

The effect of an honors college on retention among first year students

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ABSTRACT

The Honors College at Texas A&M University-Kingsville was established in 2010. At that time, student retention rate at Texas A&M-Kingsville was at 56%, one of the lowest rates in Texas. In an effort to determine if the establishment of the Honors College on campus has made a positive impact on First Time In College (FTIC) student retention rates, data on all FTIC students between 2005 and 2014 was collected, which included: ethnicity (Hispanic/non-Hispanic), first generation/non-first generation, ACT/SAT scores, if the student participated in the Honors College or not during their first year, and if the student was retained to the sophomore year at Texas A&M-Kingsville. Results indicate that the Honors College has had a positive impact on retention rates of FTIC students in the Honors College compared to the general student population. Retention rates since 2010 have increased for the entire university, with a retention rate of 69% for all FTIC students in the 2014 cohort. On average, the Honors College improved retention rates for Honors College students 25% compared to the general student population, 27% for first generation students, and 26% for Hispanic students. Likewise, the Honors College improved retention rates for Honors College students 11.5% compared to students on campus who could have joined the Honors College given their SAT/ACT scores. The results of this study show that the Honors College has had a positive impact at a rural, Hispanic Serving Institution and could serve as a model for other universities with similar student demographics to help boost retention rates of high-achieving students.

Keywords: Honors College, student retention, first year students

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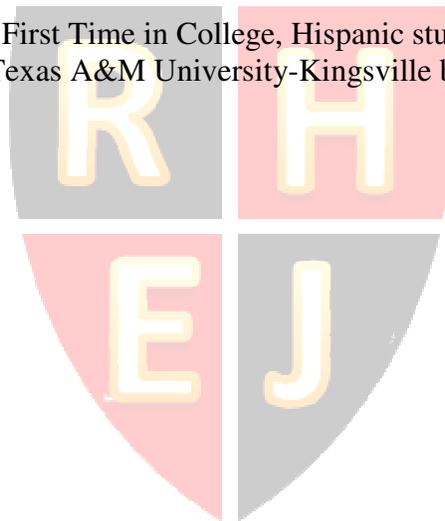
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INTRODUCTION

The Honors College at Texas A&M-Kingsville was established in 2010. After the first five years, it seemed appropriate to assess some of the benefits resulting from the creation of an Honors College at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). Improving retention rates has been a primary focus of the university since 2008. As a result, examining the retention rate of students in the Honors College may provide additional information to the university that can be used to help in the recruitment and retention of high-achieving students. The focus of this paper will be on the retention of first year students at Texas A&M-Kingsville. All first-time-in-college (FTIC) students at the university in addition to specific groups of students, including honors qualified, Hispanic, and first generation students, were analyzed and evaluated for their retention to the sophomore year. The purpose of this study is to identify benefits provided by the Honors College to first year students and the impact on retention rates.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hispanic-Serving Institutions

Institutions classified as Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) have been increasing in recent years due to the increased number of Hispanic/Latino students who attend institutions of higher learning. Seventeen percent of students on college campuses in the United States are Hispanics (Ed-facts, 2015). These institutions are in a unique position to serve Hispanic students by creating programs that address unique challenges that this growing demographic faces (Medina and Posadas, 2012). One way that these colleges help to support Hispanic students is by having their student support services and academic programs coordinating with one another as to better support the Hispanic students at their school (Benitez and DeAro, 2004).

Hispanic-Serving Institutions are defined by the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities as institutions that have a total enrollment (based on headcount) of at least 25% Hispanic students (Laden, 2004). From 2007 to 2015, Texas A&M-Kingsville has had a range of 66% to 74% of their students identify themselves as Hispanic. Since 2012, the percentage has steadily increased from 67% to 74%. Hispanic-Serving Institutions serve the great purpose of helping Hispanic students succeed. The first step to success is to be accepted into a college or university. Hispanic-Serving Institutions serve as a way for Hispanic students to gain acceptance into higher education and to eventually earn a degree in the field they choose (Laden, 2004). After they are enrolled in college, the retention and success of the Hispanic students partially depends on the support given to them by the college itself (Medina and Posadas, 2012).

Hispanic-Serving Institutions can help their students in many different ways. One way to help them is financially. These universities receive federal funding which is an asset to those students who need financial assistance to obtain their degree. In 1998, Title V of the Higher Education Act was amended to include Hispanic-Serving Institutions (Dayton et al., 2004). The universities can also be awarded competitive grants with select funding agencies. Some examples of these agencies are United States Department of Agriculture, National Science Foundation, and National Institutes of Health. These agencies have specific funding programs offered to HSIs and they encourage HSI collaborations through the proposal process. The funds can have multiple purposes, but the most common use of funding is for student services and development (Benitez and DeAro, 2004). There are 409 Hispanic-Serving Institutions in twenty-

one states and Puerto Rico to help Hispanic students throughout their college experience pay for their education (Ed-facts, 2015).

Hispanic student characteristics

The term Hispanic refers “to persons who trace their origin or decent to Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Spanish-speaking Central and South America countries, and other Spanish cultures” (Olive, 2010). Hispanic students have many characteristics that make them more susceptible to lower graduation rates when compared to other students. Laden (2004) states, “HSIs are approaching the cultural inclusion, empowerment, and education of their students- who come primarily from low-income and racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds and are often the first in their families to attend college”. Along with these challenges, Laden (2004) discusses the struggle between the feelings of low-income students or students of color and the faculty. The students may feel as if they aren’t welcome and that they are taking up space where other higher-achieving students could be. With all these challenges, it is hard for Hispanic students to thrive in the classroom, which makes the support structure of HSIs so important.

