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The Newest “Basic Characteristic” of a Fully Developed Honors Program

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After years of conversations about the sixteen “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program” (adopted in 1994), NCHC has added a new Basic Characteristic to the arsenal of the honors dean, director, or coordinator seeking to demonstrate that a particular institution’s honors program or honors college complies with NCHC’s “best practices” documents. NCHC’s Board of Directors approved the newest characteristic in November, 2007:

A fully developed program will provide priority enrollment for honors students who are active in the program in recognition of their unique class scheduling needs.

Having had the privilege to serve as an external reviewer or consultant with NCHC colleagues on more than thirty occasions, I am convinced that it is difficult to overstate the importance of the “Basic Characteristics” in making the case to a central administration that the honors program or college complies with (or needs additional resources to meet) national guidelines developed by NCHC.

The unique scheduling needs of honors students are recognized even at institutions with large numbers of honors courses because even under the best of circumstances honors students must juggle their honors courses around requirements in their academic majors. Honors students frequently pursue double (or triple) majors, multiple minors, study abroad options, and internships—all of which make it imperative that they be able to implement sometimes extremely complex plans of study in order to graduate on time. The newest Characteristic quite properly recognizes these unique scheduling needs.

As recommended by the Honors Assessment and Evaluation Committee and approved by NCHC’s Board of Directors, priority enrollment is presented as a perquisite earned by “active” honors students in light of their unique class scheduling needs rather than as a birthright of students from the time they enter an honors program or honors college. Of course each institution is free to determine what “active” means for its honors program or college.

Having priority enrollment for special populations, based on demonstrated need, is nothing out of the ordinary. Many institutions provide priority enrollment for students who fall under the terms of the Americans with Disabilities

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Act. Others do so for students involved in intercollegiate athletics in recognition of the time constraints imposed by mandatory practice and travel schedules that are beyond the control of the students. (Both of these groups of students may well include honors students, of course.)

The new priority enrollment Characteristic also is important in light of ongoing difficulties with the Banner enrollment management system in some of its manifestations and the various work-arounds required after the fact to take into account the needs of honors students, programs, and colleges. Of course, a computer system *can* do essentially anything the institution is willing to pay for it to do, so having this national guideline in hand (especially if an institution is about to make the transition to the Banner system) may well be a valuable card to play in the campus negotiations about how Banner or some other system will be configured.

Finally, and more broadly, NCHC’s “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program” (Appendix A) and more recent “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors College” (Appendix B) continue to be extremely valuable tools for the development of honors programs and colleges. Having passed the test of time, the “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program” are something akin to the received wisdom of the national honors community—and the “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors College” are well on their way to the same status. There is every reason to anticipate that the newest Characteristic soon will be viewed in a similar light.

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APPENDIX A

BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF A FULLY DEVELOPED HONORS PROGRAM

(Approved by the NCHC Executive Committee on March 4, 1994, and
amended by the NCHC Board of Directors on November 23, 2007)

No one model of an Honors program can be superimposed on all types of institutions. However, there are characteristics which are common to successfully developed Honors programs. Listed below are those characteristics, although not all characteristics are necessary for an Honors program to be considered a successful and/or fully developed Honors program.

- * A fully developed Honors program should be carefully set up to accommodate the special needs and abilities of the undergraduate students it is designed to serve. This entails identifying the targeted student population by some clearly articulated set of criteria (e.g., GPA, SAT score, a written essay). A program with open admission needs to spell out expectations for retention in the program and for satisfactory completion of program requirements.
- * The program should have a clear mandate from the institutional administration ideally in the form of a mission statement clearly stating the objectives and responsibilities of the program and defining its place in both the administrative and academic structure of the institution. This mandate or mission statement should be such as to assure the permanence and stability of the program by guaranteeing an adequate budget and by avoiding any tendency to force the program to depend on temporary or spasmodic dedication of particular faculty members or administrators. In other words, the program should be fully institutionalized so as to build thereby a genuine tradition of excellence.
- * The Honors director should report to the chief academic officer of the institution.
- * There should be an Honors curriculum featuring special courses, seminars, colloquia, and independent study established in harmony with the mission statement and in response to the needs of the program.
- * The program requirements themselves should include a substantial portion of the participants' undergraduate work, usually in the vicinity of 20% to 25% of their total course work and certainly no less than 15%.
- * The program should be so formulated that it relates effectively both to all the college work for the degree (e.g., by satisfying general education requirements) and to the area of concentration, departmental specialization, pre-professional or professional training.

