said: “So we have advisors that will set up an education plan for us, but it’s up to us to go meet with them and say, ‘This is my end goal, how do I get there?’” Due to the fact that each non-AH advisor saw a revolving set of hundreds of students each term, they were unfamiliar with each student’s particular circumstances. As one non-AH student complained: “It’s very difficult not having enough student advisors to actually know who you are, know your career path, and things like that.” This lack of holistic understanding often led to advising mistakes; some non-AH students reported that they had been told to take classes they did not actually need; others said that they did not have confidence that advisors had correct and up-to-date information.

**Personal relationships and support.** When discussing AH advisors, it was common for AH students to say that their advisor was proactive about checking-in and providing support and responded to requests quickly. One student contrasted his AH advisor against the college’s regular advising:

The support is a lot better, it’s just more interaction. And then my advisor checks up on me every day, and any time I have any problems, I just email him and he replies within one or two hours when he can. It has just made this whole

process and this whole situation of being full-time and trying to balance everything, it has just made it a lot easier.

The accessibility of AH advisors facilitated closer and more personal relationships between advisors and students. As one older AH student recounted:

For me coming back—and academics were never the issue, it wasn't my intellect that was the problem—but still, coming back as an older student, it's scary. And having the support and the people there—to remind you that you are worth it, and they see your potential, and you are not just a mere statistic or a number—I think that goes a long way.

A number of AH students reported that they felt comfortable going to advisors with personal issues, or that AH advisors had supported them through rough patches, enabling them to persist with college. As one AH student said, “So whenever anything is going wrong, I talk to her, or if I have a life issue, I talk to her.”

Among the non-AH interviewees, few reported feeling a close connection to college advisors. While non-AH advisors were generally characterized as “helpful” or “friendly,” students often could not provide names of a specific advisor who had helped them. Students involved in “boutique” programs at the colleges, such as PTK, TRIO, or programs for students of color, were an exception to this trend. Most of these programs had dedicated advisors (who were sometimes faculty members, administrators, or alumni taking on a mentorship role) who focused on only a small group of students. As one non-AH student observed about TRIO advising:

To be honest, I pretty much never see my general advisor. Not anything bad about that, it's just I had more of a connection with TRIO from when I started here. TRIO was more open, and the advisor thing was, “I'm your advisor, here's my number.” I was like, “Okay, cool.”

## **6.2 Leadership Seminar**

As part of the AH program, all students were required to enroll in a leadership seminar, which was developed and taught by AH advisors, typically in the student's first semester. QL envisioned the seminar as not just a support (such as a college success course), but also as a vehicle for students to re-envision themselves as individuals with agency and with unique cultural and personal strengths: people who were worthy of

attending top-tier colleges. For two colleges, the seminar functioned as a for-credit replacement for a required college success course; for the other four colleges, the seminar was a noncredit cocurricular experience (sometimes on top of a required college success course). In addition to typical college success topics and an introduction to transfer school exploration, the leadership seminar emphasized the development of leadership skills and included work on a community service project.

To develop general leadership skills, students learned about various leadership styles, watched TED Talk videos, and identified their own strengths and weaknesses as leaders. Although AH advisors told us about these components, student interviewees rarely mentioned them. Students also created resumes and prepared for interviews—activities which received mixed reviews. One advisor acknowledged that because each seminar included international students, recent U.S. high school graduates, and returning nontraditional students, some of the defined activities did not always work well:

Trying to meet the needs of all of those students by doing one thing, or by having one piece of information presented to them, has not worked very well. For example, with the resume building, I had students say, “This is fantastic; I’ve never done this before,” . . . [and I had] other students who are like, “I have had heard this five different times from five different teachers/instructors. I don’t need this help.” And so tailoring it to the student needs has really been a challenge.

In addition, the seminar included a community service or experiential learning project called Leadership in Action, which was executed very differently at each college. At some colleges, students identified a community need and created a group project to address that need, while at other colleges, students could participate in an individual or group-based “campus or community engagement” of their choice. One college encouraged students to fulfill this engagement through an internship or job-shadowing experience. Regardless of the type of project, students were expected to present or write a reflection paper about the activity, their role, and what they learned in the process of completing the project. Student interviewees unanimously agreed that Leadership in Action was the most beneficial aspect of the seminar. For most, it was the only course in their entire community college experience that included a community service or

engagement component. Students enjoyed the service learning projects because they were contributing to their communities and learning to interact with different kinds of people; they also felt the group projects were valuable in connecting them with fellow AH students. As one said, “I like that we came together . . . and it was other people I’m kind of the closest with, because we worked on projects and our leadership project together.” When the seminar was offered for credit, advisors were more comfortable requiring an in-depth and structured community service project, which in turn seemed to create more meaningful experiences for students.

### **6.3 Honors Lounge**

To reinforce a sense of community among AH students, each college provided an on-campus Honors Lounge for AH students’ exclusive use. Several colleges provided computer stations in the lounge; one college offered programming in the lounge, such as “movie nights”; and another college located the lounge next to AH advisors’ offices, which created easy access to advisors. Almost all AH student interviewees used the lounge frequently for studying and socializing—several times per week, or even several times per day.

Students at the college with synchronous online Honors courses often used the lounge to attend virtual classes, and students across several colleges reported that they used the lounge primarily to study, and that it was a good place to meet with fellow students who could support them academically. One student explained:

We study as a group in there. . . . We have people who are good at math and the other people who are good at English, and so if you have a problem, you can ask someone to proofread a paper [or] help you with this math equation.

Other students reported that their lounge was more conducive to socializing than studying, although its climate varied according to the time of day. Some students were annoyed that their lounge was sometimes too loud for studying, but most appreciated the opportunity to create and strengthen their social connections in the physical space. As one student described her college’s lounge:

It has its quiet moments, its loud moments, but it’s a great environment though. I’ve met a lot of my friends in American Honors through going in the lounge. And I

encourage people that join AH to go into the lounge and utilize the space if they can, because it's a great place to drop your books before class; it's a great place to get to know other students.

Several students observed that they utilized the lounge more often during their first terms in college, and then used it less frequently as they became bogged down with homework and found the space less conducive to study. It may be that as students became more established at their colleges, they relied less on the lounge to meet people and make friends.

#### **6.4 Overall Social, Campus, and Community Connections**

In addition to encouraging social connections through the program's small class sizes and Honors Lounge, and encouraging community activities through the leadership seminar, AH advisors helped students create an American Honors club at each college. All AH students belonged to the club, which organized a variety of optional social and community activities. To understand whether AH and high-performing non-AH students differed in terms of their overall social, campus, and community connections, we asked students to discuss their experiences with community service, club participation, academic and nonacademic service usage (outside of advising), and social connections on campus. Overall, the differences between the two groups were minor.

In terms of community service and club participation, we saw broad variation within each group. The only clear difference between the groups was that almost all AH students participated in some type of community service or engagement as part of the leadership seminar, while only three non-AH students reported that they had taken a course requiring community service. Many AH and non-AH students reported participating in community service through clubs including AH, PTK, and other organizations, although these efforts were not always particularly meaningful. For example, one student felt the AH club's community service was superficial and not well thought out:

It's more of just a, "Oh we're an Honors organization, I guess we have to do some kind of minimal amount of community service or minimal amount of anything to justify calling ourselves an Honors community." So, it feels

really disjointed, and I feel that there should be a bit more going on outside the classroom to really call this an Honors Society or Honors organization.

In terms of academic and nonacademic service familiarity and usage, the AH and non-AH groups were similar in terms of their familiarity with campus resources such as the learning center, tutoring services, mental health counseling, and financial aid. Within both the AH and non-AH group, students who were part of campus organizations, or who had jobs on campus (such as in career centers or as tutors) seemed to have a stronger knowledge of support services available. Regardless, AH students tended to rely heavily on their AH advisors for support rather than using other campus resources; the primary non-AH service they used was tutoring. Our non-AH interviewees (who were selected based on their academic success at the college) typically did not need specific campus resources but were comfortable using them when necessary. Indeed, non-AH interviewees tended to believe that students who were not successful were responsible for their own lack of success. As one said:

I feel that there is plenty of support here. There's plenty of resources to succeed. I can't take your hand and make you succeed. You have to want to succeed. And I'll give you every—and [this college] gives students—every resource they need to succeed. It's the student's choice whether to obtain that.