First generation college student characteristics

Many Hispanic students are considered first generation college students. First generation students are students whose parents never went to college (Olive, 2010). First generation students have their own distinguishing factors as well. Most of them are of a lower socioeconomic status and may have been born in a different country which most likely means that English is not their first language. Also, these students tend to have low SAT scores, and they come from smaller, more rural towns (Saenz et al., 2007). First generation students do not typically complete college at the same rate as those students who have college-educated parents (Chen and Carrol, 2005; Pike and Kuh, 2005). Even with these setbacks, first generation college students tend to be more motivated since they have a strong desire to achieve a set goal in their education (Olive, 2010).

Honors College History

Since 1873, there has been an alternate route for people who want to excel in academics. What started at Harvard University in 1873 as comprehensive exams to qualify as graduating with honors, grew into the founding of the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) in the United States, which was established in 1966 (NCHC, 2015). Honors education became more popular around the late 1920s and by the late 1930s the United States had over 100 honors programs. During World War II, honors education was not as popular because the main focus of the nation was on the war, but as a result of the launch of the Sputnik by the Soviet Union in 1956, honors education grew to new heights. In 1957, the Inter-University Committee on the Superior Students was established (NCHC, 2015). This committee was in charge of having information regarding honors activities throughout the United States; however, once external funding was depleted, the committee ceased to exist. After the complaints of many people who felt that there should be a professional association for honors education, less than a year later, the NCHC was created (NCHC, 2015).

The NCHC helps to support students in higher education. By promoting an academic

atmosphere that fosters opportunities to experience real-world situations, the honors colleges and programs help students grow socially, intellectually, and personally through these opportunities (Bratt, 2010; NCHC, 2015). Honors colleges and programs vary by university, so it is difficult to compare the different programs and to establish guidelines as to what constitutes as an honors college. Most honors colleges or programs require a certain number of credit hours that are considered honors hours. They also may require an extensive research project that would be completed prior to graduation (NCHC, 2015). Another purpose for the NCHC is to serve as an organization that brings students and faculty from honors colleges/programs together so that ideas can be exchanged in an effort to continually improve upon the honor's student experiences at universities across the United States.

Honors Students Characteristics

Students who participate in honors programs/colleges tend to be students who need to be challenged more than a normal class would allow. They are high-achieving students who excel in superior programs which help them succeed and graduate (Gasman et al., 2014). "Honors students scored higher on the personality scales of conscientiousness and openness to experience" (Scager et al., 2011). The students are also more likely to focus on their grades, participate in extracurricular activities, and prepare themselves for their courses (Scager et al., 2011).

Retention

Retention has become a problem in many universities. The American College and Testing Program reported that in the 2007-2008 school year, 66% of students returned to the same university after their freshman year for their sophomore year. This was a 2% decrease from the previous year (Turner and Thompson, 2014). There are many groups that struggle to stay in college. Students who are ethnic minorities, academically disadvantaged, have disabilities, are of low economic status, on probation, or are the first generation in their family to attend college, are all groups who are at risk of dropping out of college (O'Keeffe, 2013). There are many reasons why students who fall into the aforementioned groups struggle to continue their education. One of the reasons is because they are often a small proportion on campuses and thus, they tend to feel isolated or alone. This can be improved by offering or forcing them to have a mentor who is of the same at-risk group (Duman-Hines et al., 2001). Having a mentor of the same social or ethnic background allows that student to talk to someone who may have gone through similar struggles that they are facing and it gives them a place to go when they feel alone. By having someone to turn to, it connects the student to the institution (Medina and Posadas, 2012). Feeling like they belong will help to motivate the student to come back and complete their education.

METHODOLOGY

The Office of Institutional Research at Texas A&M-Kingsville provided information on all First Time in College (FTIC) students between 2005 and 2014. Requested information included Hispanic/non-Hispanic, first generation/non-first generation, ACT/SAT scores, if the student participated in the Honors College or not during their first year, and if the student was retained to the sophomore year at Texas A&M-Kingsville. Information pertaining to ethnic

background and first generation status are self-reported metrics on a student's financial aid package.

Student retention data were summarized using 2-way contingency tables in which student numbers were cross-classified by retention-to-sophomore-year ("yes" or "no") and year of entry (2005-2014) for various combinations of factors (e.g., Hispanic and non-Hispanic students; first generation and non-first generation; all students at Texas A&M-Kingsville and those in the Honors College). Continuous data (ACT and SAT) were averaged for factor combinations of interest. For each analysis, sample size is reported. Our scope of inference is Texas A&M-Kingsville and we have complete records for this population (that is, our data base is a population census and not a sample); therefore, use of inferential statistics is unnecessary (Zar, 2010).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Within the Honors College, the students tend to be high-achieving students that want to be challenged more than their peers. These students are also more likely to focus on their grades, participate in extracurricular activities, and prepare themselves for their courses (Scager et al., 2011). They usually excel in superior programs that help them succeed and graduate on time (Gasman et al., 2014). Retention rate results for all FTIC students and those in the Honors College at Texas A&M-Kingsville are found in Figure 1. Participation in the Honors College between 2010 and 2014 ranged from 5.7% in 2010 to 3.7% in 2014. Over the reporting period, the lowest retention rates were found in 2010 (56%) and has steadily increased to 68% in 2014. Honors College retention rates over this time period have ranged from 86% to 93%. This was a 25% improvement when averaged over the initial 4-year period of the Honors College.

