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Unveiling Excellence: Exploring The Dynamics of Honors College Impact on Students' Personal, Professional Development, and Motivation

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the influence of the Honors College at Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University on students' personal and professional growth, motivation, and intellectual development. By employing qualitative research methods through semi-structured interviews of 14 students, the researchers assessed how the Honors College fosters holistic development, critical thinking, and cultural identity reinforcement in its students. The study also explored the challenges faced by students, such as time constraints and disinterest in the teaching profession. The findings of this research highlighted the importance of experiential learning through internships and structured programs in shaping future educational leaders. Overall, this study provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of Honors programs within the Kazakhstani educational context.

Keywords: Honors Programs, Kazakhstan, Educational Impact, Student Development, Experiential Learning

Introduction

The introduction of the Honors College at Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University in Almaty, Kazakhstan, marked a significant shift in the development of specialized programs for a selected cohort of 100 students. Through a competitive process, which included GPA evaluations, interviews and standardized tests, the initial group of students joined the program in 2022. Since then, arguably, the Honors College has had an impact on students' personal and professional growth.

This study intended to explore how the Honors College's curriculum and provided opportunities such as guest lectures, study tours, internships at specialized schools etc. have influenced the holistic development of students. In doing so, the authors focused on how the students view their experience in the program in terms of students' motivations, personal transformation and growth, effects on their academic skills, worldviews, characters and aspirations.

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By investigating these aspects, the study seeks to provide detailed insights into how honors programs influence students, highlighting the complex relationship between motivations, transformative experiences, and the challenges of a rigorous academic environment.

Placing Honors College within the Context of Kazakhstani Education Landscape

With the introduction of the per capita funding in the schools of Kazakhstan a new market of private schools emerged. Practically all schools, including public, specialized and private schools, began receiving funding from the government. Private schools, besides from the state funding, continued to charge tuition fees. Consequently, a new competition began for attracting the highly qualified teachers. Private and specialized schools offer better salaries and working conditions, drawing seasoned teachers away from public schools, exacerbating the shortage of skilled educators in public schools.

This migration of educators, intensified by the introduction of per capita financing, has led to a significant growth in the number private schools all competing for top teaching talent. In response to this challenging environment, Abai University established the Honors College in 2022 to prepare future educators specifically for the demands of these diverse educational settings.

The Honors College offers a comprehensive approach that extends beyond traditional classroom learning. It aims to equip students with advanced pedagogical skills, focusing on leadership, collaboration, innovative teaching methods and an intensive IT training designed for teachers. To achieve these goals the designers of the program have prepared courses on these topics specifically for the Honors students

The honors education has evolved significantly since its inception in 1921. Starting as Frank Aydelotte's vision for honors education at Swarthmore, the movement has progressed over the past century, with honors programs and colleges currently functioning in more than 1500 colleges and universities in the United States [1], [2], [3]. The Inter-University Committee on the Superior Student (ICSS) and its successor, the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) in the US, have played pivotal roles in facilitating discussions, providing guidance, and overall promoting honors education. Supported by the NCHC and its member institutions, the advancement of honors programs to honors colleges reflected a broader professionalization of the field, aligning honors education with other academic colleges [2], [3]. As a consequence, Honors programs emerged as an instrument for attracting high-achieving students to universities [4].

Joseph Cohen strengthened the advocacy for honors education by setting up the Honors Council in 1928 [5], [6]. Cohen subsequently played a pivotal role in forming the Inter-University Committee on the Superior Student (ICSS), commencing its first meeting in the spring of 1957 [6]. Although the ICSS was instrumental in contributing innovative set of standards for honors during its first conference, its existence was relatively brief, spanning only eight years [7].

Nevertheless, the lasting impact of the ICSS was evident in the establishment of the National Collegiate Honors Council in the USA (NCHC) in 1966. The NCHC continues to play a crucial role in honors education by organizing annual conferences, publishing national honors journals, and offering guidance and assessment to member institutions in developing honors programs [7].