In terms of the overall extent of social connections, some AH students had made close friends in the program, and others had only created a circle of acquaintances, but in general, AH students reported that they were part of a connected student community. The cohorted nature of the program and the designated spaces for AH students made it easy for students to build relationships with one another, as this student observed:

With the American Honors, you automatically become more engaged, because you keep seeing the same faces, the same names. You're working with these kids in different classes, different semesters, and you do become more engaged. I feel like it's more open to go and talk to other kids. I won't even know their names, but I hear they're talking about the class I've taken or something. I'll usually interject or something.

Among non-AH students, some also had a wide and diverse set of acquaintances or close friends on campus, particularly those who belonged to clubs or had on-campus jobs. However, our non-AH interviewees were more likely to be older and part-time in college. These students were in college to pursue specific goals and were less interested in having a socially engaging college experience. When asked about their relationships with other students, many non-AH students noted that building friendships was not a priority. As one said, “I’m here to get an education, not make friends. If I make friends, that’s awesome. But that’s secondary.”

## **7. Did the Theory of Change Work?**

Overall, our qualitative analyses suggest that the AH program was successful in implementing the key components of its theory of change. In this section, we explore the estimated effects of those components on students’ retention, graduation, and transfer outcomes. Analyses in this section use records from QL’s applicant database, which contained information on nearly 12,000 domestic U.S. applicants to American Honors between fall 2014 and fall 2016, matched with National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) data.

First, we discuss how we used AH applicant and NSC records to define three key subgroups of domestic AH students: dual-enrollment students, recent high school graduates, and older continuing community college students. Second, we discuss how we identified similar non-AH comparison groups for inferential analysis. Third, we discuss the inferential results, which suggest that AH improved the outcomes of students who would otherwise have enrolled in the regular community college, but dampened the outcomes of students who would otherwise have enrolled in a four-year institution.

### **7.1 Identifying Applicant Segments and Subgroups**

Based on their date of high school graduation, AH applicants fell into three groups: High school students interested in taking dual-enrollment courses through AH (6 percent), graduating high school students interested in entering AH as college freshman students (42 percent), and older students who departed high school a year or more ago

(48 percent). Table 2 shows the proportions of each group who were accepted into and enrolled in AH, and the proportion who were matched with the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) data such that we could track their long-term outcomes.

As Table 2 shows, older students were less likely to be accepted or to enroll in American Honors. This pattern is consistent with interview data suggesting that many continuing community college applicants had already taken non-Honors versions of college courses offered by AH, which may have influenced reviewers to decline their applications, or influenced admitted students to decline the program invitation, because there were not enough Honors courses available that these students had not already taken. In addition, some colleges offered the AH program on a full-time basis only, which may have dissuaded older students who needed to attend part-time. Across all applicants in our database, 83 percent were matched with NSC records; of those, 61 percent had already attended some college, and 50 percent had already attended one of the six community colleges that were the target of our study.<sup>5</sup> Among older students, 82 percent were continuing students at the given target college; some may have previously participated in the college’s pre-AH version of Honors courses, although we do not have records to that effect. Dual-enrollment (41 percent) and graduating high school students (11 percent) were also somewhat likely to have already attended the target college (presumably to earn dual-enrollment credits).

**Table 2**  
**Segments of Applicants**

	Dual-Enrollment Student ( <i>n</i> = 639)	Graduating High School Student ( <i>n</i> = 4,931)	Older Student ( <i>n</i> = 6,052)	Total
Age at targeted entry term	17.07	18.46	27.19	23.07
Accepted into AH	41%	50%	34%	41%
Enrolled in AH	27%	21%	12%	17%
Matched with NSC	84%	81%	85%	83%
Of those matched...				
Prior college (any)	43%	23%	93%	61%
Prior college (target CC)	41%	11%	82%	50%

<sup>5</sup> Among students who were known to enroll in AH, 88 percent were matched with NSC records. Thus it is probable that at least 12 percent of the larger applicant population also went unmatched due to insufficient match information rather than due to lack of any college enrollment.



Among AH applicants matched with the NSC ( $n = 9,634$ ), Table 3 disaggregates students by applicant segment, as well as by whether they eventually enrolled in AH (“AH”) or not (“non-AH”). In order to classify students as community college versus four-year college students, we examined their NSC enrollment records during the “target term” (the expected term of initial American Honors enrollment, based on their recruitment cycle). Table 3 shows that in the target term, 86 percent of NSC-matched AH applicants enrolled in college, including 11 percent who enrolled at a four-year college and 76 percent who enrolled in a two-year college. Among AH enrollees, 96 percent enrolled in the target college during the target term. Whether they participated in AH or not, almost all two-year enrollees were at one of our six target community colleges, which led us to wonder how many who enrolled in AH were truly net-new to the college. A supplemental analysis showed that among older students who enrolled in AH, 81 percent were already students at the target college prior to the target term; none of these would qualify as net-new. In addition, the non-AH columns in Table 3 provide some sense of where AH students might have enrolled during the target term in absence of the program; it seems most would have enrolled in the target community college anyway, although some would have enrolled in a four-year college instead. Thus if an AH student was net-new to the target college, it was likely because the program pulled the student away from four-year college enrollment.

**Table 3**  
**Target-Term Enrollment Patterns by Applicant Segment and AH Participation**  
**(Among NSC Matches)**

	Dual-Enrollment Student ( $n = 537$ )		Graduating High School Student ( $n = 3,970$ )		Older Student ( $n = 5,127$ )		Total
	non-AH	AH	non-AH	AH	non-AH	AH	
Enrolled in target term	86%	93%	86%	97%	83%	97%	86%
Enrolled in 4-year college	1%		27%	1%	4%	1%	11%
Enrolled in 2-year college	85%	93%	59%	96%	79%	96%	76%
Enrolled in target CC	84%	93%	55%	96%	78%	96%	74%

Students who co-enrolled at both a two-year and a four-year college in the target term were classified as four-year entrants. Students who did not enroll in any college during the target term (about 14 percent of NSC matches) were excluded from further

analysis. In addition, Table 3 includes some small segments of students who were excluded from further analysis: four-year college entrants who were also dual-enrollment students, AH program enrollees, or older students (about 2 percent of the NSC matches); and entrants into a two-year college that was not one of our six targets (about 2 percent of the NSC matches).

## **7.2 Identifying Comparison Groups for AH Enrollees**

Among the remaining  $n = 7,970$  NSC-matched AH applicants, applicants fell into three different groups based on AH admission: (1) applicants who were “Not Accepted” into AH (54 percent); (2) applicants who were accepted into AH but “Declined AH” (26 percent); and (3) “AH Enrollees” (21 percent). To explore the most appropriate comparison groups for AH Enrollees, we examined the demographic background information of each admission group (Not Accepted, Declined AH, AH Enrollees) by each applicant segment (Dual-enrollment, Graduating HS, or Older Student), as shown in Appendix A.

In general, Not Accepted students were dissimilar to AH Enrollees. For example, among students graduating from high school and enrolling in community college, Not Accepted students were more disadvantaged than AH Enrollees: They were 10 percentage points more likely to be first-generation college students (49 percent vs. 39 percent), had substantially lower high school GPAs (3.20 vs. 3.48), were more likely to be missing a standardized test score (71 percent vs. 40 percent), and had lower standardized test scores when reported (52.11 vs. 59.95 percentile). In contrast, Declined AH students who entered the regular community college were more similar to AH Enrollees in their demographic characteristics and academic metrics (e.g., 40 percent first-generation, 3.47 GPA, 46 percent missing standardized a test score, 56.60 test percentile when reported), although they had lower neighborhood median household incomes (around \$53,000) compared to both AH Enrollees (around \$57,000) and Not Accepted students (around \$55,000). When shifting the focus to high school graduates entering the four-year sector, Not Accepted four-year entrants continued to be a poor match for AH Enrollees, with higher rates of first-generation status and worse academic metrics, while four-year entrants who Declined AH continued to be a good match for AH Enrollees, with relatively similar demographic and academic characteristics. Four-year

entrants who Declined AH also had similar neighborhood median incomes as AH Enrollees (around \$57,000).