First generation students are students whose parents never went to college (Olive, 2010). These students tend to have low SAT scores, and they come from smaller, more rural towns (Saenz et al., 2007). Most of them are of a lower socioeconomic status and may have been born in a different country which most likely means that English is not their first language. Retention rate results for FTIC first generation students and those in the Honors College are found in Figure 2. By looking at the sample sizes, featured in each bar, the participation of first generation students is low within the Honors College. Throughout the time that the Honors College has been present at Texas A&M-Kingsville, the percent of first generation students within the Honors College has ranged from 14% to 24%. The percent of first generation students participating in the Honors College has had a negative trend from its highest point (24%) in 2011 to its lowest point (14%) in 2014. Over the reporting period, the lowest retention rates were found in 2005 (51%) and in 2014 they were at 64% for the general first generation student population. Honors College retention rates over this time period have ranged from 67% to 100%. This was a 27% improvement when averaged over the initial 4-year period of the Honors College.

Hispanic students have many characteristics that make them more susceptible to lower graduation rates when compared to other students. Laden (2004) talks about the struggle between the feelings of low-income students or students of color and the faculty. The students may feel as if they aren't welcome and that they are taking up space where other higher achieving students could be. With all these challenges, it is hard for Hispanic students to thrive in the classroom and this, makes the support structure of HSIs so important. Retention rate results for all FTIC Hispanic students and those in the Honors College are found in Figure 3. Participation percentages of Hispanics in the Honors College do not represent the university wide

demographics. In 2011, 67% of Texas A&M-Kingsville students were Hispanic, but in the Honors College only 57% were Hispanic. From 2011 to 2014 the percent of Hispanic students at the university has steadily increased to 74% while the percent of Hispanic student in the Honors College has steadily decreased to 43%. Over the reporting period, the lowest retention rates were found in 2010 (56%) and has steadily increased to 68% in 2014. Honors College retention rates over this time period have ranged from 83% to 97%. This was a 26% improvement when averaged over the initial 4-year period of the Honors College.

Besides the creation of the Honors College by the 2010 to 2015 university strategic plan, additional strategies were put in place to help increase both recruitment and retention including living learning communities, classes for freshman to help teach them strategies to be successful in college (UNIV), and peer mentoring with older students on campus who can help them with any questions they may have. Even though these were implemented throughout campus, there was a greater increase in retention rates for the FTIC students in the Honors College. For Honors College students, they have their own Living Learning Community and UNIV classes strictly for them. There are also some courses which are strictly for Honors College students. They include General Inorganic Chemistry and General Biology. The benefit of Honors-only sections is that it reduces the number of students in the class from 100+ to 15 to 20 students, allowing for greater faculty-student and peer to peer interaction. In addition, another important difference between Honors College students and the general student population is that they tend to be the students who are higher achieving and stronger in the classroom, suggesting that they would continue their education.

In an effort to determine if students with strong academic backgrounds would have similar retention rates to those in the Honors College, FTIC students who would have qualified for the Honors College were compared to those who decided to join the Honors College. To qualify for the Honors College, incoming student ACT scores must be a 24 or higher, or their SAT score must be an 1100 or higher which is based off of the math and reading sections only. To then join the Honors College, students are required to submit an application that will go through a faculty review process.

When comparing those students who qualified for the Honors College to those that joined the Honors College (Figure 4), results indicate that there was still an increase in retention rate for the FTIC students who were in the Honors College versus those who were not, but the difference was less. The average retention rate of those in the Honors College was 11.5% higher than those not in the Honors College. It is also important to note that for each FTIC cohort, a total of 193, 176, 201, and 173 students were eligible to join the Honors College in 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2014, respectively. On average, only 18% to 36% of the students over that time period elected to join the Honors College.

In Figure 5, the average retention rate of first generation students in the Honors College was 10.5% higher than those students who were Honors College qualified and not in the Honors College. While in Figure 6, the average retention rate of Hispanic students in the Honors College is only 7.5% higher than those who were Honors College qualified, but did not join. When assessing only those students who are qualified for the Honors College, retention rate differences are reduced compared to the general student population. This suggests that academically stronger FTIC students will be retained at a higher rate compared to those with lower incoming test scores. Since the retention rates are higher for those who decided to join the Honors College, this also implies that the Honors College is helping these students decide to stay in college. So the retention rate being higher may not be caused strictly by the students being higher achievers, but

it may also be the fact that the Honors College is doing something to help increase the retention rates.

