

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council -  
-Online Archive

National Collegiate Honors Council

---

Fall 2005

# Characteristics of the Contemporary Honors College\* A Descriptive Analysis of a Survey of NCHC Member Colleges

Peter Sederberg

University of South Carolina, sederberg@schc.sc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nhcjournal>



Part of the [Higher Education Administration Commons](#)

---

Sederberg, Peter, "Characteristics of the Contemporary Honors College\* A Descriptive Analysis of a Survey of NCHC Member Colleges" (2005). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive*. 180.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nhcjournal/180>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the National Collegiate Honors Council at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

PETER C. SEDERBERG

# Characteristics of the Contemporary Honors College\* A Descriptive Analysis of a Survey of NCHC Member Colleges

PETER C. SEDERBERG,  
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

## INTRODUCTION

Every year the number of honors colleges across the country increases. Most of these new colleges emerge out of pre-existing honors programs, an origin that suggests that the change reflects an interest in raising the public profile of honors education at a particular institution. Sometimes this transformation entails only a cosmetic name change; other times, institutions take the opportunity to review what they are providing in honors education and how they might enhance it.

The Executive Committee of the National Collegiate Honors Council recognized that the NCHC ought to take a strong interest in this phenomenon. 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 into believing that something new exists where, in fact, substance remains unchanged. Passive acceptance of this trend also does a disservice to those exceptional honors programs that resist playing the name change game because they deem that their program as it stands serves their institution well. Nonetheless, four-year programs at universities face increasing competitive pressure to enter the collegiate game.

Unfortunately, until recently the game lacked a referee. In the absence of some commonly agreed-upon criteria, honors administrators often found themselves in a weak negotiating position when asked, or required, to make the name change. If anything goes, then normal institutional inertia means nothing will change *except* the name.

---

\* Over the spring and summer of 2004, the NCHC Ad Hoc Task Force on Honors Colleges constructed and distributed an extensive survey on honors college characteristics to 68 self-identified “honors colleges” affiliated with the NCHC. We received replies from 38 of those surveyed, three of which indicated they were incorrectly identified as a college. The relevant response rate, then, is 54%. We consider the results of this survey suggestive but not scientifically conclusive. The illustrative statistics in this draft are drawn from the survey.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CONTEMPORARY HONORS COLLEGE

Similar concerns motivated NCHC to develop “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program” over a decade ago. Rumors of the conflict over these guidelines echo down the years and made people reluctant to engage in a similar debate over “honors college.” Unlike “honors program,” however, an honors college is a particular subset of the larger species and is neither relevant to nor desirable for all institutional settings. Nonetheless, those institutions that have made or are contemplating the transformation ought to be expected to make more than a rhetorical change.

Consequently, in November 2003, then NCHC President Norm Weiner reconstituted the NCHC Ad Hoc Task Force on Honors Colleges and charged it with the task of developing a draft set of “The Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors College” for discussion at the 2004 National Conference in New Orleans.<sup>1</sup> This draft was accepted by the Executive Committee in November 2004 and formally endorsed as modified at their June 2005 meeting (see Appendix). The task force also reported on their survey of existing honors colleges affiliated with the NCHC and assessed the extent to which certain characteristics are widely shared among putative honors colleges. What follows is a preliminary descriptive analysis of the findings of this survey.

### METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS OF THE SURVEY

Our survey is limited in a number of ways that necessarily infuse our conclusions with a degree of tentativeness. The most basic issue involved determining our survey population. We considered trying to identify all the entities that are self-declared “honors colleges,” regardless of whether they were affiliated with the NCHC. Given our limited time and resources, this task proved daunting and ultimately impossible to implement. In addition, we concluded that even if we could identify something that would pass for the whole population of honors colleges, we should not give non-affiliated institutions a voice at this stage of our deliberations. We decided, then, to survey those NCHC members who were listed in the national database as possessing honors colleges.