If we had complete and detailed academic information on all students, we might retain the Not Accepted groups in our analysis and attempt to control for their dissimilar academic profile. However, the recruitment dataset contained large amounts of missing data for academic indicators, particularly for dual-enrollment students and continuing community college students. Accordingly, it seemed wise to rely on the AH admissions committees' decisions as to whether each student had strong academic qualifications and to discard the Not Accepted students from analysis. Because over half of dual-enrollment applicants were Not Accepted, this decision resulted in very small sample sizes for the dual-enrollment population. Due to these small sample sizes, and the fact that dual-enrollment students were not the focus of the AH program's theory of change (indeed, a formal dual-enrollment option was offered by only two of the target colleges), we also discarded the dual-enrollment population from further analysis. Overall, our final inferential dataset included  $n = 3,463$  students.

Among high school students entering college, the AH Enrollees treatment group ( $n = 889$ ) was contrasted against two different comparison groups: Students who Declined AH and entered community college ( $n = 557$ ), versus students who Declined AH and entered four-year college ( $n = 417$ ). Among continuing community college students, the AH Enrollees group ( $n = 609$ ) was contrasted against students who Declined AH ( $n = 991$ ).

In order to understand the differential college costs between each group, we matched IPEDS information to each student's college of enrollment in the target term and calculated the college's sticker price based on the student's in- or out-of-state residency status. On average, students who Declined AH and entered four-year colleges faced annual tuition and fees of \$19,894, plus on-campus room and board costs of \$11,120. In contrast, students who entered a regular community college faced an average of \$4,033 in tuition and fees. AH Enrollees paid an additional premium of \$2,213 on average, resulting in a total of \$7,899, or just 40 percent of the tuition and fees of their four-year peers.

### 7.3 Outcome Analyses

Our analyses examined the following persistence, graduation, and transfer outcomes: (1) among all students, whether they were still enrolled in any college at 1, 2, or 3 years after the target term; (2) among community college students, whether they had enrolled in a four-year college by 1, 2, or 3 years of the target term; (3) among community college students, whether they had earned an associate degree within 2, 3, or 4 years of the target term; (4) among all students, whether they had earned a bachelor's degree within 4 years of the target term; and (5) among those who ever attended a four-year college, whether that college was out-of-state, private, or more selective. Due to the timing of the NSC follow-up matching (summer 2018), analyses include all entry cohorts (2014, 2015, and 2016) for outcomes occurring within two years of the target term, but only earlier cohorts had longer-term follow-up data. We were able to capture *within*-four-year graduation outcomes for the earliest entrants (fall 2014), but not *at* four-years-later enrollment (fall 2018).

Table 4 provides descriptive outcomes for each treatment and comparison group. To provide a full picture of both two-year and four-year entrants' enrollment patterns, the table provides retention metrics (whether the student was enrolled in each type of college during the term exactly "*at*" 1, 2, or 3 years later) as well as transfer metrics (whether a community college student transferred "*by*" a certain term, i.e., enrolled in a four-year college *before or at* 1, 2, or 3 years later). For associate degree outcomes, unfortunately one of our six target colleges did not report associate degrees to the NSC. Thus in Table 4 we present two versions of the associate degree outcomes: The first includes reported associate degree rates across all six colleges, and the second excludes the non-reporting college. Among those who ever attended a four-year college, in addition to outcomes related to the type of college, Table 4 also provides the price of tuition and fees at the time of the student's first enrollment in the college.

**Table 4**  
**Descriptive Enrollment, Graduation, and Transfer Outcomes for the**  
**Treatment and Comparison Groups**

	Graduating from High School			Continuing CC Student	
	Declined AH, CC Entrant	AH Enrollees	Declined AH, 4-Year Entrant	Declined AH	AH Enrollees
All cohorts (2014–2016)	<i>n</i> = 557	<i>n</i> = 889	<i>n</i> = 417	<i>n</i> = 991	<i>n</i> = 609
Enrolled any at 1 year later	78%	85%	90%	78%	79%
Enrolled 2-year at 1 year later	68%	79%	8%	58%	59%
Enrolled 4-year at 1 year later	11%	6%	83%	21%	20%
Transferred 4-year by 1 year later	11%	7%	-	22%	21%
Associate degree within 2 years	21%	30%	2%	32%	35%
Associate degree within 2 years*	25%	36%	3%	35%	42%
Cohorts 2014–2015	<i>n</i> = 343	<i>n</i> = 482	<i>n</i> = 222	<i>n</i> = 721	<i>n</i> = 394
Enrolled any at 2 years later	66%	66%	86%	60%	60%
Enrolled 2-year at 2 years later	35%	24%	9%	27%	17%
Enrolled 4-year at 2 years later	31%	42%	78%	34%	44%
Transferred 4-year by 2 years later	33%	44%	-	40%	49%
Associate degree within 3 years	34%	42%	5%	44%	44%
Associate degree within 3 years*	39%	51%	6%	49%	54%
Cohort 2014	<i>n</i> = 152	<i>n</i> = 151	<i>n</i> = 86	<i>n</i> = 435	<i>n</i> = 190
Enrolled any at 3 years later	48%	66%	80%	43%	48%
Enrolled 2-year at 3 years later	12%	12%	7%	12%	9%
Enrolled 4-year at 3 years later	36%	54%	73%	32%	40%
Transferred by 3 years later	41%	56%	-	49%	57%
Associate degree within 4 years	44%	47%	9%	49%	39%
Associate degree within 4 years*	49%	57%	11%	55%	55%
Bachelor’s degree within 4 years	8%	16%	28%	20%	26%
Those ever enrolled in 4-year	<i>n</i> = 178	<i>n</i> = 299	<i>n</i> = 417	<i>n</i> = 422	<i>n</i> = 284
Out-of-state (vs. in-state)	16%	26%	20%	17%	23%
Private (vs. public)	25%	26%	35%	31%	31%
Inclusive	31%	22%	24%	34%	21%
Somewhat selective	42%	34%	40%	42%	39%
More selective	26%	44%	36%	23%	40%
4-year college tuition/fees	\$31K	\$36K	\$36K	\$32K	\$35K

\* Excluding the community college that did not report associate degree outcomes.

Overall, Table 4 suggests that compared to community college peers, AH Enrollees were more likely to persist, earn an associate degree, transfer to a four-year college, and graduate with a bachelor’s degree (although those differences seem very clear among the segment graduating from high school, and much less clear among the segment continuing in community college). Among community college students who ever transferred, AH Enrollees also seemed more likely to transfer to an out-of-state, more-selective, and slightly more expensive destination. When compared to four-year

entrants, however, AH Enrollees seemed *less* likely to persist, ever enroll in a four-year college, or graduate with a bachelor's degree within four years. On the other hand, students who enrolled in AH directly after high school and eventually transferred to a four-year college did seem to attend more out-of-state and more-selective destinations than did native four-year entrants.

In order to control for background characteristics, we examined key outcomes using logistic regression models. Available covariates included: to which target college the student applied for the AH program; the year and season of the target term; high school GPA, standardized test percentile, and whether Advanced Placement test credit was reported; gender, age, first-generation status, and full-time intent; neighborhood median income; college credits earned by the time of application; and indicators of missingness for gender and for each academic metric. Given that the distributions of the academic metrics were similar across groups (when reported) and that large proportions of the academic metrics were missing, our primary Model 1 excludes the academic metrics. Among students who had just graduated from high school, academic metrics were relatively more complete. For this population, as a sensitivity check, Model 2 restricts the sample to students who had at least one of the academic metrics on record and includes all available academic metrics as well as missing indicators where metrics are unavailable. The results for the two models are quite similar, although Model 2 tends to have larger standard errors due to its smaller sample sizes. For both models, we encountered multicollinearity issues for associate degree outcomes when including the non-reporting community college, and for the bachelor's degree outcome when including students who reported the intent to attend college part-time (who could not realistically graduate within four years). Accordingly, models for the associate degree outcomes exclude the non-reporting college, and models for the bachelor's degree outcomes exclude the small proportion of students who reported part-time intent. For recent high school graduates, we also excluded age, as almost all students were 18 or 19 years old.