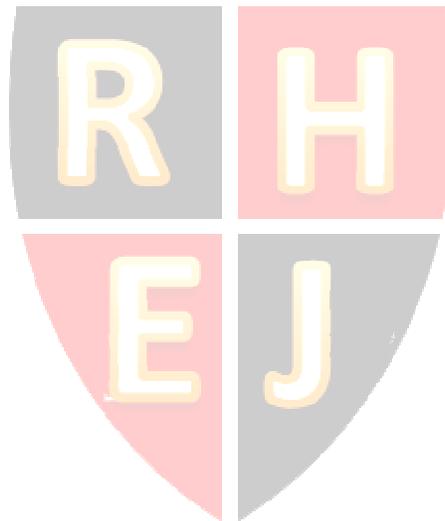
Using Figures 1, 3, and 6 it is possible to calculate different percentages based upon the Honors College qualified Hispanic students, the total FTIC Hispanic students, and the amount of Hispanic students within the Honors College. By looking at 2011 in these three figures, it can be seen that 70% of the FTIC students who were retained, are Hispanic. It is also interesting to note that 12% of all the FTIC Hispanic students were qualified for Honors College, but less than half of those students (38%) did join. This shows a lack of interest among these students. Throughout the years, the percent of FTIC Hispanics on campus stays around 70% and the percentage of those students who qualify for the Honors College stays around the 12%, but a steady decrease in the percent that choose to join the Honors College is seen. This in turn also causes a decrease in the percentage of Hispanic students in the Honors College. From Figure 1, it is noticeable that the number of FTIC students who choose to join the Honors College has also decreased. What started out in 2011 with 72 students has slowly decreased to 42 students. One of the many reasons this could be happening is that there isn't enough of an incentive for them to join the Honors College. In the long run, having Honors College written on the student's resume and transcript will look good, but many college students think about the present and there isn't any reason for them to join right now. They may only focus on the additional work expected through the honors course workload and the research project requirement. From a financial perspective, the Honors College only offers a housing waiver to those students who chose to stay in Mesquite Village West, which houses the Living Learning Community of the Honors College. Mesquite Village West is one of the most expensive dormitories on campus. For any other student in the Honors College, there is no monetary incentive to join.

CONCLUSION

Since the Honors College was established in 2010, there has been an overall increase in retention among all students. It is especially visible for the students who are in the Honors College, but retention rates have increased in the general student population as well. This could also be a reflection of effort put forth to improve retention through campus-wide programs including the Living Learning Communities, the Learning Assistance Center, and the Center for Student Success which houses many programs that are geared toward helping FTIC students succeed. The Honors College also has many benefits that help the students. Students in the Honors College have a better connection to faculty and staff. With the Honors College office located in Mesquite Village West, it is easy for students to go there to ask question and find help on a variety of topics. Also, students have to complete Honors College credit hours within their degree plan, so they work closely with faculty to obtain these hours. This results in the students becoming close with several faculty members. Another benefit that helps the students is the smaller class sizes. Some courses are offered as strictly Honors College courses which mean they are only open to Honors College students, therefore these classes tend to be smaller in size.

While the percent of FTIC Hispanic students on campus has steadily remained the same, there has been a decrease in FTIC Hispanic students within the Honors College. The Honors College at Texas A&M-Kingsville should further investigate why fewer students want to join the Honors College and what can be done to improve student participation in the Honors College, especially for the Hispanic students. Through further research, it is possible to look to see what aspects of the Honors College are helping increase retention rates, and see if these aspects could

be used to help increase student retention in students who aren't in the program. Overall, the Honors College program at Texas A&M-Kingsville can be viewed as a successful program that is improving retention rates of FTIC students who join the Honors College. A similar model may prove beneficial to other rural, Hispanic Serving Institutions as a way to improve retention rates among FTIC students.