While this decision gave us a manageable sample of 65 schools, subsequent problems arose in conducting the survey. First, the list was not accurate. Ultimately, we found that some colleges we knew to exist were not included on it. Others who were on it actually did not have honors colleges. And, finally, some of the contact information was incorrect. Through several iterations we addressed all of these problems to some extent, but still we know that we overlooked some affiliated honors colleges, and to these we apologize.

We ultimately surveyed 68 institutions, 38 of which replied. Three of these did not have colleges and were not included in our sample, leaving a total of 35 responses from

---

<sup>1</sup> The members of the committee are Cheryl Achterberg, formerly Penn State (now Iowa State); Gary Bell, Texas Tech; Jill Ghnassia, Western Carolina; John Madden, Cerritos College; Rolland Pack, Freed Hardemann; Peter Sederberg, South Carolina (Chair); and Peter Viscusi, Central Missouri State.

## PETER C. SEDERBERG

an adjusted total of 65 surveyed colleges or a response rate of 54%.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, our 35 responses must be seen as a subset of a subset of a subset.

Second, our survey is hardly a perfect instrument. Its size, twelve pages, made it unwieldy and intimidating. We went through multiple revisions of this instrument, all of which made it longer. While initial drafts were designed to have easily quantifiable responses, the ultimate instrument included a fair number of open-ended questions that while providing rich information defy simple summary. We have gathered a lot of information, not all of it pertinent to our central mission of identifying common characteristics of self-described honors colleges. Though subsequent studies of this phenomenon may find this additional information interesting, some busy deans probably put the lengthy survey aside and never replied, despite repeated pleadings.

Moreover, though we pre-tested the survey on the committee members, we did not catch all the questions that turned out to be confusing to the respondents. In reviewing the responses, it grew obvious that some questions, especially the more open-ended ones, elicited non-comparable responses.

As primary author of this preliminary report, I focus on the information that is directly pertinent to the core mission of the task force—drafting the “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors College.” I intend what follows to provide further context for our recommendations. Time constraints prevent me from doing any statistical correlations. On occasion, though, I will point out some that are obvious from inspection of the descriptive data. For example, larger universities tend to have larger honors colleges.

Our survey was divided into three major sections and a concluding set of “summation questions.” This report follows a similar structure.

## ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND RELATIVE INSTITUTIONAL STANDING

Quality honors programs exist in diverse settings, and their particular characteristics reflect this diversity. When an entity describes itself as a “college,” however, it claims to be something more than a program, either directly or by implication. The recruitment rhetoric of most honors colleges often invokes the image of “the best of both worlds.” And what worlds are these?—typically a comprehensive research university and a small, four-year liberal arts college. The very word “college” summons up images of greater organizational complexity, programmatic diversity, physical identity, size, and resources than would be commonly associated with a “program.” In our survey, we wanted to test the validity of these implications.

Most honors colleges exist within the setting of a comprehensive university. To have an “honors college” at a four-year college runs counter to this obvious

---

<sup>2</sup> In 1992-1993, committee member John Madden surveyed 23 self-identified honors colleges for his 1993 NCHC report “What is an Honors College?” He had 19 responses. Of the 23 in his initial cohort, 16 remained on the 2003 NCHC list of Honors Colleges, and 10 of those replied to this survey. Of the other 7, 3 are no longer members, 2 are apparently “programs,” and 2 should have been surveyed.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CONTEMPORARY HONORS COLLEGE

association, just as in the case of a small college re-labeling itself a “university.” Indeed, 91% of the respondents to our survey are part of a comprehensive university. The other 9% are at four-year colleges that have some graduate programs. Unsurprisingly, the universities vary in size and complexity. For example, the number of distinct colleges comprising the university ranges from 4 to 23, with a mean of 8.8.

Honors colleges, though, relate to their university setting in different ways as indicated by the answer to a question on their overall structure:

68.6%: Centralized “overlay” structure of university undergraduate programs.

14.3%: Free standing college, with own faculty and curriculum.

5.7%: Decentralized coordinating structure providing an honors core overseeing departmentalized honors.