Table 5 summarizes the Model 1 and 2 results for a range of outcomes among students who applied to AH as they were graduating from high school; for each model, the table includes logit coefficients and their standard errors, as well as the model-based difference in the predicted probability of the outcome for AH Enrollees versus peers who

Declined AH. The first four columns of results (“AH vs CC”) compare AH Enrollees to students who Declined AH and entered the regular community college; the second two columns (“AH vs 4-Year”) compare AH Enrollees to students who Declined AH and entered a four-year college. The results in Table 5 support initial impressions from Table 4: AH students had stronger academic outcomes than similar peers who enrolled in the regular community college but weaker outcomes than similar peers who enrolled directly in a four-year college. Compared to their community college peers, AH students were more likely to remain enrolled in college, earn an associate degree, and transfer to a four-year college; they also tended to stay in community college for longer (perhaps to finish the associate degree) before transferring. Although sample sizes of students tracked into year 4 are small, and therefore standard errors are too large to draw any firm conclusions, it seems likely that AH students will also eventually have higher bachelor’s completion rates. Compared to their four-year peers, however, AH students were less likely to stay enrolled or earn a bachelor’s degree within four years.

Among the just-graduated population who ever attended a four-year college, Table 6 summarizes the Model 1 and 2 results regarding the type of four-year college attended. Compared to students who Declined AH and attended community college, AH Enrollees were more likely to attend an out-of-state or more selective college. Compared to students who Declined AH and enrolled directly in a four-year college, AH Enrollees were similar in terms of their likelihood of ever attending an out-of-state or selective four-year college but were less likely to attend a private four-year institution.

**Table 5**  
**College Retention, Transfer, and Graduation Outcomes Among Recent High School Graduates Accepted to AH: Logit Coefficient, Standard Error, and Change in Predicted Probability, Controlling for Background Variables**

Timing	Model Type	AH vs CC: Enrolled Anywhere	AH vs CC: Transfer 4-Year	AH vs CC: Associate Degree	AH vs CC: Bachelor's Degree	AH vs 4-Year: Enrolled Anywhere	AH vs 4-Year: Bachelor's Degree
1 Year	1	0.30 (0.15) 0.06*	-0.48 (0.20) -0.05*	N/A	N/A	-0.68 (0.20) -0.10**	N/A
	2	0.53 (0.17) 0.11**	-0.58 (0.25) -0.07*	N/A	N/A	-0.76 (0.23) -0.12***	N/A
2 Years	1	-0.12 (0.16) -0.03	0.43 (0.16) 0.08**	0.39 (0.14) 0.05**	N/A	-1.36 (0.23) -0.30***	N/A
	2	0.08 (0.18) 0.02	0.38 (0.18) 0.07*	0.40 (0.17) 0.04*	N/A	-1.32 (0.25) -0.28***	N/A
3 Years	1	0.63 (0.25) 0.16*	0.53 (0.26) 0.12*	0.34 (0.17) 0.06*	N/A	-0.75 (0.35) -0.18*	N/A
	2	0.69 (0.29) 0.17**	0.40 (0.29) 0.09*	0.37 (0.20) 0.06	N/A	-0.83 (0.38) -0.20*	N/A
4 Years	1	N/A	N/A	0.14 (0.28) 0.03	0.47 (0.42) 0.04	N/A	-0.91 (0.39) -0.11*
	2	N/A	N/A	0.26 (0.32) 0.05	0.31 (0.49) 0.02	N/A	-1.18 (0.44) -0.10**

Note. Sample sizes are larger for short-term outcomes; see Table 4 for details.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Table 6**  
**Type of Four-Year Institution Attended, Among Recent High School Graduates Accepted to AH: Logit Coefficient, Standard Error, and Change in Predicted Probability, Controlling for Background Variables**

	Model Type	Out-Of-State	Private	More Selective
AH vs. CC entrants	1	0.53 (0.26) 0.06*	-0.01(0.24) 0.00	0.65 (0.22) 0.10**
	2	0.33 (0.32) 0.03	0.08 (0.29) 0.01	0.68 (0.27) 0.11*
AH vs. 4-year entrants	1	0.15 (0.21) 0.02	-0.56 (0.19) -0.10**	0.24 (0.18) 0.05
	2	0.09 (0.24) 0.01	-0.63 (0.21) -0.11**	0.23 (0.21) 0.05

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$



Turning the focus to continuing community college students accepted by AH, Tables 7 and 8 summarize the results of Model 1, comparing AH Enrollees to their peers who Declined AH in terms of retention, transfer, graduation, and type of four-year destination. (Note that for this population, almost all applicant records were missing GPA and test score information, which made Model 2 infeasible.) The results suggest that continuing community college AH Enrollees fared similarly to their Declined AH peers in terms of retention, graduation, and overall transfer rates. However, among students who transferred, AH Enrollees were more likely to attend a more selective college.

**Table 7**  
**College Retention, Transfer, and Graduation Outcomes Among Continuing Community College Students Accepted to AH: Logit Coefficient, Standard Error, and Change in Predicted Probability, Controlling for All Background Variables**

	AH vs CC: Enrolled Anywhere	AH vs CC: Transfer 4-Year	AH vs CC: Associate Degree	AH vs CC: Bachelor's Degree
1 Year	0.01 (0.15) 0.00	-0.18 (0.15) -0.03	-0.34 (0.20) -0.03	N/A
2 Years	-0.02 (0.14) 0.00	0.24 (0.14) 0.06	0.12 (0.14) 0.03	N/A
3 Years	0.13 (0.19) 0.03	0.21 (0.20) 0.05	0.01 (0.16) 0.00	-0.41 (0.25) -0.02
4 Years	N/A	N/A	-0.41 (0.24) -0.10	-0.20 (0.23) -0.02

*Note.* Due to multicollinearity issues, for associate degree outcomes the non-reporting community college is excluded. Sample sizes are larger and thus standard errors are smaller for short-term outcomes.

**Table 8**  
**Ever Attended Four-Year of This Type, Among Continuing Community College Students Accepted to AH: Logit Coefficient, Standard Error, and Change in Predicted Probability, Controlling for Background Variables**

	Out-Of-State	Private	More Selective
AH vs. CC entrants	0.39 (0.22) 0.04	-0.04 (0.19) -0.01	0.71 (0.21) 0.05***

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

## 7.4 Summary

Among high school graduates who enrolled in AH, Table 3 suggests that perhaps two thirds of them would have begun their pathway to a bachelor's degree in a community college even in the absence of the program. For this segment of AH Enrollees, entering the AH program was a good bet: They paid an additional \$2,200 per year for a high-quality wraparound experience that substantially improved their chances of staying in college, earning an associate degree, transferring to a four-year college (and, in particular, a more selective college), and succeeding at that college. Indeed, AH staff provided many examples of first-generation students in the program who went on to elite destinations with strong financial aid packages, and who never would have considered such destinations without the support of the intensive advising model.

Unfortunately, the picture was not so bright for the perhaps one third of high school graduates who entered AH but would otherwise have directly entered a four-year college. For these students, entering the program was a poor bet: Although they saved nearly \$12,000 per year in tuition and fees across their first two years of college, they substantially decreased their chances of remaining in college and graduating with a bachelor's degree within four years. Finally, for continuing community college students who had the option of participating in AH for the latter portion of their community college experience, the program had limited benefits. For these students, entering the program was probably worth it only if the student aspired to transfer to a more selective institution.

One key limitation of our analysis was a lack of financial aid data, which may have played a role in both program selection and program outcomes. For example, among recent high school graduates making the choice between enrolling in AH or in a four-year college, students might be inclined to select a four-year college if that institution offered them a full scholarship, but inclined to consider AH if the four-year college offered them only a partial scholarship. Accordingly, the strong negative coefficients in the right-hand columns of Table 5 may be driven in part by differential financial aid offerings. AH entrants may also have been unaware that four-year institutions typically prioritize first-time freshman students in terms of scholarship allocation (Wyner et al., 2016). Thus, by declining an initial partial scholarship from a four-year college, AH students may have

been forgoing any future four-year scholarships, which would further contribute to the negative coefficients in Table 5. While AH staff believed that many of their graduates received strong financial aid offers from destination colleges, the program did not have systematic data on this point.

## **8. The Evolving Business Partnership and Model**

As a venture capital-backed endeavor with a social entrepreneurship mission, QL hoped to improve community college student outcomes while also generating a profit. As part of its initial “sales pitch” to each community college, QL had promised that the partnership would increase enrollment numbers, generate more revenue for the colleges, and provide their students with opportunities to transfer to more selective universities. However, the AH program’s partnership structure proved to be neither profitable nor sustainable for QL after the initial implementation phase. In this section, we first discuss the tenor of the relationship between QL and its partnering community colleges. We then discuss specific challenges around each component of the QL business model: affordable pricing, economies of scale, and high volumes of enrollment.