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Figures

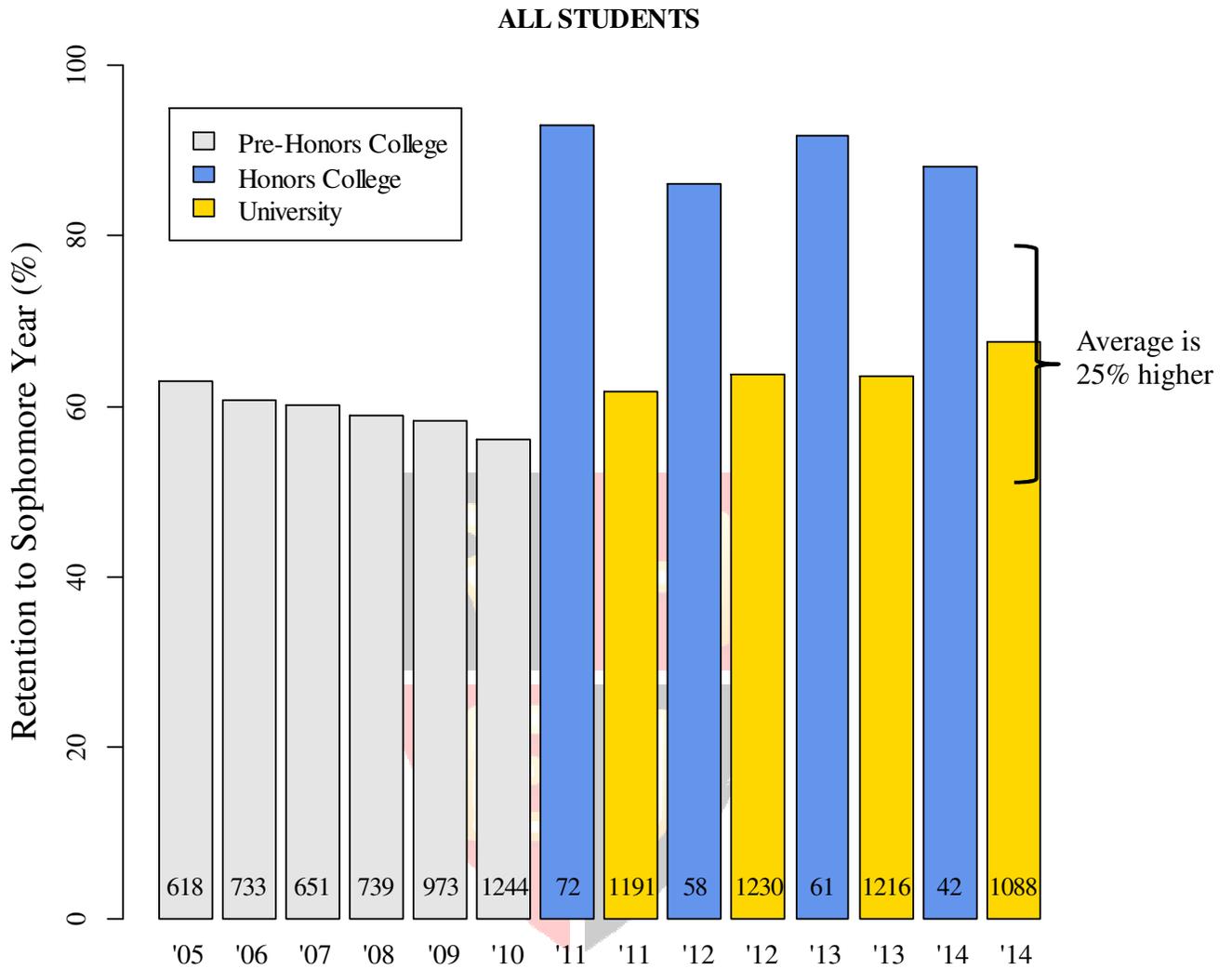


Figure 1: Retention rates of all First Time in College student cohorts at Texas A&M University-Kingsville between 2005 and 2014. Sample size/enrollment is designated in each bar.

FIRST GENERATION STUDENTS ALL STUDENTS

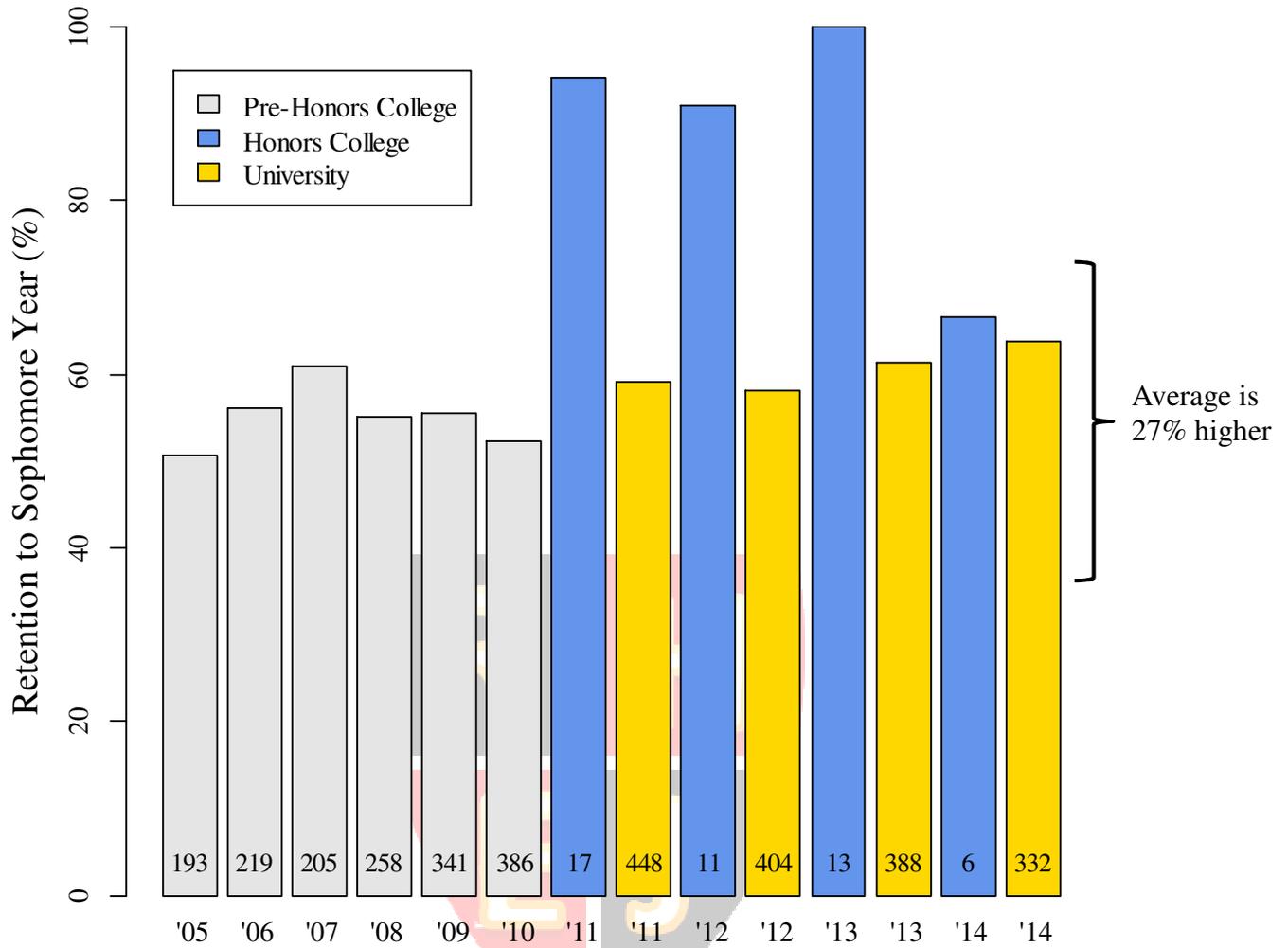


Figure 2: Retention rates of all First Time in College, first generation student cohorts at Texas A&M University-Kingsville between 2005 and 2014. Sample size/enrollment is designated in each bar.