11.4%: Other

A dominant form exists, but this does not mean other forms are not “legitimate” colleges. Questions arise, however, about the minority forms. First, can an independent college take full advantage of the resources of the wider university of which they are a part? Second, how much coordination actually exists in a decentralized structure? Do common standards, for example, exist across the confederacy of programs?

Even comprehensive universities vary significantly in the size of their undergraduate student body and the size of the honors college. Of our sample, undergraduate population size is distributed as follows:

< 10,000:	11
10,000-19,999:	9
20,000-30,000:	9
> 30,000:	6

Similarly, the honors colleges also vary in size. The range of total honors population extends from 150 to 2700; the size of the incoming freshman class ranges from fewer than 100 to 700. Distributions are as follows:

Honors College Size		Honors Incoming Class Size	
< 500:	10	< 100:	5
500-999:	13	100-199:	11
1000-1499:	6	200-299:	8
1999-	3	300-399:	5
>2000:	3	> 400:	5
NR:	1		

PETER C. SEDERBERG

We expected to find some common motivations for creating an honors college, and we did. For example, fully 80% of our respondents indicated they arose out of a pre-existing honors program, suggesting an institutional motivation to raise the public profile for what already existed on their campuses. Second, 25 colleges (71.4%) indicated that the primary initiative for establishing the honors college arose from the top administration. Third, confirming our impression that the trend toward establishing honors colleges is relatively new, 21 colleges (60%) have been established since 1993.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, substantive motivations for establishing a college were also widely shared. Among the dominant reasons given are:

- 100%: Recruit stronger students
- 91.4%: Improve overall campus academic quality
- 88.6%: Improve the quality of honors educational opportunities
- 85.7%: Raise the profile of honors within the institution

Other motivations, like fund-raising, curriculum innovation and the promotion of service learning, inspired around 60% or fewer of the respondents.<sup>4</sup>

Claiming the appellation “college” also implies a certain level of institutional status different from that of a program and equivalent to other colleges in a university:

- The administrative head of a college is a dean: 77.1%
- The academic rank of the head is full professor: 91.2%
- The head reports to the provost/academic VP: 82.8%
- The head is a member of the Council of Academic Deans: 82.8%<sup>5</sup>
- The head is a 12-month appointment: 82.8%

We also attempted to ascertain whether colleges reflected a greater degree of organizational complexity. This was one of our less successful queries. Responses were widely distributed. Unsurprisingly, it appears that organizational complexity reflects size, not the structural status of the honors college. Subsequent mining of our data, along with comparisons between large university honors programs, may confirm this hypothesis.

<sup>3</sup> This means that nearly two thirds of the colleges we surveyed were not in existence when John Madden conducted his survey.

<sup>4</sup> The motives mentioned in the 1993 Madden study were to promote cohesion in the curriculum; increase visibility for honors; showcase the university’s excellence in undergraduate education; facilitate independence; and provide more opportunities. His study asked an open-ended question, whereas ours provided a list. Given the different techniques, the responses appear fairly consistent.

<sup>5</sup> Being a dean makes a difference. They all served on the Council of Academic Deans. The others didn’t.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CONTEMPORARY HONORS COLLEGE

Some of the other attributes of a fully developed college within the contemporary university, however, are not so widely shared among our sample. For example, only 20 (57.1%) had an alumni organization, and even fewer (17; 48.6%) possessed a full- or part-time development officer. Due to the relatively recent emergence of most of these colleges, the lack of these two positions may not be surprising. Given that the motives for establishing a college often include seeking greater visibility and identity, we predict that the numbers sharing these characteristics will rapidly increase.<sup>6</sup>

Like most honors programs, honors colleges possess student honors councils (94.3%) and faculty oversight committees (88.6%). Interestingly, a significant minority of honors colleges (42.8%) co-exist with other honors-type programs. Commonly, national scholarship competition programs are housed within the honors college (74.3%). Other programs, like undergraduate research (48.6%), major campus scholarship programs (37.1%) and service learning (31.4%), are less frequently placed within the honors college. None of these characteristics appears to be strongly associated with honors colleges as opposed to honors programs in general.