In its initial stages, honors programs were primarily confined to private universities and colleges, with the University of Oregon pioneering the establishment of the first honors college at a four-year public university in 1960 [8]. Subsequently, the growth of honors programs experienced a remarkable surge, increasing by 400% in the two decades between the 1960s and 1980s. The

expansion of honors at public institutions reached a plateau in the early 2000s [9]. However, in the 2010s, which was marked by intensified student competition, honors programs witnessed another significant growth [9], [10].

While such programs originated in the United States and their development was pronounced mostly within the North American context, honors programs and colleges have gained global recognition and are currently in operation across various countries including the Netherlands, Qatar, Kazakhstan, Mexico, Canada, and Jordan. They also briefly functioned at a number of Russian universities but have closed down [7].

Honors students have been characterized as actively involved in their own educational journey [11]. They exhibit intrinsic motivation and a drive for academic success [12], [13], possess elevated academic self-concepts [14], and aspire to pursue graduate or professional studies [15]. Notably, honors students demonstrate a strong work ethic [16] and a dedicated commitment to their academic pursuits [17]. Their choice to engage in honors programs is often influenced by the perception that the learning environment aligns impeccably with their academic enthusiasm, learning preferences, and educational expectations [18].

Students enrolled in honors programs actively seek academic recognition, harbor confidence in their academic abilities, aim to gain a competitive edge in their future careers, and embrace intellectual challenges [19]. What sets honors students apart from their peers are qualities such as curiosity, imagination, and creativity [20], [21], coupled with a genuine love for learning [21] and a propensity for higher-order thinking [22]. These distinguishing characteristics contribute to the unique profile of honors students within the educational landscape.

Achterberg (2005) identifies general attributes of honors students based on research analysis. Compared to their non-honors peers, honors students often show academic excellence, increased interaction with faculty, and a higher inclination towards graduate studies. They also tend to be more motivated, ambitious, and self-directed, actively participate in co-curricular activities, and are open to new experiences, with a tendency towards introversion. However, Achterberg emphasizes the diversity within honors programs and the variations in student selection criteria, concluding that honors students are not a homogeneous group and any definitive conclusions about them should be viewed skeptically due to limited empirical data. [23]

In a 2002 study by Edgar C. J. Long and Stacey Lange involving 360 undergraduate students (142 honors and 218 non-honors) at a Midwest university, significant differences were observed between the two groups. The research, focusing on social involvement, academic behaviors, and personal traits, revealed that honors students were more conscientious, open to new experiences, and academically focused, with higher anxiety about grades. They were less engaged in social events, TV watching, and alcohol consumption. Additionally, honors students participated more in co-curricular activities and had stronger faculty relationships, with similar overall university satisfaction levels compared to non-honors students [24].

Donald P. Kaczvinsky (2007) investigated the traits of honors students at Louisiana Tech University, a selective public institution. By employing the College Student Inventory (CSI), integrated into the Noel-Levitz Retention Management System, Kaczvinsky examined the learning path that aligns best with the students' personalities. The CSI scores encompassed five main sections: Academic Motivation, Social Motivation, General Coping Skills, Receptivity to Support Services, and Two Supplementary Scales. The study compared the averages of 58 honors students to the entire freshman class of 1,496 students who participated in the survey in

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September 2004. Kaczvinsky (2007) discovered that honors students exhibited greater academic confidence, stronger intellectual interests, and a greater willingness to challenge conventional views, beliefs, and ideas. Furthermore, they were found to be more financially secure than the average student and less socially inclined, indicating a lower likelihood of participating in groups or social organizations. However, it should be noted that this study was limited to first-year, first-semester students at a single institution, restricting its generalizability to honors students across all academic levels. [25]

The study conducted by C.J.M. Suhre and E.P.W.A. Jansen, titled "Factors influencing students' perceptions of graduate attribute acquisition in a multidisciplinary honours track in a Dutch university," explores the dynamics of students' perceptions regarding teaching and learning within a multidisciplinary honors program and their subsequent impact on the acquisition of graduate attributes. This investigation was carried out among 73 honors students at a Dutch research university, utilizing annually collected survey data that examined aspects such as student motivation, perceptions of the teaching and learning environment, engagement in the program, and academic performance. The findings from this study highlight the significance of three instrumental factors that influence the perceived development of graduate attributes among honors students. Firstly, students' performance motivation emerges as a key element, underscoring the role of intrinsic motivation in driving students towards achieving high levels of academic and personal development. Secondly, the extent of teacher support in fostering creative and critical thinking skills is identified as a significant factor. This suggests that the role of educators in challenging and expanding students' cognitive abilities is vital for the enhancement of graduate attributes. Lastly, the study points to the importance of students' propensity to perceive and engage with the honors track as a learning community. This factor underscores the value of collaborative learning environments and social integration in the educational experience, which can significantly impact students' personal and professional growth [26].