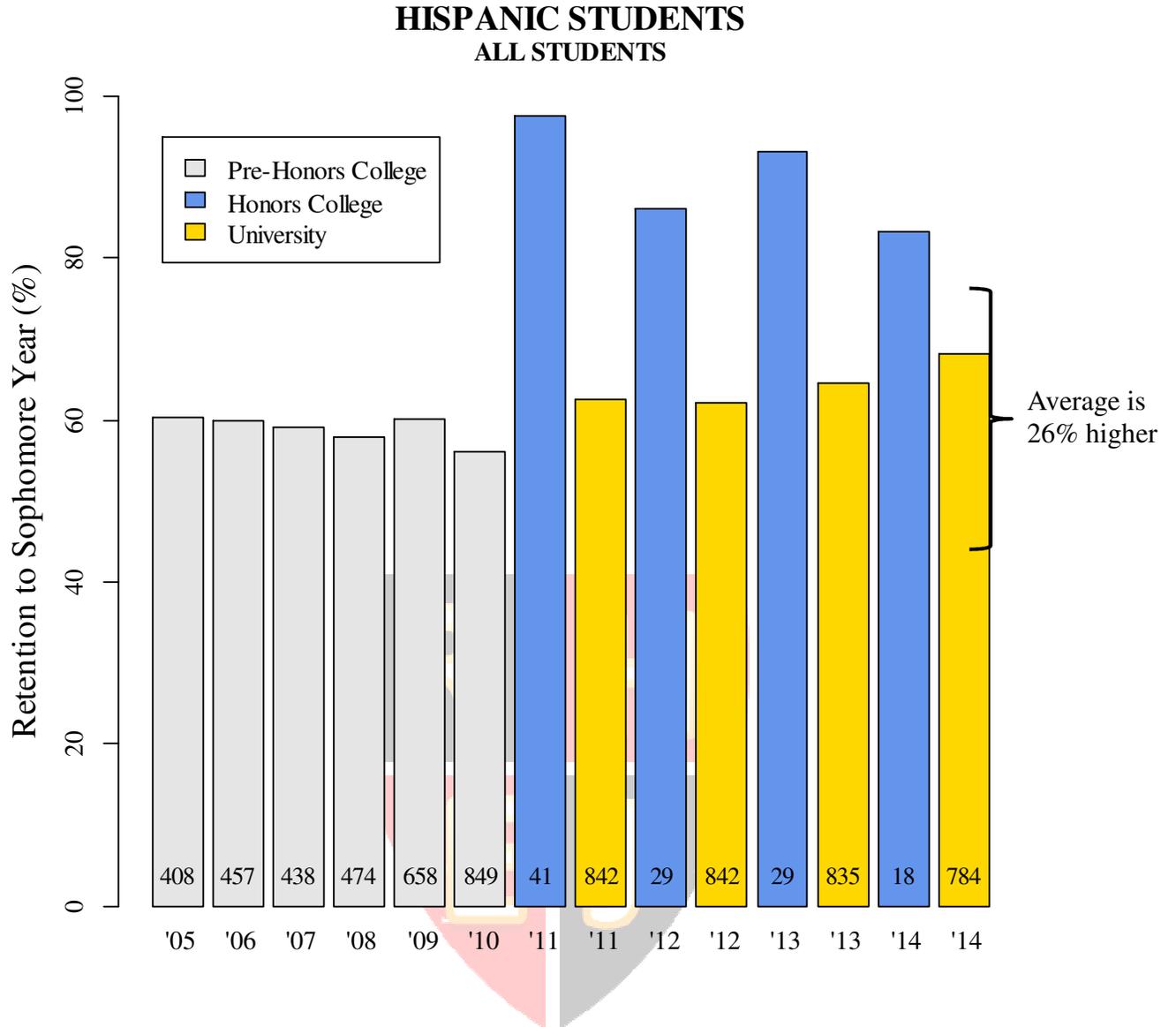


Figure 3: Retention rates of all First Time in College, Hispanic student cohorts at Texas A&M University-Kingsville between 2005 and 2014. Sample size/enrollment is designated in each bar.