### **8.1 The Relationship: Stakeholder Perceptions of QL**

At all six colleges, a top administrator first heard about AH and recommended that the college consider joining the network. One college took a “top-down” and “whirlwind” approach to joining the network, most other colleges involved a small set of key faculty stakeholders in the decision-making but were not highly inclusive, and one was highly inclusive. The inclusivity of the decision-making process was obviously and directly correlated with the faculty’s interest in the program and their initial willingness to teach the courses. In general, AH was not an easy sell to faculty, who questioned the profit-making nature of QL. As one administrator recalled:

I think the first challenge was: “Are these people going to do what they say they’re going to do?” You know, “Are they just sales people? It’s not a public entity; it’s a for-profit. But it’s really not a for-profit. But how is that going to work? Are they really going to be able to deliver on what

they say they're going to deliver on?" So I think that was a challenge.

Another faculty member captured the anxiety expressed by many interviewees:

I think the for-profit aspect of it turned a lot of people off. . . . I mean, one would like to think it doesn't contaminate [the program], but it has to in the long haul. I asked [the QL CEO] about this, and he's like, "Look, investors, they just give me a check and that's it, right? It's like Hillary Clinton about her campaign bill, right?" And I'm like, "Okay," but at a certain point—they understand they are in this for the long haul, this is education, it's not Wall Street—but at some point they need to see a return on their investment or they're going to withdraw their funding, and so how does that play into the local micro-level of an individual program?

In addition to concerns about QL itself, at three colleges some faculty were concerned about establishing or expanding any honors program at all. At a college with a long-established honors curriculum, one administrator recounted that "since we began the honors program, even before our partnership with American Honors, there have been people on campus, and there continue to be [people] on campus, who feel it's not democratic, that serving honors students is not necessarily part of our mission."

These concerns were magnified at colleges that spent less time engaging faculty in the AH partnership process at the front end; these colleges experienced a major "political loss" in their rush to adopt and implement the program without much discussion and faculty buy-in. As one faculty interviewee at the "top-down" college told us, "Some people just hold on, they are just pissed off. They are not going to join it until it's independent of American Honors. . . . People say, 'I'm just waiting for their money to dry up. And then we will have an honors program and I'll love to teach in it.'" One administrator, expressing regret over how the program was adopted, said, "I wish I could think of a way to reset the clock of how it was introduced; . . . some people's pushback against American Honors is political."

As the partnership developed, QL's "start-up" culture remained unfamiliar and off-putting to many faculty, who were accustomed to a more deliberative approach to decision-making and program-building. Within a short period of time, QL needed to hire

and onboard advisors, instructional designers, and college liaisons, most of whom lacked experience with the community college sector. In order to move quickly enough, QL “operated faster than anyone else” in ways that appeared “disorganized and very frantic” to many stakeholders. High turnover among QL staff at the beginning of the process intensified anxiety among stakeholders. In order to better communicate and connect with faculty, QL hired executives with strong experience in postsecondary education, who devoted considerable time to working with AH deans, directors, and faculty on curricular issues and other academic affairs. As QL connected more directly with faculty, these stakeholders became more comfortable with the program. By the time of our campus visits in 2016, some faculty articulated specific reservations about the program’s business model (as we discuss below), but most believed that QL staff were genuinely passionate about the program’s mission of student success. Many stakeholders also believed that, without QL, they could not have built such a robust honors program. As one interviewee said, “We wouldn’t have done it without them. . . . I’m not sure we would have . . . carved out the time and centrally now the resources—the money—to make it happen.”

Despite a generally positive relationship after the start-up phase, at some colleges an ongoing point of contention was co-branding. College stakeholders characterized QL as aggressively promoting the American Honors brand in marketing and promotional materials, recruitment efforts, and student and campus events, at the expense of the college’s own brand. For example, at local high schools’ college fairs, “there was an [our college] table, and somewhere else in the building there was an [our college] American Honors”; or at other public-facing events, “students that were chosen to talk about their experience . . . talked a lot about American Honors . . . [and] didn’t talk as much about [our college].” Over time, QL became more sensitive to colleges’ concerns about branding. As one college administrator recounted, “When American Honors first came in here, they kind of wanted to brand themselves as American Honors. Their materials were branded as American Honors, and I would say to them, ‘Guys, the reason people are coming to school is to go to [our college], not to American Honors.’” On the other hand, if the AH program was expected to recruit net-new students for its partners, then it needed to assert a national brand identity that was not necessarily tied to each college. On a local basis, this tension was resolved by co-branding materials as “American Honors at

[local college].” Even after QL tried to co-brand better, occasional tensions around the coordination of recruitment events and related branding resurfaced at some colleges.

## **8.2 Affordable Pricing**

As we noted earlier in the paper, students who enrolled in AH felt the program’s price was worth it and did not find the differential tuition difficult to afford; however, more than a third of our non-AH student interviewees specifically mentioned cost as a barrier to program entry. AH students also had slightly higher neighborhood median incomes compared to community college students who were accepted to AH and declined it. Thus the program’s price point may have been too high for many of the low-income students that AH was particularly interested in recruiting and supporting. Moreover, the program’s differential tuition contributed to ongoing tensions with some faculty at each partnering college. As a faculty member at the college with a previously well-established honors curriculum articulated:

I have a fundamental disagreement with the idea that some people should pay more than other people are paying for the same degree. I know the argument is that there’s added value in all of that. I know that argument. It’s still problematic to me. And I know we have had students in the past in [our college] honors program who were phenomenal, who I know would not participate if they had to pay more—I mean some of our greatest success stories. In some cases it’s because they just would not be able to pay one penny more. And in other cases it’s because they would not—they have objections to that idea.

At the same time, however, the pricing was too low for AH to make a profit. According to one news report, “Quad Learning earned about \$2,500 per student per year—a sum that did not cover the costs of operating the program and services” (Wan, 2018).

## **8.3 Economies of Scale**

Originally, QL hoped to keep its per-student costs low by creating a common set of courses delivered through an online platform, which would allow it to develop each course only once before scaling its delivery to large numbers of colleges. Moreover, that common curriculum and set of learning outcomes would allow it to develop and maintain

admissions and articulation partnerships with a wide range of selective colleges. Unfortunately for QL, neither vision was fully realized.

From the outset, faculty at each partnering college were strongly opposed to the notion of a common curriculum with common learning outcomes—particularly when that curriculum would be guided by a for-profit company that had no experience with community college students. Faculty were primarily worried that academic quality and student learning would suffer; they were “concerned about another organization having the potential to influence instruction and curriculum,” as one instructor said. These concerns were layered with worries about intellectual property, frustration with the online platform’s technical performance, skepticism that Honors pedagogy could be delivered through an online medium, and the belief that Honors students would be uninterested in online courses. Among faculty who were initially open to the model, technical difficulties with the platform often turned them against it. One instructor recounted:

The students didn’t have good enough technology for it to be smooth. Many of us teaching the classes didn’t have up-to-date computers that would handle this. And so you spent a lot of time with so-and-so’s mic not working: “Oh can you—my camera,” you know. I mean it’s been 15 minutes of every seminar dealing with that kind of stuff.

Quad Learning eventually abandoned its proprietary platform and encouraged institutions to use their own learning management systems with which faculty were more familiar. Even so, interviewees from several colleges cited instances in which online course sections were canceled due to lack of student enrollment. Given that only one college required the virtual model to fill Honors courses, the initial technical challenges and lackluster enrollment dissuaded the remaining five colleges from experimenting further with the synchronous online model, and they fell back on the institution’s typical course delivery practices. One of these five colleges had a general culture of offering hybrid-online courses; it thus offered several of its Honors courses in that format. At the other four colleges, Honors courses were primarily offered face-to-face by the time of our campus visits.

More broadly, in order for each college to recruit instructors to teach Honors courses, each instructor needed to view the assignment as a requisite, and most faculty

did not view teaching someone else's online course as a perk. As one administrator explained:

Faculty often want to design those academic programs . . . in particular, an honors program which highlights exceptional students. They don't want some third-party private business coming in and saying, "Here's how you should do your honors program." Those are pet projects for faculty . . . and when somebody else tries to force feed that to them, they don't like that very much.

Similarly, a faculty member recalled the outset of the partnership with QL:

When they presented themselves, they saw a vision of quality shared through a network, and I don't know, we just, the faculty here—most of us have PhDs, and we like to design our own courses. . . . Out of all the value that we get from American Honors, turning our courses online was not one of them. That's not what made me think joining that network would be good.