In the study conducted by Young et al., three central themes emerged from the students' perspectives on their experiences in the honors college: connectedness, community, and opportunity. The students highlighted the strong sense of social connectedness they felt among their fellow honors students, which they attributed to the similarity of their experiences, the rigor of the program, and unique opportunities. This connectedness fostered a supportive and nurturing environment. The honors college was perceived as a 'sense of family,' and students emphasized the camaraderie built through shared experiences such as writing a senior thesis and taking required honors classes. The community formed within the honors college was deemed crucial to success, as it provided students with a network that contributed to their academic achievements and future opportunities. The students also recognized the honors college's role in providing them with unique opportunities for personalized education, leadership, and individual research. They expressed their willingness to seize these opportunities, which they believed set them apart from other students on campus. The notion of being part of an elite group that receives more experiences, leadership positions, and personal education was a common sentiment [27].

The research questions addressing the perceived benefits and challenges of honors programs, the motivations of students pursuing honors, and the transformative nature of honors college experiences present a notable gap in the existing literature, particularly within the context of Kazakhstan. The scarcity of studies exploring these facets of honors education in the Kazakhstani higher education landscape reflects a significant knowledge void. The lack of research on the personal and professional impacts of honors programs on students in Kazakhstan hinders our understanding of the dynamics and outcomes associated with participation in such programs.

Furthermore, the motivations driving students to pursue honors, as well as the evolution of these motivations over the course of their undergraduate education, remain largely unexplored in the Kazakhstani context. Additionally, the extent to which honors colleges are perceived as transformative experiences is an area where empirical insights are conspicuously absent. Bridging this research gap is crucial for informing educational policies, enhancing the effectiveness of honors programs, and understanding the unique challenges and benefits that Kazakhstani students may encounter within the honors education framework. Addressing this dearth of literature will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of honors education's impact and relevance within the Kazakhstani higher education system.

METHOD

The research design underpinning this study is characterized by a commitment to qualitative methodologies, which is aimed at understanding the dimensions of perceived benefits and challenges within honors programs. By conducting semi-structured interviews researchers intended to capture a diverse array of perspectives, thus offering a nuanced portrayal of participants' experiences. Ultimately, the research is designed to answer the following questions:

1. What are the perceived benefits and challenges of honors on students' personal and professional development?
2. What are the motivations behind students' decisions to pursue honors programs, and how do these motivations evolve over the course of their undergraduate education?
3. To what extent is the honors college regarded as a transformative experience?

All fourteen participants of the study were students in the Abai University Honors College program. They were selected from a variety of academic majors to understand the experiences of students from different majors comprehensively. Interviews were conducted with a subset of these participants to understand their individual motivations, personal and professional growth, and experiences within honors programs. Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the study. Measures were taken to ensure participant confidentiality, informed consent, and the option to withdraw from the study at any time, thus upholding to ethical standards.

The study also acknowledges potential biases and limitations, the main one being the participants' involvement in the Honors Program as well as the authors' perceived contributions to the establishment and operation of the program.

RESULTS

The investigation into the first research question concerning students' personal and professional growth uncovered intricate results, revealing both positive aspects and obstacles faced during this academic voyage. To this end, we categorized perceived benefits as follows: catalyst for holistic development, intellectual growth and critical thinking enhancement, cultural identity reinforcement.