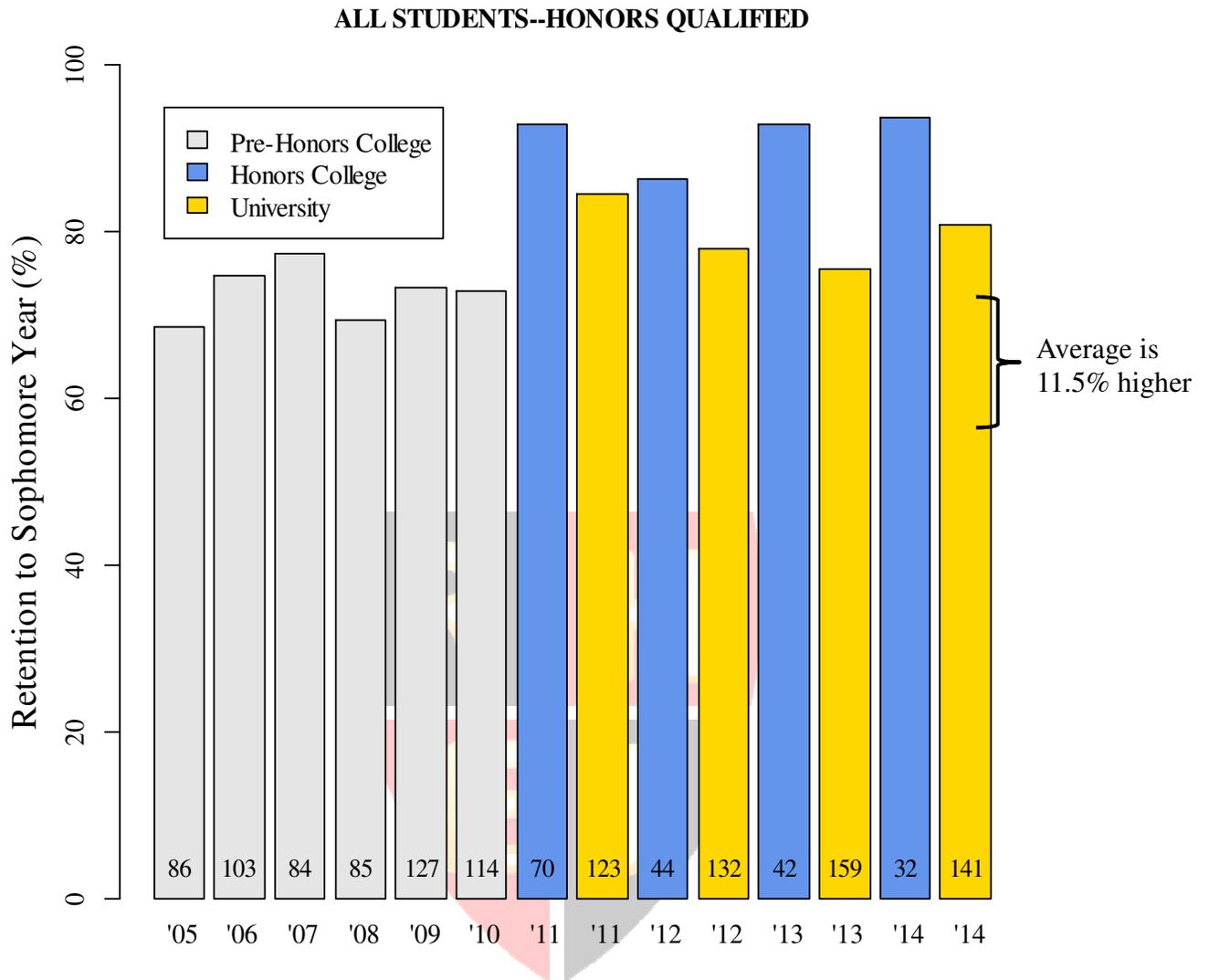


Figure 4: Retention rates of all First Time in College student cohorts who qualified for the Honors College at Texas A&M University-Kingsville between 2005 and 2014. Sample size/enrollment is designated in each bar.