QL also had difficulties securing admissions and articulation agreements with selective and highly selective institutions. Initially, community colleges were particularly excited about this aspect of AH. As one interviewee said, "Relationships with schools across the country can bring opportunities to [our college] students that they might not otherwise have thought of." Another participant said, "What makes our Honors program unique [is] extra advising, the transfer network . . . managing these articulation agreements." Each college knew it was infeasible to secure individual articulation agreements with universities across the nation, but they believed, as one administrator put it, that "the American Honors articulation agreement is for the students that they have" and "are not things that we as a college [have to] manage." AH students also considered the transfer network to be a major part of the program's value; most believed their credits would transfer more seamlessly to colleges within the network. As one student said, "I feel the network that American Honors has with the schools I'm applying to, those schools will give me the most credits—unlike [out-of-state elite university], because they are not on the [AH network] list, and a few others are not on the list as well."

QL invested a substantial amount of time and resources into its transfer network, and signed more than 70 transfer agreements with four-year destinations, including some



highly selective universities. Most agreements specified that if the AH student met key criteria (e.g., completed a certain number of Honors credits, earned a specified GPA, and had no behavioral issues), then the student would be admitted. QL also initially planned to create articulation agreements with its network of four-year colleges in order to ensure that students' credits would seamlessly transfer; however, without a common AH curriculum, the articulation framework became much more daunting. To ease students' credit transfer in the short-term, QL worked to ensure that AH curricula were comprised of courses that readily transfer to most four-year colleges. In addition, AH advisors worked closely with students on Honors and non-Honors course selection and registration, in order to ensure that most or all courses would be transferrable to the student's desired destination colleges. Over the long-term, QL planned to tackle the larger challenge of creating a network of articulation agreements; however, they did not have the opportunity to fulfill this goal before financial exigencies required a shift in the company's strategy.

On the national AH website, QL listed dozens of universities as part of its transfer network, and categorized some as "assured transfer" schools, which carried the suggestion of guaranteed admittance and seamless credit articulation. However, a local journalist concluded, after contacting universities on the AH website, that QL's description of its transfer relationships was overblown. As one example, the journalist cited Michigan State University:

James Cotter, the director of Michigan State University's office of admissions, said American Honors students still have to fulfill normal academic requirements to be accepted to MSU, much like any other student. MSU is an assured transfer institution in the American Honors network. "Basically the term 'assured admission' is their term, it's not ours," he said. "Basically, what they are saying is if you meet the university's criteria, you're in." (Francovich, 2016).

That is, if students completed their associate degree with an AH designation, they would be well qualified for admission to MSU and would almost certainly be accepted—but by no means was MSU guaranteeing this. After Francovich's story, QL changed the categorization of universities on the AH website, labeling them as "members" or

“affiliates.” Member institutions were more clearly defined as “four-year colleges and universities that work with American Honors to facilitate the transfer process. This can include conditional acceptance agreements, transfer articulation, Honors-specific scholarships, and/or application fee waivers,” while affiliate institutions were defined as “four-year colleges and universities who are interested in attracting American Honors students and who provide limited benefits such as application fee waivers and participation in transfer activities.” In most cases, then, students would have no guarantee of acceptance or seamless credit articulation.

While the labeling on the AH website may have been confusing to prospective students and parents, students enrolled in AH had access to an online transfer portal which provided full details regarding the admission and articulation requirements of each destination college in the network, and they had proactive assistance from advisors in terms of interpreting and fulfilling these requirements. Overall, the program’s intensive transfer advising and transfer network did seem to help students select courses appropriate for transfer to their desired destinations; however, the time and resources required for QL to provide these services was much more substantial than the company had initially anticipated.

#### **8.4 Large Enrollments**

When building its initial partnership with each college, QL set ambitious program recruitment goals, which it believed could be met through recruitment tactics that are typically beyond the reach of community colleges, such as purchasing and leveraging high school graduates’ data from national standardized test providers or pursuing international student recruitment. However, at each college we visited, we heard that enrollment projections and goals were consistently not met, which caused some political friction. As one administrator explained:

Part of [the challenge] too was that [AH] was perceived and was sold to our board of trustees and others as an enrollment booster. American Honors was going to go recruit all of these students in our area that will be in our Honors program, and enrollment will go up. Well, they have targets in the formal contract that were outrageously high. . . . It was really sold as an enrollment booster.

In particular, college administrators were frustrated that the proportion of net-new students in the program did not seem to be high. One administrator had hoped AH would “bring new people to the funnel, not cherry pick people out of a funnel, because we had already spent money, resources, to get them into the funnel. I was expecting [AH] to bring new people.” For incoming freshman students, it was impossible for the college to determine whether AH students were truly net-new, but administrators suspected that most would have come to the community college anyway. One clear recruitment option to gain net-new students was to pull them away from a nearby four-year college, but administrators were skeptical about whether this was realistic. As one administrator said:

Oftentimes the kinds of students who we are targeting for American Honors are also being recruited to go . . . directly to the four-year institution and being offered quite significant scholarships to do so. . . . You know, one of our selling points is, “Yes our tuition is higher than the other [our college] students’, but it’s significantly lower than what you are going to pay if you go to a four-year.” Well if . . . the [four-year college] scholarships ameliorate that gap, now the student’s saying, “You know, I want to go there eventually anyway, why shouldn’t I just go there from the beginning?” It’s becoming more challenging to convince them that they got to come to [our college] first. So I do think it will continue to be a challenge. And I think again, if you talk to folks from American Honors and people that are trying to recruit and get these numbers, they establish a goal every year in how many students they . . . hope to bring in. I think we’ve missed it every year.

In addition, although AH had originally been designed with incoming freshman students in mind, it was open to continuing students who met certain academic criteria, and some administrators felt AH was too aggressive in recruiting these students into the program (and thus in reducing the college’s revenue from 100 percent to 75 percent for these students). As one participant said, “I’ll just speak direct; [AH] perhaps overpromised in terms of what they would be able to bring in, in terms of new students . . . . It’s great to get our existing students into American Honors if it enhances their experience. [But] we really want to see more students who are attracted to [our college] because of American Honors.”

As corporate pressures on QL staff to meet enrollment goals became increasingly intense, some college stakeholders felt the program's admissions standards were becoming more lax. On the other hand, throughout the history of AH, the colleges' own AH admissions committees were in full control of program admissions criteria; moreover, as discussed earlier in the paper, most other program faculty praised the high quality of AH students. To explore the claim that AH program standards had declined, we examined AH enrollees' academic metrics in the admissions database. Although it is difficult to draw firm conclusions given the large amounts of missing data on applicants' academic metrics, the available data suggest that among high school graduates entering AH, high school GPAs remained the same or slightly increased from 2014 to 2016 (from 3.39 to 3.48), while standardized test percentiles slightly decreased (from 64 to 58 percentile). Accordingly, it's not clear that program admissions standards were actually falling, but it did seem that QL staff were pushing increasingly hard at college admissions committees to consider a wider variety of students for the program.

In 2017, challenges meeting domestic student enrollment goals prompted QL to increasingly move into the international student market to recruit AH students. At the time of our campus visits in 2016, the international component of the AH program was relatively small, and in interviews college stakeholders did not volunteer strong positive or negative perspectives about the volume, quality, or meaning of the international student segment of the program. The following year, QL launched a separate program called American Success, which focused on recruiting international students into community colleges to brush up their English-language or other academic skills before transferring to their desired four-year destination. In February 2018, QL raised a second round of funding in order to grow the American Success model (Stacey, 2018). For two of our focus colleges, which had geographic locations appealing to the international student market, growing their international enrollment through AH and American Success was a welcome move. The remaining colleges, however, either felt that moving into an international market was a mismatch with their locally focused mission, or they were unable to attract large numbers of international students due to their location.

