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Honors 2025: The Future of the Honors College

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As we attempt to foresee the future, we recognize that the increase in the number of honors colleges over the past decade appears to be an accelerating trend. We base our predictions on the continuation of this trend and on our need as honors administrators to anticipate and welcome the multiple impacts it will have on current and future honors colleges. We have selected four connected areas as the focus of our consideration: mission; curriculum; assessment and accreditation; and recruiting.

MISSION

The term “honors” is arguably moribund. The concept of “honor,” as in “honorable,” is medieval in origin and requires unquestioning conformity to social expectations (Berger, et. al 1974). From Cervantes forward, however, Western ideals have shifted to discovering individuals’ inherent dignity, nameable only after discarding scripts authored by others, authors now long dead. To do so requires critical thought immersed in the liberal arts—the liberating arts—that leads to stepping outside taken-for-granted structures of everyday life.

This cultural shift suggests that “honors” is no longer limited as it once was to a mission of strictly transmitting knowledge of past traditions. If “honors” has been emptied of that former meaning, with what will it now be filled? We see honors colleges moving away from being defined by specific problems or disciplinary approaches and heading instead toward missions that convey flexible problem-solving skills, and these require project-based classes.

With this mission, “honors” becomes understood as a site rather than a certain kind of student or class or faculty member. It is a place where selected students and faculty members practice scholarship and citizenship together. We study great books not simply because the canon is what one studies but because its answers have stood the test of time in coping with recurring human problems. We study sources of other answers, too: sources other than those of antiquity, from places other than the west, from women, from science, from contemporary scholarship.

This mission works best in a learning community with infrastructural requirements focused on the student working group rather than the faculty member. Faculty members act as interactive participants, resources, advisors, consultants, or coaches, helping keep students on task, delivering content,

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evaluating progress, and giving regular feedback. What emerges is the ability to solve real-world problems collaboratively and creatively, grounded in scholarly undertaking that compares and contrasts wisdom traditions and disciplinary methodologies. The goal is to develop citizen-scholars, capable of carrying out research, collaborating with others, leading when necessary, and embracing the public square as a locus of action that is as important to them as their work and family lives.

CURRICULUM

To carry out this mission, the curriculum from one honors college to the next will come to resemble an integrative approach, with stand-alone, interdisciplinary courses and increasing emphasis on student-generated content as students mature each succeeding year, rather than a distributive approach, in which honors is an extra activity in departments or in departmental courses beyond ordinary requirements for graduation.

We expect the curriculum to consist of arrangements that ground student empowerment in and out of the classroom. Such a curriculum employs strategies, structures, and technologies of disintermediation: the practice of student-to-student collaboration taking place without constant intervention and oversight by an instructor. The goal is readiness, the ability to respond to new situations rather than rehearse old scenarios. Old situations are good for practice, but the test is how students perform under new sets of circumstances, which is the only way to test skills apart from content.

Service learning will proliferate, complete with more emphasis on extramural evaluation of students' work. Extramural evaluation will not come easily since it requires performance to an external public, and, although it is becoming more common, it is not yet prevalent in the liberal arts and sciences; it has not fully migrated from colleges of performing arts with their competitive juries or from colleges of education with their student teaching or from colleges of business with their internships or from colleges of health or behavioral sciences with their practicums. In the service-learning approach, students are thrust into positions of leadership, keeping track of progress, coordinating efforts, and organizing research and demonstrations of results. Professors need to give students training and experience in being evaluators, as well. By 2025 look for more honors colleges requiring internships, team tutorials, joint theses, study abroad, and intra-national travel as classroom boundaries become permeable and elastic.

Faculty will adopt pedagogies deemphasizing professorial centrality and will work together across more than one course, with faculty rotating in and out of a project as their expertise is demanded. We will see more honors colleges hire core faculty, on a tenure track within the honors college or as joint appointments or both, to develop and sustain a cadre of faculty practicing collaborative, disintermediative, and interdisciplinary teaching methods.

We believe that the curriculum of the future will be mostly project-oriented. Honors online communities will be powerful workspaces for students and

faculty members to share ideas and develop these projects. Science and industry and all academic areas, including the humanities, are increasingly organized around interdisciplinary teams. Instructors on our campuses will find themselves reenergized by the possibility of groups that learn and generate content by working together on interconnected projects. The online educator can already easily integrate messaging, chat, and virtual classrooms seamlessly. No longer distracted by technical snafus, instructors will inevitably become conversational partners rather than inaccessible sages, and honors students will more and more find acceptance as their partners in research.