One major motive for creating an honors college is to improve recruitment of top students; therefore, we might expect that attention would be paid to admission standards. All the respondents claimed total or significant control over admissions standards and processes. Fewer than two-thirds (64.7%), however, enhanced admission standards when they became a college and 22.9% do not have a separate application.<sup>7</sup> These data point to a potential problem that anecdotal evidence suggests has occurred. Without tight control over the admission process and enhanced standards, the publicity push accompanying the inauguration of an honors college (trumpet flourish) may lead to a surge in enrollment that at least temporarily overwhelms available resources.

Finally, in this era of increased accountability, we expected to find that the performance of honors colleges, like other academic units, is increasingly assessed. Thirty colleges (85.7%) reported being assessed in terms of courses and faculty; 28 (80%) on the basis of student performance; and 20 (57.1%) on the basis of their advisement processes. Twenty-six colleges (74.3%) reported producing an annual report.

## RESOURCES AND FACILITIES

If we presume that an honors college presents itself to the world as something more than a program, then we should expect that the transition from program to college

---

<sup>6</sup> At the South Carolina Honors College, we did not create a formal alumni organization until our seventeenth year; the assignment of a part-time development officer occurred two years later with the inauguration of the University's first major capital campaign.

<sup>7</sup> The survey attempted to gather data on admission standards, and these revealed rather wide disparities. For example, minimum acceptable SAT scores ranged from "no minimum" to 1350. However, only three schools reported a minimum score of 1300 or above. High school GPA minimums also ranged from none to 3.6 (un-weighted). Fewer than two thirds of the honors colleges reported using essays (61.8%), letters of recommendation (57.1%), or activities/leadership (54.3%) in their admissions review process.

PETER C. SEDERBERG

would entail an increase in resources. In addition, echoing again the common recruitment refrain “the best of both worlds,” we might also expect that an honors college would possess an enhanced physical identity reflecting the notion that it replicates a small liberal arts college within a wider university setting.

The most obvious way of addressing resource issues is through the budget. Unfortunately, this was one of our less satisfactory questions. Our primary question inquired about the size of the *operating* budget, excluding any teaching faculty lines, but including staff. Some perceived this query as sensitive resulting in a “no response” rate of 22.8%. In addition, the data appear contaminated to some extent by non-comparable responses. Perhaps the best way of getting at something valuable is to look at the colleges’ *per capita* budgets where possible, recognizing we may be using two fuzzy numbers (estimated student population and estimated budget). In particular, some colleges clearly were including scholarships they support in their operational budget. When I could not break down a college’s total budget, I excluded it from the analysis. Consequently, the survey produces only 23 reports that may provide something equivalent to a *per capita* operating budget number.

The average per capita budget was \$596/student. The range was \$83 to \$1,855. Only four colleges had a per capita budget of over \$1,000; 8 had budgets of between \$500 and \$1,000; and the remaining 11 were below \$500. The largest per capita budget was reported by a college of 270 students, the smallest by a college of 600. However, the other three colleges reporting operating budgets of over \$1,000/student each had student populations exceeding 1000. Apparently some relatively large colleges enjoy significant support.<sup>8</sup> Alternatively, relatively tiny budgets of some colleges raise the question of how they can live up to expectations created by their appellation.

Another, somewhat ambiguous, measure of resources involves faculty lines controlled directly by the unit. Obviously, a freestanding honors college will possess a significant faculty budget, and their own faculty will provide most of their courses. Twenty-one colleges have no faculty lines, and a number of those reporting faculty included adjunct faculty hires. Half of those reporting faculty lines also indicated that their own faculty covered 20% or less of their courses. The debate over relative benefits and costs of “owning” faculty versus drawing on the wider university for honors instruction exceeds the scope of this study. However, we should note that significant faculty lines inevitably involve an honors college in the promotion and tenure process.