**FIRST GENERATION STUDENTS
ALL STUDENTS--HONORS QUALIFIED**

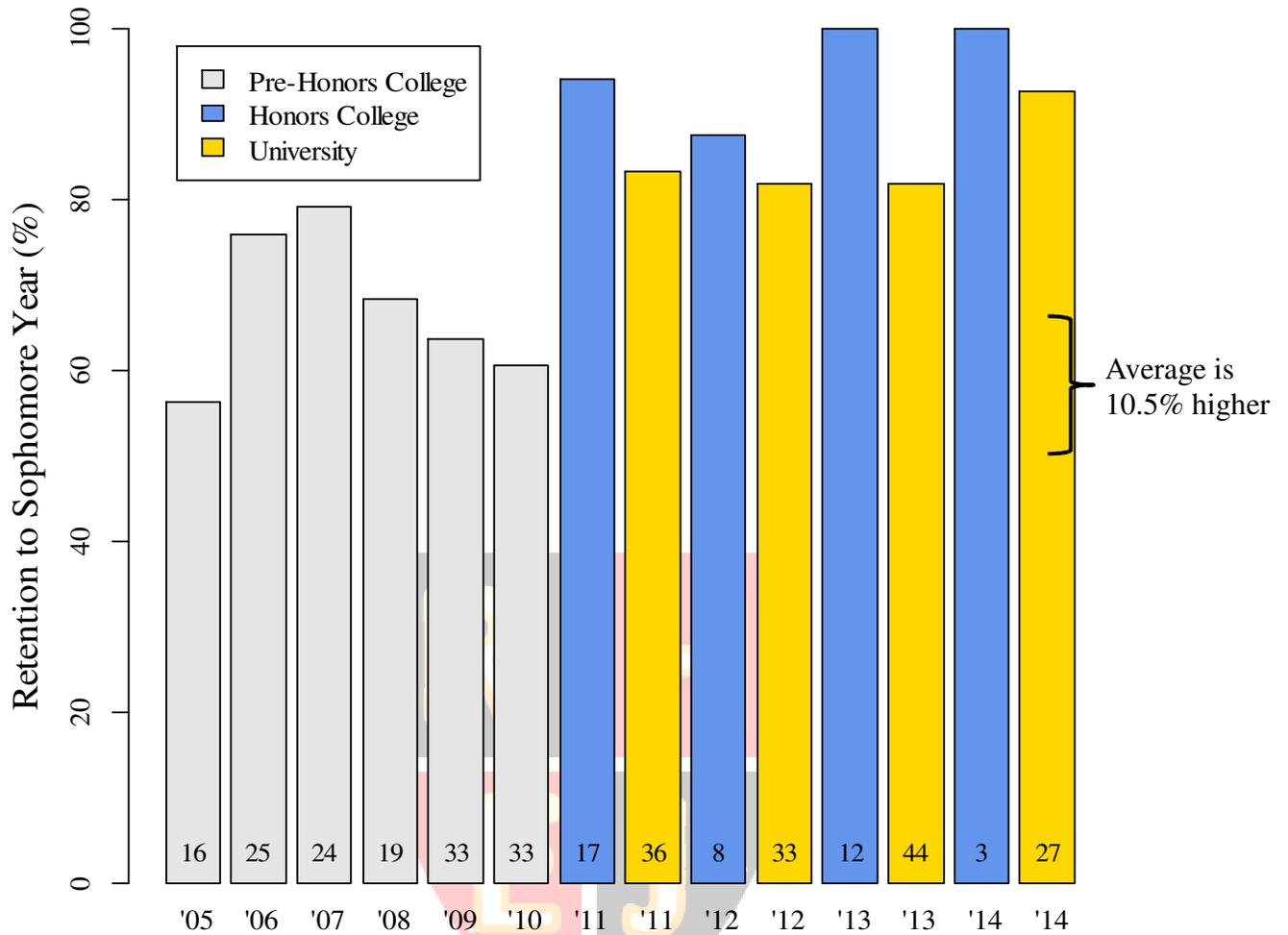


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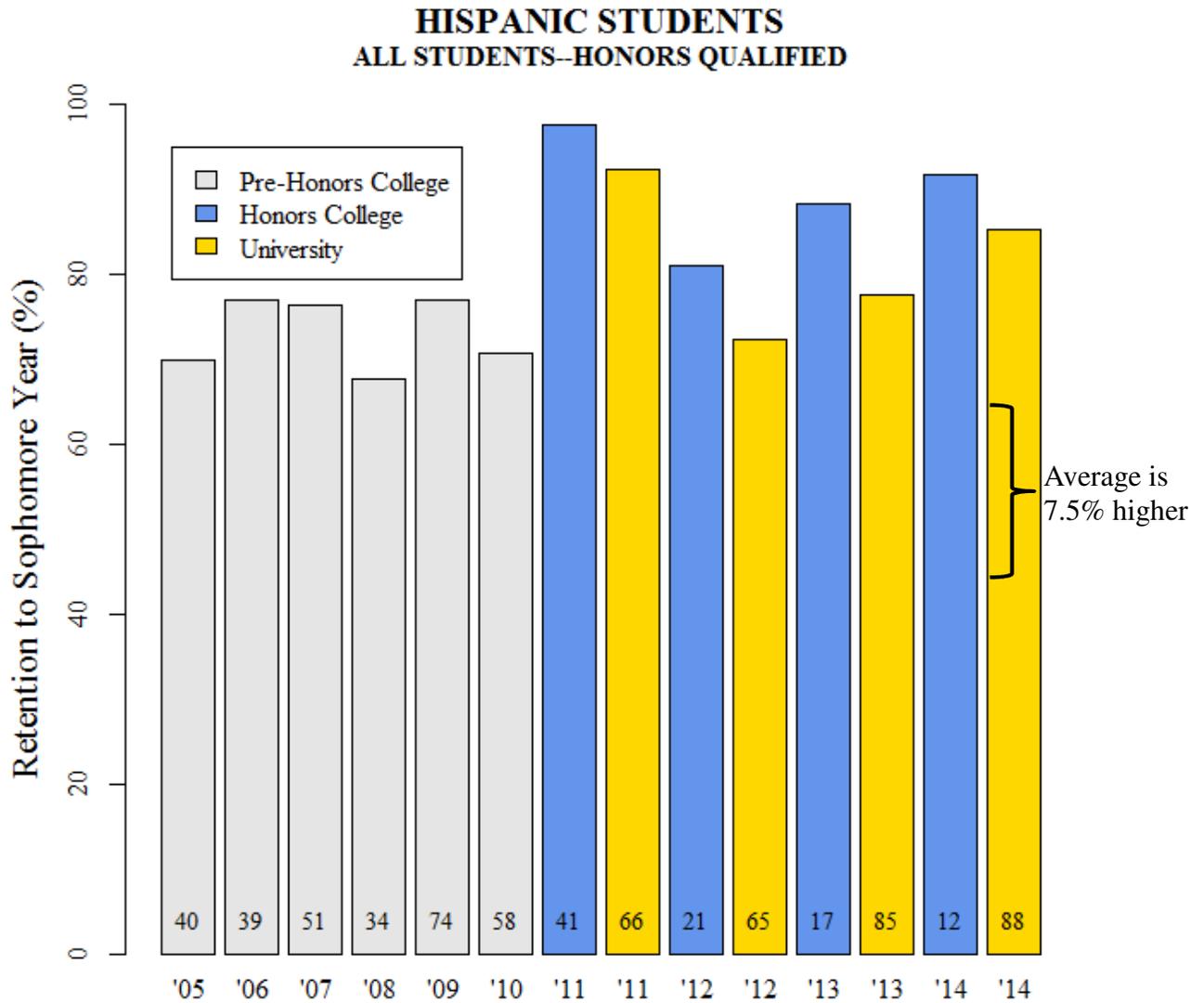


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