In this emerging curriculum, intellectual advancement occurs through scholarship, which is the way knowledge has been generated and assessed since the Enlightenment. The core value, freedom of inquiry, requires transparency of method and assumptions as well as participation in a peer community through publications and presentations; students read and review publications of others, past and present, and attend oral presentations of their contemporaries, whether student, faculty, or guest. Assessment of scholarship will be difficult; the challenge ahead is naming and defining skills we want students to learn, not confusing skills with their outcomes, and to do so we must identify what practices are transferable to other contexts.

Citizenship and leadership develop where students build and facilitate conditions for human flourishing, including practices of listening, turn-taking, and non-violent conflict resolution along with respect for difference. Citizen-scholars will be guided in their leadership by values of unlimited inquiry, transparency of method and assumptions, and the free flow of information.

ASSESSMENT AND ACCREDITATION

In recent years contentious discussions have occurred about identifying basic characteristics of fully developed honors programs and colleges in the context of rapid increases both in honors programs and in programs transitioning to colleges. In 1994, 23 honors colleges were in the NCHC database when John Madden conducted a survey to learn what distinguished programs from colleges (Cummings, 1994; Madden, 1994). Following a decade of debate, NCHC sought to discover and codify the basic characteristics of a fully developed honors college. Peter Sederberg led the effort, saying “the NCHC ought to take a strong interest in this phenomenon, (because) if an institution is simply gilding the name, then ‘Honors College’ becomes a devalued misnomer designed as a marketing strategy and intended to mislead potential applicants” (Sederberg, 2004, p. 121). When research was conducted in 2004, the number of honors colleges affiliated with NCHC had grown to 65 (Sederberg, 2004). Since the basic characteristics were accepted and then endorsed in 2005, perhaps another 25 or more have formed; the fourth edition of Peterson’s Guide to Honors Programs and Colleges named 88 honors colleges, and the NCHC list of institutional members in April of 2007 included 92.

Because highly able and motivated students are rare, competition in recruiting is intense, and this pressure to attract students from a small pool will

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encourage more universities to launch honors colleges or convert existing programs into colleges. To ensure that substance is not diluted during this increase in numbers of honors colleges, we expect demand to grow from the membership that NCHC become an accrediting organization. At the same time, many more programs and colleges will conduct self-studies and undertake comprehensive assessment despite slow adoption of these practices by honors administrators so far. NCHC's summer workshops on assessment and evaluation are drawing numerous participants, and the newer guard of honors administrators are operating in a "culture of evidence," implementing assessment to demonstrate value added by honors education and better justifying expenditures for scholarships, housing, faculty, technology and other resources.

RECRUITING

Recruiting will move toward active outreach, attracting students who otherwise would not have enrolled at the university rather than merely selecting among top applicants to the school. We expect recurring charges of elitism and lack of diversity to result in more sensitive ways to assess prospects and predict performance—including labor-intensive strategies favoring review of teacher recommendations and writing submissions, personal interviews, and campus visits by prospects and their families—rather than reliance mainly on standardized test scores. Race and class biases in testing are too well understood to allow continued use of standardized tests to screen for a population of prospects. Honors colleges may never be as diverse as the overall student body, but through outreach recruiters should be attracting a more diverse group than the subpopulation of all university scholarship recipients.

Elitism can be countered by emphasizing service and volunteerism when recruiting. We expect a "culture of service" to grow as administrators help students appreciate that honors education is a gift and that they are participating in what Lewis Hyde (1983) has called a gift economy. In a market economy, high status goes to those who own the most. In a gift economy, high status goes to those who *give* the most. Gifford Pinchot (1995) points out that the academy is a gift economy; academics "with highest status are not those who possess the most knowledge; they are the ones who have contributed the most to their fields." Gifts surprise us and motivate us to pass them along. By 2025, we expect honors colleges to be sites of intense community service led by citizen-scholars.

CONCLUSION

What we see for honors colleges nearly two decades in the future is a hopeful vision that we are eager to see unfold. Many of these "future" trends have existed in individual honors settings for quite some time; however, they are likely to become standard components of honors education with more colleges having more of them. Should these developments take place, some of them will inevitably cause pain and produce displacement. For example, accreditation could homogenize local traits of honors colleges incubated in

their host institutions, leading to forms of unwanted standardization. Project-based classes that limit professorial centrality will diminish traditional forms of curriculum delivery, such as the lecture and the single-author essay.

Despite potential problems, we believe that, to borrow an election year truism, what unites us is greater than what divides us, and this truism is not likely to change for honors in 2025. Traditionally our strengths have hinged on our ability to act as a powerful countervailing force in academic life, moving academic missions toward student-centered, student-empowered practices. The NCHC-approved Basic Characteristics documents speak of “distinguishing ourselves” on campus. We can continue to be strong players in higher education by standing together as a movement for high standards of student learning, engagement, and assessment.

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