Perceived Benefits

Catalyst for Holistic Development

Participants have consistently reported heightened engagement in extracurricular activities and community events. A respondent articulated this perceived benefit, stating: "After this program,

I became more active. We participated in various events, met different people.” Another respondent mentioned that he was very active and always participated in Honors College projects. During one of these programs, he uncovered a new interest, mentioning that “The last time, I received an additional certificate and a book in the media program, which helped me start a blog.” Another respondent reflected that Honors College trainings helped him to be active and develop ‘holistically’. Another respondent found it beneficial to learn what she called “life hacks” that “helped analyze actions and thoughts”.

One person revealed that Honors College helped him overcome his fear of public speaking, another one noted: “I am an introvert by nature, but studying at Honors College developed my communication skills and ability to work in a team.”

Several participants highlighted the development of leadership skills that they acquired through the Honors College. For example, one interviewee stated: “Honors College helped me manifest leadership qualities, which I was able to organize to help the university invite speakers to conferences. I think it expanded my leadership qualities.”

The participants echoed a unanimous sentiment regarding intellectual growth and the cultivation of critical thinking skills facilitated by their engagement in the Honors College. The program was acknowledged for encouraging a deeper level of academic inquiry and honing analytical abilities. One interviewee emphasized: “when I attended these conferences, I could improve many abilities, such as critical thinking...”, another one commented that the program developed such qualities as: “making independent decisions, the ability to work in a team, taking responsibility for implementing independent projects, and improving my educational results.”

Overall, throughout the study we found consistent evidence that Honors College significantly enhanced students' engagement in extracurricular activities and community events, contributing to the development of leadership skills and new interests as well as critical thinking skills.

Cultural Identity Reinforcement

A key observation highlights the Honors College's function in strengthening cultural identity and fostering national pride. The integration of coursework covering cultural topics and conferences centered on prominent national figures has resulted in students displaying an increased understanding of their cultural legacy. One individual specifically praised the conference devoted to Abai, a poet, philosopher, and composer of significant importance in Kazakh literary and intellectual history, and Abai's idea of Tolyq Adam, the "Whole Human" (translated from Kazakh language).

Abai Qunanbaiuly (1845-1904) is a highly esteemed figure in Kazakh culture. As a poet, philosopher, and a pivotal figure in Kazakh literature and intellectual history, his contributions extend far beyond poetry. He played a crucial role in promoting education, cultural awareness, and social reform in Kazakhstan during a time of significant change. His works not only showcase the beauty of the Kazakh language but also delve into profound philosophical and moral themes. Abai's influence and contributions have been highly regarded in Kazakh culture.

While exposed to what scholars in Kazakhstan call “ethnopedagogy” (education of a specific ethnic group), Honors students also noted that their views on education became more diverse: the program taught to “look from different angles and see the advantages and opportunities”.

Thus, Honors College seem to have contributed to reinforcing cultural identity and national pride among students by integrating discussions on cultural concepts and organizing conferences

focused on notable national figures, thereby enriching their understanding and appreciation of their cultural heritage.

Challenges

Initial Disinterest in the Teaching Profession

One of the persistent issues identified by participants was a lack of initial interest in their respective fields of study, reflecting a disconnect between their personal inclinations and academic pursuits. This challenge, though not inherent to the Honors College, underscores a pivotal period where students struggled to find harmony between their individual preferences and academic obligations. A participant candidly disclosed: "At first, I didn't like my profession. I didn't want to study." Another participant said regarding the choice of her major: "First of all, this was not my choice; it was the choice of my parents."

Given the rigorous workload in the Honors College, it appears that not being passionate about one's major can be especially challenging for such students.

Time Constraints

Because the Honors College activities go concurrently with the regular classes, involvement in the Honors curriculum presents a challenge of meeting tight deadlines. It was particularly difficult within the context of a weekly business course that focused on educational startups. The participants struggled with the dual pressure of the course's rigorous demands and their weekly class schedule. One participant lamented: "I like the program, I feel that I am part of some kind of community, but Honors College and my studies are not interconnected in any way. I still feel sorry and embarrassed about missing classes because of Honors meetings."

This challenge suggests that the intensive nature of certain courses within the Honors College, coupled with the regularity of classes, posed difficulties for students in terms of time management. The condensed timeline, combined with the need to balance other academic commitments and possibly extracurricular activities, underscores the rigorous academic environment of the Honors College program.