In addition to the standard university budgetary allocation, an honors college may draw on two other sources of significant funding—college fees and endowment income/private donations. Only five colleges reported imposing fees on their students, ranging from \$15 to \$125 per semester. The two colleges with the highest fees

---

<sup>8</sup> Madden reported two “super-budgets” of over \$2,000/capita and two others in the \$1,000 range. None of these four responded to this survey. My suspicion is that these high figures from 1993 reflect substantial scholarship budgets. For example, one college responding to our survey reported a budget that unadjusted for scholarships equaled over \$2200/student. Once scholarships were backed out, the number fell to \$368/student.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CONTEMPORARY HONORS COLLEGE

generate over a quarter of million dollars a year. Given the current fiscal climate, we expect more honors colleges and programs to consider this option.<sup>9</sup>

Ironically, given the extensiveness of our survey instrument, we failed to inquire about annual fundraising and the amounts generated for the colleges. We did inquire about endowment. Twenty-five colleges (71.4%) reported at least a small endowment. Endowments vary significantly in size, ranging from under \$100,000 to over \$25 million. The distribution of those reporting endowment size is as follows:

- Under \$500,000: 8
- \$500,000 to \$1 million: 5
- \$1 million to \$5 million: 4
- \$5 million to \$10 million: 2
- \$10 million to \$25 million: 2
- Above \$25 million: 2

In recent years, honors colleges have attracted major gifts; indeed, sometimes the gift itself is the primary motivation for establishing the college. These figures do not tell the whole story, of course. For example, “naming gifts” to colleges are often heavily earmarked for merit scholarships. At least one college with an endowment of less than \$1 million was the indirect beneficiary of recent gift of \$20 million to endow a named merit scholarship program for non-residents. Moreover, a heavily earmarked endowment, while supporting critical activities like merit scholarships, may co-exist with relatively small operating budgets. Of the 22 colleges reporting the percentage of earmarked endowment income, 12 (54.4%) indicated that 90 to 100% of their endowment income was dedicated.

Our survey attempted to drill down a bit into the budgetary status of responding colleges. For example, 21 colleges reported compensating departments offering honors courses. Such compensation is generally viewed as a way of developing an honors curriculum that entails small-enrollment classes. The compensation budgets varied from \$20,000 to approximately \$1 million. The range of compensation per course ranged from \$800 to a high of \$7,000. Several colleges reported negotiating a sliding scale of compensation, presumably reflecting the difficulty of extracting a desired honors course from a unit. Unsurprisingly, compensation budgets tended to correlate with the size of the college. The three largest budgets of \$1 million, \$600,000, and \$400,000 were in colleges of 1700, 1100, and 1900 students respectively.

We also inquired about what other activities honors colleges supported out of their budget. The most widely shared services are:

- 91.4%: Student travel
- 77.1%: Student research

---

<sup>9</sup> The South Carolina Honors College increased its fee to \$200/semester for 2005-2006 generating close to a half million dollars *per annum*.

PETER C. SEDERBERG

- 77.1% Publications
- 71.4% Student council activities
- 68.5% Honors course enrichment
- 60% Senior thesis expenses

One last budget probe attempted to ascertain to what extent the budgetary position had improved with the establishment of the college. We received a fair number of non-comparable or non-responses. Eight schools reported more than doubling their budget, but the time frames for doubling ranged from 3 to 40 years. Three colleges reported increases of between 50 and 100%, and another five reported increases between 25 and 50%. Seven colleges, however, reported increases of less than 10%, and one replied that its budget was actually reduced. This reported absence of budgetary support by nearly one-third of those responding raises troubling questions about the reality behind the rhetorical transformation from program to college in many universities.

The desire for increased visibility for honors, internally and externally, drives the transformation from program to college, and we expect that the transformation in name should be physically embodied on campus. Moreover, since honors colleges claim to offer the best of both worlds, those existing within universities with a significant residential undergraduate population might be expected to offer honors housing opportunities.