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- * The program should be both visible and highly reputed throughout the institution so that it is perceived as providing standards and models of excellence for students and faculty across the campus.
- * Faculty participating in the program should be fully identified with the aims of the program. They should be carefully selected on the basis of exceptional teaching skills and the ability to provide intellectual leadership to able students.
- * The program should occupy suitable quarters constituting an Honors center with such facilities as an Honors library, lounge, reading rooms, personal computers and other appropriate decor.
- * The director or other administrative officer charged with administering the program should work in close collaboration with a committee or council of faculty members representing the colleges and/or departments served by the program.
- * The program should have in place a committee of Honors students to serve as liaison with the Honors faculty committee or council who must keep them fully informed on the program and elicit their cooperation in evaluation and development. This student group should enjoy as much autonomy as possible conducting the business of the committee in representing the needs and concerns of all Honors students to the administration, and it should also be included in governance, serving on the advisory/policy committee as well as constituting the group that governs the student association.
- * There should be provisions for special academic counseling of Honors students by uniquely qualified faculty and/or staff personnel.
- * The Honors program, in distinguishing itself from the rest of the institution, serves as a kind of laboratory within which faculty can try things they have always wanted to try but for which they could find no suitable outlet. When such efforts are demonstrated to be successful, they may well become institutionalized thereby raising the general level of education within the college or university for all students. In this connection, the Honors curriculum should serve as a prototype for things that can work campus-wide in the future.
- * The fully developed Honors program must be open to continuous and critical review and be prepared to change in order to maintain its distinctive position of offering distinguished education to the best students in the institution.
- * A fully developed program will emphasize the participatory nature of the Honors educational process by adopting such measures as offering opportunities for students to participate in regional and national conferences, Honors semesters, international programs, community service, and other types of experiential education.

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- * Fully developed two-year and four-year Honors programs will have articulation agreements by which Honors graduates from two-year colleges are accepted into four-year Honors programs when they meet previously agreed-upon requirements.
- * A fully developed program will provide priority enrollment for honors students who are active in the program in recognition of their unique class scheduling needs.

APPENDIX B

BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF A FULLY DEVELOPED HONORS COLLEGE

(Approved by the NCHC Executive Committee on June 25, 2005)

An honors educational experience can occur in a wide variety of institutional settings. When institutions establish an honors college or embark upon a transition from an honors program to an honors college, they face a transformational moment. No one model defines this transformation. Although not all of the following characteristics are necessary to be considered a successful or fully developed honors college, the National Collegiate Honors Council recognizes these as representative:

- * A fully developed honors college should incorporate the relevant characteristics of a fully developed honors program.
- * A fully developed honors college should exist as an equal collegiate unit within a multi-collegiate university structure.
- * The head of a fully developed honors college should be a dean reporting directly to the chief academic officer of the institution and serving as a full member of the Council of Deans, if one exists. The dean should be a full-time, 12-month appointment.
- * The operational and staff budgets of fully developed honors colleges should provide resources at least comparable to other collegiate units of equivalent size.
- * A fully developed honors college should exercise increased coordination and control of departmental honors where the college has emerged out of such a decentralized system.
- * A fully developed honors college should exercise considerable control over honors recruitment and admissions, including the appropriate size of the incoming class. Admission to the honors college should be by separate application.
- * An honors college should exercise considerable control over its policies, curriculum, and selection of faculty.
- * The curriculum of a fully developed honors college should offer significant course opportunities across all four years of study.
- * The curriculum of the fully developed honors college should constitute at least 20% of a student's degree program. An honors thesis or project should be required.

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- * Where the home university has a significant residential component, the fully developed honors college should offer substantial honors residential opportunities.
- * The distinction awarded by a fully developed honors college should be announced at commencement, noted on the diploma, and featured on the student's final transcript.
- * Like other colleges within the university, a fully developed honors college should be involved in alumni affairs and development and should have an external advisory board.