The repeatedly observed challenge of time constraints highlights a broader problem within the program, where students struggle to allocate sufficient time and attention to the demands of their coursework effectively. This challenge is not only about the complexity of the material but also about the structural demands on students' time, adding an additional layer of pressure to an already demanding academic experience. As one participant noted: "We had a course, a business course, where we learned as startups. And this course was a bit challenging and difficult for me because it was also a weekly course, and because of that, I didn't have time, and I didn't have time."

Honors College students struggle to maintain the balance especially in Honors courses with a heavy workload. This difficulty underscores the rigorous nature of the Honors College experience and at the same time leads to the need to reevaluate the workload and perhaps introduce some introductory modules on time management skills.

Honors Students Motivations

Among findings for the second research question on initial motivations of students to enroll in the Honors College, the following themes emerged: initial attraction to the unknown and a desire for a distinctive educational experience.

Initial Attraction to the Unknown

Participants expressed initial uncertainty about the Honors College but were drawn to it due to the promise of “something significant”. One participant mentioned: "Initially, we didn't know why they were asking us to take a test... But after the first conference, I understood that this was one of the best places."

The theme of "Initial Attraction to the Unknown" captures the participants' experiences and sentiments as they embarked on the Honors College journey, initially lured by the unfamiliar. The participants perceived the Honors College as an opportunity to enter uncharted educational and experiential territory. The concept of the "unknown" was tied to the uncertainty of the journey. This sentiment is evident in the following statement by a participant: "In one conference, we gathered, and during that conference, I learned that something significant would happen."

The Honors College programme's uniqueness and innovation attracted participants, who were drawn to the idea of being part of an academic initiative with a specific goal. One participant expressed her enthusiasm, stating: "I understood that this was one of the best places because, until then, I was still searching for how and where."

Despite some uncertainty about the situation, participants generally viewed the journey as an opportunity for meaningful change. The sense that "something important could happen" seemed important, hinting at a common understanding that the new path could provide opportunities for growth and enhancement.

Desire for a Distinctive Educational Experience

Motivations were rooted in the desire for a unique and impactful educational journey. A participant noted: "I understood that if I attended these conferences, I could improve many abilities, such as critical thinking." This suggests student motivation to go beyond conventional learning methods. The Honors College represented an opportunity for academic excellence, as one participant mentioned: "Initially, we didn't know why they were asking us to take a test, as we were among the best students in our group."

The participants' desire for a unique educational experience is closely tied to their eagerness for intellectual engagement. Their involvement in conferences and courses aimed at nurturing critical and creative thought was a key feature of their educational path, underscored by one participant's mention of learning from "the greatest teachers in Kazakhstan."

A highlight of Honors College was that students were placed in highly specialized schools, sometimes referred as “elite” schools for high-achieving students. Several Honors students reflected that this was one of the motivations and bonuses of the program noting that: “we went to a good school for practice, where we saw interesting and useful techniques”. Several participants were drawn into the program by the promise of going to such specialized schools.

Evolution of Student Motivations

When exploring the themes on evolution of motivations over time, the following emerged: shifting from ambiguity to purpose and transformational impact on goals.

Shifting from Ambiguity to Purpose

Initially unsure about the program's purpose, participants evolved from a state of ambiguity to

clarity regarding the transformative potential. One participant mentioned: "I never knew where I was going. In one conference, we gathered, and during that conference, I learned that something significant would happen."

This theme encapsulates the transformative journey experienced by participants within the Honors College. It unfolds as honors students engage over time, reflecting the evolution from initial uncertainty to a clear sense of purpose.

At the outset, participants expressed confusion and ambiguity about the purpose of enrolling in the Honors College. The initial lack of clarity was a shared experience, with one participant indicating that one of her initial reactions was that she and her fellow students didn't know why faculty asked them to take a test at the outset. It should be noted that for organizers of Honors College themselves, the whole program was novel, the university basically pioneered the approach in Kazakhstan.

As participants gathered for conferences and discussions, a collective goal began to emerge. The revelation that the program aimed to create leaders who could elevate the education system provided a unifying purpose. The participant reflects: "I understood that this was one of the best places because... they gathered us to achieve that main goal."