The physical plant of honors colleges in our survey substantiates these expectations, at least to some extent. Although only a minority (16) possess their own building and the others (19) reside in a suite of offices in a larger building, not too much can be drawn from this data. For example, being confined to a dilapidated house on the fringes of campus is not self-evidently better than a renovated suite in a centrally located building. Gratifyingly, none of our respondents indicated that they were located in "cave next to the boiler room." However, some attributes commonly associated with a "college" were not so widely shared:

- 45.7%: Honors student lounge/reading room
- 40%: Honors IT center
- 37.1%: Honors class/seminar rooms

Honors residential opportunities are widespread: 91.4% of the colleges reported having some residential component, and 26 (74.3%) indicated opportunities existed across all four years. The extent of these opportunities varied. For example, 11 colleges (36.7%) reported that fewer than 25% of their freshmen were housed in honors residences. Of the 28 reporting some housing opportunities for continuing students, 18 (64.3%) housed fewer than 25% of these students. We must be careful about drawing too strong a conclusion from these data because factors not accounted for in our survey, such as the percentage of the overall student population living on campus and the attractiveness of non-honors on- and off-campus housing opportunities, would affect honors residential demand.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CONTEMPORARY HONORS COLLEGE

In conclusion, our respondents indicate that the transformation from program to college generally contributed to improved facilities. Of the 31 answering our summary question, 24 (77.4%) indicated a “great” improvement while 5 (16.1%) agreed that some improvement occurred. Only two reported “little or no” improvement.

Generally, then, as universities transformed their honors programs into colleges, they made some effort to “put their money where their mouth is.” However, we cannot ignore that eight of the colleges reported little or no increase in their operating budget. Is this a large or a small number? It depends on what’s being counted. Following Kenneth Stamp, we might ask whether “8” would be a large or a small number if we were counting beatings over a lifetime.

### **EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES, REQUIREMENTS, AND RECOGNITION**

Structure and resources, while important aspects of an honors college, are, after all, only means to an end. For many institutions the goal is recruitment success alone. If that can be achieved with merely a bump in publicity budgets, we suspect some universities have aimed no higher. We should, nevertheless, demand more substance behind the gloss of a new brochure. More should be expected from the students, and more opportunities should be provided to them. Remember, the comparison we invoke, implicitly when we label ourselves a “college” and explicitly when we use the common phrase “the best of both worlds,” is with a quality liberal arts college. Such a comparison should not be invoked casually.

The nature and quality of student experience are difficult to capture through our survey instrument; we can only approach it indirectly. Specifically, we asked how many honors courses were offered each semester; of these, what percentage were straight honors sections (not embedded in a larger non-honors course); whether they provided honors curricular opportunities across all four years; and, if so, what percentage of their total offerings were upper division. In this way we hoped to ascertain to what extent honors colleges offered more opportunities than a well-developed lower-division honors program.

Given the range in size of the participating honors colleges, we expected to find a significant variation in the number of courses offered each semester:

More than 100 courses:	5
75-99 courses:	4
50-74 courses:	4
25- 49 courses:	11
Fewer than 25 courses:	11

A better way of assessing the significance of honors course opportunities is to divide the total student population of the honors college by the number of honors courses offered per semester, providing a kind of “Index of Opportunity” (IO) somewhat akin to a student/faculty ratio. The variation remains significant, but now the

PETER C. SEDERBERG

data reveal that several of the larger honors colleges actually provide a fairly limited number of curricular opportunities for their students while one of the smallest, albeit a freestanding college, has the most. The IO distribution is as follows:<sup>10</sup>

Less than 10:	4
10 to 20:	17
21 to 30:	5
31 to 40:	6
More than 40:	3

Since lower is better in this case, some colleges are clearly offering a great many more curricular opportunities than others. Overall, though, at least 60% (21) seem to be doing quite well by this measure. Also significant in this regard, 24 (68.6%) report that at least 90% of the courses they offer are freestanding honors courses, not embedded sections.

