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Top Students at Community Colleges to Have Chance to Raise Ambitions

By **RICHARD PÉREZ-PEÑA**

A disparate group of colleges from across the country — public and private, two-year and four-year — plans to announce a novel alliance on Friday aimed at producing high-achieving community college graduates and making it easier for them to transfer into bachelor’s programs.

The coalition builds on a program called [American Honors](#) to create honors programs within community colleges, with competitive admissions, demanding academics and intensive guidance for highly talented students. That program, created by a for-profit company, [Quad Learning](#), and a handful of community colleges, is less than two years old and still small — only about 230 students at five community college campuses — but plans call for it to grow rapidly, quadrupling the number of students by next fall.

The 27 four-year institutions in the alliance include several of the nation’s most prestigious and range from giants like Ohio State to smaller colleges like Amherst and Middlebury. Administrators say they have been impressed by students in the program, including the first group of 17 who graduated last spring and were accepted as transfers to universities including Vanderbilt, Stanford and Georgetown.

Educators and policy makers see community colleges as a crucial answer to the need for more college-educated workers and the rising cost of education because they have lower entry requirements and much lower prices than four-year universities. And with the number of college-age Americans falling after decades of growth, four-year colleges are looking for new sources of students.

“Community college transfers are going to be more and more a part of the college picture, because there’s big potential there,” said Kasey Urquidez, associate vice president for student affairs and enrollment management at the University of Arizona, which is joining the program. “From what we’ve seen, these American Honors students are going to be really good students who are well prepared and can persist and graduate.”

But community college becomes a morass for too many students. They get little guidance, and they rarely finish in two years. The more ambitious among them cannot find enough challenging courses, and four-year colleges often refuse to honor the credits they have earned because the curriculum is rarely rigorous enough.

State universities often have agreements with community colleges in their own states to automatically admit transfer students who meet certain academic standards, and to accept certain credits. But those deals generally do not cross state lines or apply to private colleges, which organizers say makes the new alliance the first of its kind.

A handful of universities in the group will offer automatic admission to some American Honors graduates, though the criteria for that, like grade point average, will vary by institution. None have pledged to accept all of the students' community college credits, but administrators say they have committed to accepting as many as possible.

“We won't guarantee admission or transferring credits, but these students will be at a distinct advantage over other transfer applicants,” said Carolyn Dietel, coordinator of transfer affairs at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts.

“One of the appeals for us is that there will be consistency among these various sites about the kinds of courses students will be offered, the kind of advising they will receive, that we know it will be up to a certain standard,” she said.

A handful of community colleges have comprehensive honors programs — notably Miami Dade College, whose program is a model for American Honors. But many more have concluded that they cannot do it on their own.

American Honors programs began at campuses of the Community Colleges of Spokane, in Washington State, and Ivy Tech, a community college system in Indiana. Two more Indiana colleges and two in New Jersey are scheduled to join soon, and Quad Learning hopes to build a network of 40 to 50 community colleges, each with 500 to 1,000 students in the honors program.

At the community colleges participating so far, students in the honors program pay about \$2,000 per year more in tuition than their classmates. Quad Learning has long-term revenue-sharing agreements with each college.

“We like to think about the price as being halfway between a community college and a four-year, open-access university,” said Chris Romer, president of the company. “If we can do the first two years of college for \$12,000, that's a game changer for a lot of families.”