The theme of shifting from ambiguity to purpose involves participants aligning the program's objectives with their personal aspirations. The realization that the Honors College could be a platform for personal and professional development brought clarity. Over the course of their journey, participants developed clearer objectives for their academic and personal growth. The exposure to critical thinking, creative thinking, and engagement with influential figures contributed to the formulation of specific goals. A participant reflected: "I can not only learn new things but also teach them. And that is what helps me."

For some participants, the Honors College became a catalyst for shifting from unchosen paths to purposeful directions. The initial lack of understanding about the chosen major transformed into a realization of the program's impact on their academic choices. A participant shared, "Firstly, I did not understand why I was here. But now, thanks to Honors College and our university for my major, I understood."

The theme of shifting from ambiguity to purpose is closely linked to participants adopting a narrative of becoming future leaders. The rhetoric of being the future of Kazakhstan, coupled with the encouragement to dream big, seem to have played a pivotal role in this transformation.

Transformational Impact on Goals

Participants reported a significant evolution in their clarity of purpose and career aspirations throughout their journey in the Honors College. The initial lack of understanding transformed into a more defined sense of purpose.

The Honors College seems to have played a pivotal role in shaping participants' leadership aspirations, with a specific focus on contributing to educational advancements. The realization that the program aimed to create leaders capable of improving the education system had a transformative impact on participants' career goals. A participant reflected: "Our Vice-rector always says that we are the future of Kazakhstan, that we will be people who will not only change but also create new spheres."

Another overarching theme emerged around the reevaluation of chosen professions. The Honors

College journey prompted individuals to reconsider their initial career choices, especially when those choices were made under external pressures such as parents. Participants experienced a significant shift from being influenced by external factors, such as parental decisions, to discovering and aligning with their intrinsic motivations. This transformation indicates a redefinition of personal and professional goals, as one participant acknowledged: "I did not understand why am I learning, why am I teaching, why am I studying at this university because this was not my choice."

The theme highlights a commitment to educational enhancement as a central goal for participants. The narrative of creating leaders who contribute to the improvement of education became a driving force, shaping individuals' ambitions. Participants seem to have adopted a narrative of being agents of positive change and making impactful contributions to society. The transformative impact of the Honors College journey was evident in the rhetoric of shaping the future of Kazakhstan and actively participating in the creation of new spheres. Having been reassured over and over again by Honors faculty and speakers at Honors events, one participant summarized a viewpoint by several participants: "We are the future of Kazakhstan...." Another participant emotionally stated: "Belief in us is what keeps me in Honors College."

Honors College as a Transformative Experience

In regard to the third research question on the perception of the Honors College as a transformative experience one important aspects emerged: internships.

Internships

Experiential learning within the Honors College, specifically through immersive internships in innovative and specialized schools, seem to emerge as the most important transformative element mentioned practically by all participants, leaving an indelible mark on their perspectives, aspirations, and future roles.

Internships in innovative and specialized schools for Honors College Students seem to be not mere educational supplements but powerful catalysts for transformation. Participants engage in real-world scenarios, stepping outside the traditional academic boundaries. These encounters become pivotal moments that transcend theoretical learning, providing a glimpse into the complexities and nuances of the education system. The participant's quote "This was what completely changed my view of the course" encapsulates the profound impact of experiential learning. The internship experience seems to have triggered a paradigm shift, challenging preconceived notions and theoretical understandings. It prompts participants to confront the practical realities of education, fostering a more nuanced and insightful perspective.

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that enrollment in the Honors College promotes comprehensive development, establishing it as an instrument for multi-faceted growth. Participants reported heightened levels of involvement, leadership roles, and enhanced community engagement, demonstrating that the Honors College functions as a conduit for fostering well-rounded individuals. This is consistent with literature highlighting the significance of holistic development beyond academic accomplishments [28].

The theme of intellectual development and the strengthening of critical thinking skills stood out as evidence of the Honors College's effectiveness in promoting thorough academic exploration. Participants recognized the program's role in nurturing analytical skills, identifying the Honors

College as a venue for refining cognitive abilities beyond the usual academic contexts. This aligns with studies indicating that honors programs facilitate intellectual growth [29], [30], [31].