We also expect that honors colleges should offer course opportunities across all four years, and a significant majority (82.8%) of our respondents do so. We also inquired, though, what percentage of their total honors offerings were upper division courses. Here the response was more mixed. Of the 29 schools claiming four-year opportunities, 14 (48.3%) indicated that 40% or more of their courses were upper level, but 9 (31%) offered 20% or less. When these nine are added to the six that reported no upper division offerings, we have evidence that a significant percentage of our total (15 or 42.8%) can make only a limited claim or none at all to comprehensive curricular opportunities.

Honors curricular opportunities come in a variety of flavors. Among the more popular are:

- Honors courses for general education requirements: 97.1%
- Honors senior thesis/creative project: 94.3%
- Honors independent study: 80.0%
- Special topic, upper division honors seminars 74.3%
- Special topic, interdisciplinary honors seminars 74.3%
- Honors individual “contracts” in regular courses 68.6%
- Undergraduate research courses: 62.8%
- Experimental honors courses: 62.8%
- Honors major/minor level courses: 60.0%
- Honors study abroad opportunities: 57.1%

<sup>10</sup> A lower number is better, because dividing the total number of honors students by the number of honors courses/semester produces this index.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CONTEMPORARY HONORS COLLEGE

- Special, lower division honors core: 57.1%
- Special topic, lower division, honors seminars: 48.6%
- Honors internships: 45.7%
- Service learning courses: 37.1%
- Embedded or honors increment courses: 37.1%

Honors colleges collectively offer a wide variety of opportunities, but again some colleges offer nearly the entire range while others do not. We are particularly interested in those opportunities that should flourish at an honors college within a larger research university—undergraduate research. Nearly all of the colleges (94.3%) reported directly supporting undergraduate research opportunities. This figure became somewhat less impressive when broken down into the numbers engaging in specific forms of support:

- Travel support to make research presentations: 81.8%
- Undergraduate research/scholarship recognition events: 69.7%
- Grants for senior thesis/project expenses: 63.6%
- Undergraduate research assistantships/fellowships 51.5%

Perhaps the ultimate indicator of collegiate status involves the conferring of degrees. With the exception of the freestanding honors colleges, most, usually all, of the students in the “overlay” honors college model earn their degrees from another unit, like Arts and Sciences or Business Administration. Only six of the colleges responding indicated offering their own degree as an option. However, three of these seemed confused by the question. Nonetheless, honors colleges seem uniquely positioned to foster interdisciplinary degrees, in particular, and might be encouraged to aspire to develop such opportunities.

Finally, as programs move to claim honors college status, they could also take the opportunity to increase what they expect from their students. We earlier noted that of the 34 schools responding to this question, 22 or 64.7% enhanced their admission standards. Unfortunately, we failed to inquire whether they also enhanced what was required to earn their particular honors distinction after the students matriculated

We did ask about current standards. Generally, the minimum GPA needed to earn the honors distinction ranged from 3.0 to 3.5, though one school reported a range of distinctions, with the highest requiring a 3.8. We had two unclear responses. Of the 33 remaining, a significant majority required a GPA above 3.25 (24 or 72.7%).

Most of us would agree, however, that the GPA is the least significant attribute of the honors distinction awarded by our programs and colleges. We believe our students earn their distinction by challenging themselves in more demanding honors courses and seminars as well as by other distinctive requirements. We approached this issue from a number of different angles. We inquired about the minimum number of honors credits needed to earn the basic honors distinction. Although not all answers were clearly comparable (for example, the free standing college is an outlier,

PETER C. SEDERBERG

requiring its students to take 85% of their work in the college), we are able to make several revealing comparisons.

First, excepting the freestanding college, the range of honors credit hours required for their distinction extended from 18 to 45, although a significant majority of respondents (24 out of 33 or 72.7%) require between 21 and 30 honors credits. Only three colleges require fewer than 21 honors hours, and six require more. We should recall, though, that the “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program” suggests that a fully developed *program* should require that 20 to 25% of the student work be in honors, and “certainly no less than 15%.” None of the honors colleges report fewer than 17%, although six fall below 20% required honors credits and another 15 fall in the 20 to 24% range. Nine colleges require 25 to 29% of their student’s work be in honors and four require 30% or more.

