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Honors in 2025: Becoming What You Emulate

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Honors in 2025: Becoming What You Emulate

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INTRODUCTION

Predicting the future is always difficult and fraught with many dangers; just ask your local weather forecaster. The process of looking into the future, even if the predictions are in error, is nevertheless an important tool for honors faculty, staff, and administrators; it is part of the strategic planning process that helps develop new and interesting ideas. The goal of this essay is to look over the horizon, make some predictions about what honors education will look like in the year 2025, and encourage people to think about the future of honors. My predictions will most likely seem naive to a reader in 2025, but thinking about the future provides value today.

Out of numerous possible topics related to what the future of honors education might look like, this essay examines three: the transformation of most honors programs into honors colleges, leading to honors accreditation systems; the future similarities between honors colleges and private colleges; and the greater ownership and control honors colleges will have over their curricula and faculty.

PREDOMINANCE OF HONORS COLLEGES

Over the past decade we have seen an accelerating evolution from honors programs to honors colleges. Research compiled for a companion essay in this forum, by Rick Scott University of Central Arkansas, found that the number of honors colleges is increasing. In the *Peterson's Guide* 3rd edition (2002), there were 68 self-identified honors colleges; in *Peterson's Guide* 4th edition (2005), they have increased to 86, and in his review of the NCHC membership (2007), 90 institutions claimed an honors college. During the 2007 NCHC conference, I helped facilitate a "Developing in Honors" session where over twenty honors directors stated that they were planning on making the transition to an honors college in the next two to four years. By 2025, we can expect that most university honors experiences will be within honors colleges. The focus will be not on colleges vs. programs but on which honors colleges are most fully developed.

Among the many reasons to move toward an honors college, the ones that dominate are institutional prestige, recruitment, and fundraising. Having an honors college is a mark of institutional pride and might assist in elevating a university to a higher tier (or the next *U. S. News & World Report* ranking) in

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much the same way as nations have increased their prestige by accumulating colonies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, joining the nuclear club, or putting a man on the moon. An institution's strategic thinking is typically that the creation of an honors college will increase the university's reputation, help the institution attract more and better students, and thus lead to more donations (especially naming gifts). Some universities create and resource robust honors colleges while others simply change the name on the letterhead from Honors Program to Honors College. The latter institutions desire the advantages of an honors college without the investments in staff and budget necessary to create a well developed honors college. Given this trend, there will likely be a bifurcation of honors colleges over the next decades: those that are nominal honors colleges created primarily for marketing purposes and those that are robust, well developed, and worthy of the name. Therefore, institutions that have made substantial investments in their honors colleges and believe the label is being abused by other institutions will work toward an accreditation standard for honors colleges. Because of the controversy that will surround the accrediting debate, multiple accrediting entities might emerge in the same way as the various college and university accreditation agencies.

HONORS COLLEGES AND PRIVATE COLLEGES

By 2025, after honors programs have evolved into honors colleges, the standard of evaluation and probably accreditation will be how well the honors college compares to the model of elite private colleges. Most honors colleges are created so that a large university can provide a small private school experience for high-achieving students. The typical slogan is "the experience of the small private school with all the amenities of a large university." If the university is state-supported, then one can add "and the price tag of a public institution" to the end of the statement. The future standard of what makes an honors college will be a version of the "duck test" ("if it acts like a duck..."). What will be the criteria that will make up an honors college duck test?

Some of the traits that define private colleges include: granting degrees; having an independent faculty; granting promotion and tenure; negotiating partnership agreements with other entities such as foundations, academic institutions abroad, or the Washington Center; having a board of trustees or the equivalent; and employing a substantial staff to conduct responsibilities such as recruitment, development, and financial aid/scholarships. The list is not exclusive, but it includes many of the characteristics one finds in a private college.

By 2025, most "fully developed honors colleges" will have all (or nearly all) of the attributes listed. At present, nearly fifteen honors colleges grant some kind of degree or its equivalent, and this will increasingly become the norm across the nation. Similar numbers of honors colleges are organized in a department model, where they "own" most if not all of the faculty who teach the honors core classes. Additionally, many of these honors colleges have their own promotion and tenure process.

The size and level of specialization of professional staff is on the increase among honors colleges. Although many honors programs have had in-house advisors and recruiters for many years, traditionally they have been part-time or shared positions. Increasingly the norm is that honors programs and colleges have full-time dedicated honors advisors and recruitment staff. Most of today's high-end honors colleges have increasingly independent admission procedures, substantial advising offices, and other specialized support staff for service learning, programming, research, study abroad, and instructional technology. Additionally, more and more honors colleges have a full-time development officer who, in cooperation with the dean, works closely with an external board, which often functions like a board of trustees rather than an advisory board.

The hiring and resourcing of a specialized staff will increasingly allow honors colleges to look and behave like independent private colleges within the larger institutional system. While the organizational structure and behavior of the honors college will chart new territory, the curriculum in some respects will look back at tradition for a model.

THE HONORS COLLEGE CURRICULUM: BACK TO THE FUTURE

Today's college students and parents are often more focused on the speed of a university education than its quality or the educational experience itself. Increasingly, high-achieving students are coming to campus with a large number of Advance Placement, International Baccalaureate, and dual enrollment credit (often thirty credits or more). Parents discover that these credits cost less than those taken as a residential student at a college or university and that a student can graduate earlier by taking advantage of these pre-college opportunities (thus saving even more money). Many students talk about graduating in two or three years and then heading to their next educational experience. We have all heard the eager, well meaning student say, "the law school will be really impressed that I graduated in four semesters."

This situation is further aggravated when students and parents discover CLEP credit, bi-term classes, online opportunities, and accelerated/weekend executive courses which allow students to race through their education. Over time, students and parents are conditioned to think a university education is like a steeplechase: the faster you navigate around the educational obstacles and check off all the boxes on your degree application, the more successful you are as a student and the more desirable you will appear to an employer or professional school.

By 2025, honors colleges will be much more stringent than they are now on how many pre-college credits they will accept. Some will not accept them at all. Graduating in less than four years will become the exception, not the norm, because honors colleges will increase the number of honors-only core requirements that cannot be fulfilled by pre-college credit. Honors courses will less frequently be taught in accelerated fashion through, for instance, bi-terms

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or online options. An honors college education will be more in tune with a traditional private-college experience than today's assembly-line university process that is increasingly dominated by accelerated learning, pre-college credits, credit for life experience, ITV, online, and weekend courses.

At the same time, honors colleges will not be technophobic. They will use technology to enhance the educational experience, but it will not be the primary medium for transfer of knowledge. Technology will be a key component in making an honors experience relevant in a fast-changing high-tech world. However, honors colleges in 2025 will not develop their own slate of online honors courses as additional revenue generators even though the University of Phoenix will no doubt develop an ersatz honors program along with online residence halls and dining facilities.

CONCLUSION

As higher education continues to change and grow, honors programs and colleges will participate in the evolution of higher education. Honors colleges will become explicit about what they implicitly emulate: the small private college. The resources required to provide a private-college experience will demand that honors colleges prove their value by enhancing the host institution's reputation and its ability to attract and matriculate high-quality students. Honors colleges will explore new ground in the size and complexity of honors staffing, alumni relations, corporate philanthropy, and the politics of university development. The future of honors colleges will require a great deal of modernization, but it will also entail a more traditional curriculum that is separate from that of the host institution. In sum, by 2025 the fully developed honors college will look and act like a private college.

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