The distinctive approach to cultural enrichment and identity reinforcement, as observed in the Kazakhstani Honors Program, appears to be a unique aspect not commonly found in the existing literature on honors education. The program's integration of curriculum and extracurricular activities specifically designed to highlight cultural heritage and national figures is a novel method for fostering cultural awareness and pride among students. This method, which effectively merges academic pursuits with cultural appreciation. However, the specific emphasis on leveraging national history and figures to enhance cultural identity and pride seems to be a distinctive feature of the Kazakhstani Honors Program, potentially offering a model for other institutions aiming to cultivate a deeper connection between students and their cultural heritage. This unique approach underscores the potential for educational programs to not only impart knowledge but also to play a critical role in the development of cultural identity and consciousness, contributing to the formation of well-rounded, culturally aware individuals. Such a model may inspire further research and implementation in other educational contexts, seeking to enrich students' educational experiences by integrating cultural identity reinforcement into the academic curriculum.

Transformative potential of experiential learning in honing practical skills and preparing students for real-world challenges is well documented [32]. Experiential learning, particularly through internships in innovative schools, surfaced as a transformative element of the Honors College journey. Despite challenges, participants perceived these experiences as pivotal in shaping their future roles as leaders and contributors to the education system. Leadership development involves not only acquiring skills but also receiving support. The participant's mention of advocates in internships reflects the importance of a supportive network. Advocates provide guidance, understanding, and encouragement, helping participants overcome challenges and reinforcing their belief in their leadership capabilities.

The challenges identified, such as initial disinterest in chosen professions, overcoming self-belief and independence hurdles, and managing academic challenges and time constraints, shed light on the complexity of the Honors College experience. These challenges highlight the transitional nature of the early stages, requiring students to navigate personal and academic obstacles. The need for a balancing act between personal and academic spheres is apparent, resonating with literature on the demands of honors programs [33].

The study highlights a distinct approach of the Honors College at Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University in Kazakhstan compared to Honors Colleges in the United States, particularly in terms of fostering a sense of connectedness among students. In many U.S. institutions, Honors Colleges actively cultivate a community atmosphere where students feel interconnected and supported both academically and socially [27]. This is often achieved through residential programs, dedicated campus spaces, social events, and academic cohorts that encourage frequent interactions among honors students, fostering a tight-knit community.

It is important to note the limitations of this study, including the limited sample size and possible biases in self-reported data. Future research should aim to more closely examine the Honors College experience, exploring the detailed challenges participants encounter and the long-term effects on their career paths. Additionally, comparative studies with students not in Honors programs could offer valuable perspectives on the unique impact of the Honors College in developing leadership skills in the field of education.

CONCLUSION

The study of the Honors College at Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University provides significant insights into its role in promoting holistic development, leadership skills, and intellectual growth among students. The program effectively integrates academic excellence with cultural identity reinforcement, demonstrating its potential to shape socially responsible individuals prepared for diverse educational and professional challenges.

However, the challenges identified highlight areas that warrant further attention. Initial disinterest in chosen fields of study, often stemming from parental influence or a lack of intrinsic motivation, suggests a need for enhanced career guidance to help students align their academic and personal goals. Additionally, the issue of time constraints, as students navigate the rigorous demands of the Honors College alongside their regular coursework, emphasizes the importance of structural adjustments, such as flexible scheduling and training in time management.

These challenges, while significant, do not diminish the broader applicability of the program's experiences. The Honors College's approach, combining experiential learning with cultural and leadership development, offers valuable insights not only for Kazakhstan but also for other countries that share similar systemic and structural legacies, particularly within the Central Asian region and other post-Soviet contexts. Its focus on fostering critical thinking, professional growth, and cultural identity provides a model that could be adapted to address the educational and societal needs of these regions.

This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of Honors programs in Kazakhstan, offering valuable insights for educational policy and practice. By balancing the program's strengths with responsive strategies to mitigate challenges, the Honors College experience serves as a reference point for enhancing educational frameworks in comparable settings, further promoting regional academic and professional excellence.

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