## 8.5 Ending the Partnership

By spring 2018, QL was conducting conversations with each college to discuss the ending of the AH partnership for domestic U.S. students. When we conducted follow-up calls with a subset of key college administrators in early summer 2018, all said their colleges had benefited from the partnership. By leveraging QL's resources, they were able to quickly launch a high-quality honors program, and most planned to continue the same or similar program in the absence of QL. Several said they planned to hire the AH advisor to continue working with the re-branded honors program. In general, colleges were not sorry to dissolve their partnerships with QL and continue honors programs in their own way, with their own college-specific tweaks and branding. Back in 2016, one college's administrator had summarized why the QL partnership was appealing:

The big gap with a homegrown program would be the branding and PR necessary. The appeal of AH was being able to leverage the two-year network to develop a best-in-class honors curriculum, based on their previous experience, to answer the question: What does an honors curriculum look like? Also [it was] leveraging the network of four-year schools outside of [our state]—making connections with [elite colleges] would not be feasible for us on our own. It gave us the ability to experiment with differential tuition and to draw on AH's experience and expertise based on how that has worked elsewhere. The partnership allowed us to defray costs that we otherwise would have had to pay. If we wanted to expand our homegrown program, we could not have scaled an advisor to every campus. We would have had to compensate faculty for honors course development, which AH does for us. We didn't have to hire new folks all over the state. We didn't have to train advisors. Our advisors are much more schedule-oriented and reactive; the AH folks had their advisors well trained in a better, more proactive model. It would be hard to justify doing all this without the leveraging of scale that AH has.

By 2018, these infrastructures were now in place at each college and could easily be maintained by the college itself, without ongoing partnership with QL. Thus, although the colleges were grateful to QL for helping them launch the program in the first place, it was unclear why any college with a strong domestic-student focus would have renewed their existing AH contracts, even if QL were continuing the domestic model.

## 9. Conclusion

To what extent did the American Honors program operate according to its theory of action and deliver on its business goals? Our findings suggest that the program's success in fulfilling its goals varied by stakeholder. Despite some initial tensions, community college partners felt that they benefited from their relationship with QL. Colleges and their students were highly satisfied with many aspects of the AH program, including the dedicated advising and the Honors curriculum. Moreover, the program seemed to deliver superior transfer outcomes for high-achieving students compared to the regular community college environment (but inferior outcomes compared to the four-year college environment). However, QL failed to deliver on several key business goals: meeting student recruitment targets, creating a common Honors curriculum, and establishing a strong network of four-year admissions and articulation agreements. The failure to meet these goals had the most adverse effect on QL itself, and ultimately undermined its profitability and sustainability as a stand-alone company. Below, we review our key findings in terms of the program's theory of change and business model.

### 9.1 Fulfilling the Theory of Change

#### **Building students' transfer aspirations and facilitating the transfer process.**

A key goal of American Honors was to develop and support students' transfer aspirations by providing dedicated advising and a transfer seminar. Many AH students, as well as community college faculty and administrators, reported a high level of satisfaction with the program's transfer advising. Even after dissolving the QL partnership, most community college partners wanted to maintain the AH transfer advising component, and ideally, to scale it up to improve transfer outcomes for all students. Many AH students reported that the dedicated advising alone made joining the program worth its extra fees. Additionally, students felt that AH helped them feel more confident in the transfer process and led them to apply to colleges they otherwise would have considered out of reach.

However, graduating from the AH program did not necessarily ensure that a student's application to a target college would receive preferential treatment. Additionally, while AH advisors encouraged students to "dream big" and apply to elite

four-year colleges, some faculty and administrators expressed concern that students' dreams would be crushed by the financial realities of attending such colleges.

**Providing high-quality academic preparation.** QL collaborated with community colleges to create an Honors program that included small, seminar-style classes with high expectations for student performance. QL provided professional development to faculty in terms of how to design and teach Honors courses, and faculty generally reported positive experiences with the course development process and QL's ongoing professional development opportunities. Students, particularly those who had received competing offers of admission from four-year colleges, reported that the promise of a rigorous Honors curriculum played a key role in their decision to come to a community college and reassured them that they would receive a high-quality education. AH students reported a high level of satisfaction with Honors courses, which explored content in more depth, demanded higher-level tasks, and had a more student-centered approach to teaching than non-Honors courses. Faculty enjoyed teaching a more challenging curriculum to a group of high-performing and motivated students, and some faculty reported that they expanded Honors-level assignments or teaching approaches to their non-Honors courses.

**Providing wraparound supports.** The AH program was designed to integrate a variety of key interventions, including a cohort model, high-quality instruction, and intrusive transfer advising, in order to address the array of academic and nonacademic challenges that can thwart the progress of even high-achieving community college students. Faculty, administrators, and students felt AH was successful in creating a web of supports for its students and at building a community for them within the college. AH students had strong personal relationships with AH advisors, and they felt they could rely on their advisors or AH peers to help them navigate academic and nonacademic challenges. In contrast, while many non-AH students were aware of supports and services available at their college, they made little use of them and often noted that their relationships with college advisors were impersonal and transactional.

**Successes and limitations of the theory of change.** For recently graduated high school students who would attend community college even in the absence of AH, the program's theory of change worked very well: The AH program improved their chances

of staying in college, earning an associate degree, transferring to a four-year college (and, in particular, a more selective college), and succeeding at that college. Indeed, an impressive 56 percent of the 2014 cohort transferred to a four-year college within three years, and among AH students who transferred, 44 percent attended more selective destinations. The program seemed to have more limited benefits for students who were already enrolled at community college before switching into the AH program: For these students, the program did not increase retention, graduation, or overall transfer rates, but did seem to increase their chances of entering a more selective school. On average, these students were older and had already successfully completed at least one term in college before applying to AH. Given their history of success in college, these students may have had less need of the wraparound supports provided by the program. And many may have had adult responsibilities that limited their transfer options to local colleges.

In contrast, the theory of change did not work for high school graduates who would have entered a four-year college directly in the absence of AH. For these students, entering the program substantially decreased their chances of remaining in college and graduating with a bachelor's degree within four years. The superior results of four-year college entrants may be due to the cultures, policies, and financial aid packaging mechanisms of most four-year colleges, which tend to encourage continuous full-time enrollment (Xu, Jaggars, & Fletcher, 2016), as well as the logistical barriers inherent in transferring from a two-year to a four-year college, which even the structured assistance of AH advisors could not necessarily overcome. For example, an AH student may have foregone an initial four-year college scholarship to attend community college with the expectation that the scholarship would still be available as a transfer student, when in fact most such scholarships are unavailable to transfer students (Wyner et al., 2016). And while QL encouraged universities in its network to create scholarships earmarked for AH students, they had limited success in that endeavor.

## **9.2 Failing to Fulfill the Business Model**

In addition to its public-minded goal of improving student outcomes, QL needed to pay back its venture capital investors. If the organization were backed by a non-profit funder, then merely covering operating costs, or turning a small profit to be reinvested in the program, would be sufficient. However, venture capital investors are typically



seeking a return of ten times their initial investment. To meet these high profit expectations, QL planned to improve on the traditional higher education business model by charging affordable prices, leveraging economies of scale, and attracting large volumes of students. Those goals required the creation of two national infrastructures: a state-of-the-art Honors common core curriculum to be delivered online, and a network of selective four-year college admission and articulation agreements.

The common online curriculum never materialized as planned. QL lacked a clear strategy for inter-institutional development, review, and approval of individual course learning goals and content, as well as of the particular course offerings and sequencing included within a common curriculum. It failed to address faculty concerns regarding how the latter's intellectual property rights as content developers might be exploited within the framework of a for-profit entity. QL also had not anticipated the challenges that online course delivery formats would pose to faculty and students, and it overestimated the target student population's interest in online coursework. Overall, the time- and resource-intensive process of designing exemplary synchronous online courses resulted in little or no return on QL's investment. On the other hand, the face-to-face version of AH incurred minimal costs for QL, given that colleges were covering instruction costs. If the company were not under pressure to earn large profits, the face-to-face model would likely have been sustainable across time, as well as scalable to any college with enrollments large enough to support separate Honors sections of key courses.

The nationwide network of admissions and articulation agreements also did not meet the company's initial goals. Four-year institutions are generally reluctant to provide guaranteed admissions to anyone, unless compelled by state policy. Thus to the extent that AH students were given a competitive advantage for their participation in the program, it was likely no greater than that which would be afforded to the graduates of any community college's honors program. On the other hand, QL's key goal was not to privilege their students over other community colleges' honors students, but rather to help AH students access a wider range of four-year destinations across the country; and the AH network did achieve some success with that goal. More importantly, QL was unable to secure and maintain transfer credit articulation agreements with its four-year

partners—in large part because the company was forced to pivot its strategy before it had time to complete the intensive interpersonal labor required to create and maintain such agreements.

