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Keeping Honors Information Current

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JOAN DIGBY AND TRACEY CHRISTY

Keeping Honors Information Current

JOAN DIGBY AND TRACEY CHRISTY

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In the process of composing the fourth edition of Peterson's *Smart Choices: Honors Programs & Colleges*, we spent a great deal of time verifying current information about our member institutions. This turned out to be far more difficult than we had anticipated, and so we would like to share with you some of the problems we encountered that may have practical implications for you when it comes to keeping in touch with NCHC, providing information about your program, and recruiting new students.

The Peterson's cycle is 3-4 years. We have learned from previous editions that directorships and deanships in honors also have an average turnover of about the same time frame. That means, when we come to write a new edition, mailings frequently are sent to directors or deans no longer with the program. For that reason, it is essential for you to update your affiliation and contact information with NCHC on an annual basis. If you are turning over a program or college to someone else, if you are taking a leave or going on sabbatical, you really should give NCHC the name and contact information of the person who takes over your position—whether temporarily or permanently. Telephone numbers, fax numbers, email addresses, and mailing addresses have very short life spans. When these change, NCHC has serious problems locating the administrator of the program.

When there is a turnover of directors, membership in NCHC frequently lapses. As a result, new directors often lose the advantages of belonging to a national organization that can be helpful in teaching them the ropes and helping them understand the national honors context. Often they could use the assistance of an NCHC consultant but know nothing about the availability of such people. They are unaware of the annual conference and miss the opportunity to take part in "Beginning in Honors" and all the other workshops that could be useful. They also lose the opportunity to meet people both in their region and around the country from whose experience they can profit.

It is easy to understand why directors and deans fired from honors positions might not pass such information along to their replacements. One such person slammed the phone down on me (this is Joan speaking) when I asked for the name of the new director! This is hardly in the spirit of honors collegiality, but it is understandable. It is also not the most common case. Many programs change administration in a regular rotation. Others change because, after a few

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years, people prefer to go back to their department or to do research. So, assuming that changes in administration are generally cordial, it would be best to prepare for the next in line by: keeping all your NCHC monographs and journals shelved together as a reference library and by also keeping a current copy of Peterson's *Honors Programs & Colleges* on the shelf so that the new director will have a model to revise your profile when the time comes.

Now that we have a permanent national office, it is also easy to update your information with our Executive Director, Patricia Speelman, speelman@unlserve.unl.edu (402-472-9150). Putting the national office in the loop should be a regular arrangement that you make when there is any change in the leadership of your honors program or college. The same is true for your regional affiliations.

Most frequently, mail that is sent to a person who is no longer in charge either gets trashed or returned as undeliverable. The same is true of email. When mail bounced back to us, we sought to locate the current honors administrator by going to the college or university's website. Amazingly, this is where we encountered the most difficulty. In general, these websites were confusing and very difficult to navigate. More often than not, HONORS IS BURIED and very hard to find. By using a Google search with honors included in the string, we were sometimes able to get there, but what we found was not generally very useful. Most institutions are trying to wean enquirers away from the telephone, so it is really hard to find a phone number for the honors office, or even a main switchboard number for the University, at a website. Usually, the searcher arrives at a button marked "contact us," which on most sites is the email address for an admissions office. Websites are designed for recruitment, not for providing information. As a result, finding the name of the Honors Director or Dean, or finding a phone number or email address for that person requires CIA training and the patience of a saint.

You can do yourself a great service if you attempt to get your critical contact information on your college or university's website. By working with the web designer, you might even be able to make honors easily accessible with a few clicks in the right places. The routing that leads to honors on most institution websites is Byzantine. Sadly, it led us to the conclusion that honors is not a priority at many institutions. Making honors more prominent and easier to discover should be a priority for us all.

When we did locate honors, it was frequently in connection with an award ceremony or picnic that took place in the 1990s. Colleges and universities don't clear out old junk any more than other businesses do, so much of what is available on your websites is as old as directors who have long retired to Sedona! You can imagine that what we found sent us back to our public relations office to update information about our own program. I'm sure your office is as busy as ours, so it's easy to understand how we all let this problem go. But truthfully it is a problem that needs immediate attention. The best action you can take for yourself is trying to find your program on the Internet. If you can't, you're in

trouble. If you find it and it leads you to the person you replaced, you are also in trouble. Clear up the trouble on your end.

Inform people who have contact with prospective students that an honors program or honors college does exist at your University. In some instances when a main switchboard number could be found on the website, we would call and ask to be connected to the Honors Office. A very confused person would direct our calls to Admissions, Financial Aid or other offices, and not to Honors. Once, a switchboard operator just hung up on me (this is Tracey speaking). More often we would go through a long ritual of "twenty-questions," offering helpful hints such as a previous director's name or a purpose for the program, and we would eventually be directed to the appropriate area. People answering the telephone need to be made aware that an Honors Program or College does exist, along with the names of the director, dean, and/or administrative assistant. They should receive proper instructions on how to route telephone calls for honors. Prospective students do not have extra information to help a switchboard operator determine where a call should be directed, and, more times than not, they will just become frustrated and not bother to call again.

If there are students out there searching for what we have to offer, then finding information that is out of date, pictures from seminars held ten years ago, and phone numbers for people who don't run the show can be very discouraging. Probably you will need to provide them with new photos and information in order to make the change. Whenever you take students to conferences, sponsor events, or confer awards, TAKE NEW PHOTOS AND GET THEM ON YOUR WEBSITE. (We are just beginning to do that as a result of everything we discovered). Many of you submitted photos for our Peterson's guide. Not all of them could be used by the publisher, but they can all be used by you to advertise what is current in your program. Do it. Keep your web page as current as you can.

The good news is that, while many directors change, most honors programs and colleges stay put. Many of them have administrative assistants who survive all these changes and are the greatest source of program information on the planet. It might be a good idea to give their contact information as well as your own to NCHC or post it on your website. Most prospective students have first contact with administrative assistants more frequently than they do with directors. From an operational perspective, administrative assistants should know all about NCHC, including the dues and conference schedules. They are the ones who should probably read the monthly e-letters so they know exactly what is coming up for you, your faculty, and your students.

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