Second, we inquired what other requirements were associated with earning the primary distinction. This enabled us to identify some other common expectations honors colleges hold for their students. While hardly definitive, these additional requirements hint at some commonalities, though they establish no overwhelming identity:

- Senior thesis/project: 65.7%
- Honors selective seminars: 57.1%
- Core of specific courses (e.g., “great books” seminars): 51.4%
- Liberal education distribution of honors courses: 34.3%
- Service learning: 8.6%

Note that the most commonly shared requirement is a senior thesis or project (65.7%). How good a showing is this? Again, remember the implied comparison with a fine liberal arts college, most of which require a senior thesis or project to graduate.

## SUMMATION AND CONCLUSIONS

In summation, we asked the respondents to identify the major consequences of becoming an honors college.<sup>11</sup> The following consequences were commonly identified:

- Enhanced stature for the head of the college: 85.7%
- Enhanced stature among the faculty 85.7%
- Enhanced organizational position in the university: 82.8%
- Enhanced recruitment: 77.1%

---

<sup>11</sup> Madden asked a similar question in his 1993 survey. He grouped the responses into three broad categories:

- Respect, visibility, recognition, etc: 10 mentions.
- Autonomy, power: 7 mentions.
- Funding, recruiting: 7 mentions

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CONTEMPORARY HONORS COLLEGE

- Improved facilities: 77.1%
- Increased budget 74.3%
- Enhanced academic programs and opportunities: 74.3%
- Enhanced standards of admission and retention: 60%
- Increased size of student body 57.1%
- Enhanced scholarship opportunities: 45.7%

Finally, we polled our survey population on three issues confronting NCHC. Given the importance of these debates, we provide the complete distribution of response:

Should honors colleges be expected to pay higher dues?

- Yes: 9 (25.7%)
- Maybe: 4 (11.4%)
- No: 21 (60%)
- NR: 1 (2.8%)

Should NCHC develop “The basic characteristics of a fully developed honors college?”

- Yes: 27 (77.1%)
- Maybe: 2 (5.7%)
- No: 5 (14.3%)
- NR: 1 (2.8%)

Should the NCHC accredit honors colleges?

- Yes: 11 (31.4%)
- Maybe: 5 (14.3%)
- No: 15 (42.8%)
- NR: 4 (11.4%)

So what can we conclude? First, though honors colleges come in a variety of sizes and shapes, by and large they represent a fairly distinctive subset of the overall membership of the NCHC. Second, this subset is growing in number, a trend likely to continue, even increase. Third, despite the presence of a minority of honors colleges that appear underdeveloped in comparison with their peers, most of the colleges surveyed reflect a pattern of emerging out of programs that were already fairly well developed and were then substantively enhanced on becoming a college. Fourth, the respondents strongly supported the idea that the NCHC should offer guidance as to what becoming an honors college might entail. Basically, I think the survey reveals

PETER C. SEDERBERG

that the transformation should mean more administrative status, more resources, more facilities, more programs and opportunities, higher admission standards, and higher expectations of students.

The survey, then, provides support for the Executive Committee's decision to endorse "The Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors College." Their decision, I believe, will serve a number of purposes. First, it stands as our organizational recognition of a distinctive trend in higher education where the NCHC has a legitimate organizational interest, even obligation. Second, it provides guidelines for those institutions contemplating making such a change in announced status. Third, it embodies a set of criteria against which existing honors colleges can measure themselves and that they can use as leverage within their own institutions to gain additional support. Fourth, it will assist prospective students in making informed discriminations among the institutions they are considering. For all these reasons I think the NCHC has taken a significant step in its maturation as an organization by endorsing the "basic characteristics" appended to this essay.

## APPENDIX

### BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF A FULLY DEVELOPED HONORS COLLEGE

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.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CONTEMPORARY HONORS COLLEGE

- 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.
- 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.

Approved by the NCHC Executive Committee (6/25/05)

\*\*\*\*\*

The author may be contacted at

[sederberg@schc.sc.edu](mailto:sederberg@schc.sc.edu)