Finally, QL had unrealistic expectations for how easily it would be able to leverage big-business recruitment models to attract large volumes of net-new students into the AH program. The program needed to attract high-achieving but less-privileged students who would not otherwise attend the community college in their local area. Initially this seemed to represent a plausible business case: Perhaps 35,000 of these students complete high school each year, most “undermatch” into colleges that are less selective than they are qualified to attend, and many seem to apply to colleges almost at random (Hoxby & Avery, 2013). Thus it seemed reasonable to assume that a large proportion could be swayed by sophisticated recruitment techniques into a new option that combined relatively low cost, high quality, and the promise of transfer to highly selective destinations. Theoretically, AH’s recruitment could draw net-new students away from three alternatives: (1) not attending college at all, (2) attending a different community college, or (3) attending a four-year college. Based on our data, it seems unlikely that AH recruitment induced students to attend college who otherwise would not have attended: All of our interviewees were already planning to go to college before applying to AH. In addition, it seems unlikely that the program drew students away from other community colleges, since community college students generally enroll in the college that is geographically closest to them (Hodara & Jaggars, 2014; Liu, 2016; Long & Kurlaender, 2009). Moreover, our descriptive analyses suggest that the large majority of AH students would have attended the same community college in the absence of the program. It does seem that AH attracted some students who would otherwise have attended a local four-year college, but this volume was relatively small. Many nearby four-year institutions provided strong financial aid packages for low-income but high-performing students, which made AH a less appealing option.

If QL was unable to deliver large volumes of new students at any given college, another option for growth would involve recruiting more community colleges to join the AH network; however, QL was able to recruit only a handful of partners outside of our target colleges. Anecdotal conversations with community college leaders across the

country suggested to us that most colleges were wary of the company's for-profit charter, were turned off by its initial focus on a common online curriculum, were philosophically opposed to the notion of differential tuition for Honors students, or already had an honors program and did not perceive a value-add of partnering with QL on its existing program. If the program were operating as a non-profit venture, many of these perception problems may have been solved. For example, if QL's financing allowed it to merely cover costs rather than to turn large profits for its investors, the company may have been able to charge a lower level of differential tuition. However, even if QL had initially succeeded in building a large network of community college partners, it is unclear that any given college would have an incentive to remain with the company after its initial contract expired, unless QL had been successful in recruiting large volumes of net-new students into that college.

### **9.3 Takeaways for Aspiring Public-Private Ventures**

For-profit companies have become quite interested in partnering with community colleges and four-year institutions. To the extent that colleges can take advantage of these companies' economies of scale to provide traditional or new college services at a lower price point, these partnerships could represent a classic "win-win" scenario. For example, colleges that cannot afford to build and maintain an intensive coaching model for at-risk students may find that outsourcing these services reaps cost-effective improvements in student success (Bettinger & Baker, 2011). Yet such private-public partnerships fail as often as they succeed (e.g., Redden, 2018b). The AH case study suggests three potential lessons for private ventures interested in partnering with the postsecondary sector.

First, QL underestimated the complexity of the academic business of community colleges, including course design, curricular design, admissions processes, and credit articulation processes. Thus we might recommend that external entities wishing to partner with colleges first gain a deep understanding of the inner workings of their target colleges' current academic and administrative processes. For example, entities could recruit a co-founder or senior executive who has extensive work experience in the community college sector, or they could form an advisory board comprised of community college leaders, administrators, and faculty. While QL did in fact include community college advisors in the design of AH, the company's enthusiasm to move

forward quickly may have made it difficult to fully incorporate these advisors' perspectives into the program's design.

Second, QL operated as a nimble for-profit start-up with national ambitions, and the behaviors that naturally flowed from this culture created tensions with many stakeholders at partnering institutions. Because community colleges are responsible for serving the needs and expectations of their local communities over the long term, their decision-making tends to be deliberative, consultative, and relatively slow. Faculty are likely to question the motives of for-profit entities, to have concerns regarding additional costs to students, and to worry about whether resources invested in the partnership will pay off over the long term. If the pace of a partnership's creation and implementation is too quick, these concerns may not be properly resolved, resulting in insufficient buy-in and scaling across the college. As disaffected faculty at these colleges network with colleagues across the country, they may propagate their negative perceptions of the company, which in turn may undermine the company's ability to expand to new colleges. To create positive and sustainable relationships with their initial set of college partners, outside entities may need to invest quite a bit of time and patience—a luxury when under pressure to repay venture capital investors. Given all these factors, a socially conscious entity that wishes to partner with colleges might consider incorporating as a non-profit or as a public benefit corporation, leveraging start-up funds from impact investors. For example, many foundations engage in program-related investments that are designed to generate social impact and are not necessarily expected to produce market-rate financial returns. These forms of capital can allow companies to focus on social value and cost-recovery rather than profit maximization.

Finally, QL had an incomplete understanding of its student customer base, and in particular, the factors that motivate students to enroll in a given college. It is not alone in this failing; many companies that promise high enrollments to colleges are unable to meet their targets (Redden, 2018c). To the extent that AH was able to attract net-new students to the college, these students were likely pulled away from a four-year college alternative. Unfortunately, this particular segment of students seems to have been harmed rather than helped by the program. Accordingly, QL's business need of recruiting net-new students was incompatible with its social goal of improving students' college

outcomes. Thus, any external entity seeking to partner with colleges needs to have a thorough understanding of the current behaviors of its target population, to map out how the theory of change and business model interact for this population, and to ensure that the theory of change and business model will complement one another rather than undermining each other.

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## Appendix: Descriptive Background Student Characteristics

**Table A1**  
**Students Graduating From High School and Enrolling in College**

	Community College Entrants			Four-Year Entrants	
	Not Accepted	Declined AH	AH Enrollee	Not Accepted	Declined AH
All cohorts (2014–2016)	<i>n</i> = 1,122	<i>n</i> = 557	<i>n</i> = 889	<i>n</i> = 399	<i>n</i> = 417
Female	63%	65%	59%	68%	61%
Age	18.51	18.47	18.41	18.39	18.40
First generation (when reported)	49%	40%	39%	47%	39%
First generation missing	5%	4%	4%	4%	5%
GPA (when reported)	3.20	3.47	3.48	3.31	3.46
GPA missing	64%	57%	61%	45%	50%
Neighborhood median income	55,273	52,962	56,860	52,092	57,022
Test percentile (when reported)	52.11	56.60	59.95	51.95	60.06
Test missing	71%	46%	40%	52%	31%
AP credits: Any reported	32%	47%	55%	46%	63%
Full-time intent (when reported)	89%	95%	96%	94%	98%
Full-time intent missing	13%	14%	13%	19%	16%
Prior credits: Number reported	2.20	2.24	1.55	2.98	1.49

**Table A2**  
**Continuing Community College Students**

	Not Accepted	Declined AH	AH Enrollee
All cohorts (2014–2016)	<i>n</i> = 2,502	<i>n</i> = 991	<i>n</i> = 609
Female	68%	64%	58%
Age	28.10	26.86	23.44
First generation (when reported)	56%	54%	47%
First generation missing	5%	4%	5%
GPA (when reported)	3.33	3.43	3.37
GPA missing	95%	94%	89%
Neighborhood median income	51,445	52,674	54,886
Test percentile (when reported)	53.26	62.40	60.67
Test missing	98%	96%	89%
AP credits reported	2%	3%	5%
Full-time intent (when reported)	74%	81%	87%
Full-time intent missing	9%	11%	12%
Prior credits reported	21.06	11.51	8.95

**Table A3**  
**High School Students Participating in Community College Dual Enrollment**

	Not Accepted	Declined AH	AH Enrollee
All cohorts (2014–2016)	<i>n</i> = 243	<i>n</i> = 63	<i>n</i> = 134
Female	70%	65%	80%
Age	16.92	17.13	16.97
First generation (when reported)	41%	27%	22%
First generation missing	6%	2%	6%
GPA (when reported)	3.48	3.60	3.71
GPA missing	74%	60%	67%
Neighborhood median income	63,338	60,339	59,669
Test percentile (when reported)	64.47	68.28	65.15
Test missing	76%	54%	66%
AP credits reported	37%	35%	46%
Full-time intent (when reported)	80%	80%	89%
Full-time intent missing	12%	14%	10%
Prior credits reported	3.37	7.39	6.77