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Honors Programs in Four-Year Institutions in the Northeast: A Preliminary Survey toward a National Inventory of Honors

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COUNTING INVISIBLE PROGRAMS

Honors education, as we know, is a curious phenomenon, particularly from the perspective of those interested in institutional research. It is not a discipline *per se*, and so it is not given a "Classification of Instructional Programs" (CIP) code by the National Center for Education Statistics. Accordingly, the federal Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (IPEDS) does not include any information on honors. Honors is part of the Common Data Set (part E.1 "Common Data Set," 2009) overseen by the College Board and an assembly of national post-secondary-education organizations. That instrument lets colleges state whether they have an honors program along with other options such as study abroad and internships. However, the Common Data Set is not gathered into a publicly available database, and so it is not much use for institutional comparisons.

The available lists of honors programs are, therefore, limited. Researchers can turn to the list of National Collegiate Honors Council or institutional members of regional NCHC-affiliated organizations. Alternatively, they can use the list of honors programs and colleges in the most recent edition of *Peterson's Guide to Honors Programs and Colleges* (2005), which lists almost six hundred programs, giving details about them and their place within their institution. Not surprisingly, *Peterson's Guide* has been a primary basis for studies of honors programs in America (see, for instance, Long). All of these sources, though, are limited by the fact that participation in honors organizations (and *Peterson's Guide*) is voluntary. While many excellent universities are active in NCHC, many are not. In the absence of any other source of information, we cannot know for sure what proportion of honors programs have an affiliation with a national or regional honors organization.

As a faculty member originally from Canada, where honors programs are generally limited to departments, I have long been interested in discovering which institutions near mine have college-wide honors programs. Sometimes my curiosity is spurred by some internal institutional request for a comparative report, when, like many honors directors, I need to mine information about institutional peers and their honors programs from websites and direct surveys. In the absence of a more systematic survey of honors, I know I am neglecting uncounted and thus invisible programs. Given this lack of information about honors from comparative institutional studies, individual honors programs may well suffer in times of economic privation. This study is an attempt to count that which has been previously invisible and, perhaps, to begin a national inventory of honors programs.

WHY BOTHER?

Recently, attending a faculty development day on instructional productivity, I asked the presenter how honors might be counted. Since honors lacks a CIP code and its faculty members are housed in other departments, I was told it would not be counted. Honors instruction would be attributed to the department of the professor teaching the class. So, for the National Study of Instructional Costs and Productivity, a major comparative initiative sponsored by the University of Delaware, honors education is invisible ("National Study"). Similarly, honors is typically given short shrift by major regional accrediting bodies. Going unnoticed can be a pleasure, particularly when being noticed means being asked for data and reports, but, whatever immediate advantages invisibility offers, the long term-disadvantages are obvious. Studies that generate data about particular funding needs determine where the money will go, and so honors is likely to lose out financially if it remains invisible.

Having ample information about honors programs can better contextualize requests for funding or support. Having a wide comparative survey of other programs lends weight and statistical significance to a claim about underfunding or to an argument for retaining a program that otherwise might be imperiled. In 2002, for instance, Long claimed that 41% of public four-year programs have honors programs, basing her studies on information from the 1997 *Peterson's Guide*. As a point of historical comparison, a South Carolina survey in 1967 suggested that the percentage was 63% (Neidich). Surely honors programs at public institutions have not declined in number since 1967; instead, methodological differences explain the discrepancy between the 2002 and the 1967 studies. Given the lack of information, we do not know how many public four-year institutions typically offer an honors program, but such knowledge can be crucial to an honors administrator's perspective on how honors works at his or her own school.

Beyond the self-serving uses of honors information, we can see that it might also help us learn how many honors programs are affiliated with honors organizations such as NCHC as well as giving us a benchmark to consider how honors waxes or wanes with the years. The purpose of this study is to take an initial step toward some of these particular ends by proposing a method to generate a database of honors programs that might extend beyond the limits of this study. This database could then be used as the basis for more extensive and authoritative surveys of the state of honors education in the United States.

METHOD AND DEFINITIONS

Answers to the question of what defines honors education have consumed considerable ink, culminating in sets of "Basic Characteristics" for honors programs and for colleges. However, these defining documents are intentionally broad; not all programs have all the basic characteristics, and some may exist that have very few of them. Practical definitions have been devised to help students navigate their way into honors education (Digby, 9–10) and to distinguish between honors programs and honors colleges (Sederberg; Achtenberg). Such definitions usually take the form of exploratory essays and are difficult to boil down into a list of essential characteristics.

The authors of the Common Data Set used by institutional research officers are less bothered by the nuances of definition. They describe an honors program as "Any special program for very able students offering the opportunity for educational enrichment, independent study, acceleration, or some combination of these" ("Common Data Set, 2009–2010"). The simplicity of the definition sacrifices precision, but it does seem to be clear. On closer inspection, however, one can see how different institutional research officers, assembling a large mass of data, might define honors differently. Does a university, for instance, that allows students with a high GPA to take a larger number of summer courses in the interest of accelerated learning count as an honors program? Does a university that offers some departmental honors options have an honors program? Most people with practical knowledge of honors would not think so, but, given the breadth of the definition, an IR officer might. The vagueness of any brief definition impedes progress toward a list of essential ingredients for honors.

Instead of dragging in Wittgenstein and the history of taxonomy, I have chosen simply to move away from the essentialist and toward the nominalist pole of defining honors. In order to have an operational definition, I have defined an honors program as any program so-named online and providing information to off-campus website visitors. The only qualification to this definition is that an "honors" program or college must at least have a unifying

early experience for students with different majors. While many honors programs offer in addition several departmental options, for the purposes of this survey the presence of individual departmental honors offerings on their own does not qualify an institution as having an honors program. I searched for a school's single central honors website rather than various departmental honors pages.

To find honors programs, then, I visited and searched institutional websites drawn from Carnegie Classification listings. I chose to focus on four-year institutions located in New England and the Middle Atlantic states (Connecticut, District of Columbia, Delaware, Maryland, Maine, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont). I chose this region because it is the one I am most familiar with, having been active in the Northeast Regional Honors Council, and because it seemed likely to offer a wide range of four-year schools. I selected all classes of doctoral and research universities, all master's universities, and all baccalaureate institutions with the following exceptions: I did not include special-focus colleges (such as seminaries and medical colleges) since most of these do not serve a mainly undergraduate population; and I removed from the list one or two colleges that either had closed since the information was collected by the Carnegie Foundation in 2005 or that offered only graduate instruction. In the end I came up with a survey population of 421 four-year institutions. I did not add community colleges (or other colleges that primarily award associate's degrees) to this study because I had already come up with a substantial number of institutions to examine. However, I hope, perhaps with the collaboration of community college honors directors, to examine honors at two-year institutions in the future.

This survey involved a lot of web-browsing, which was undertaken from February 2009 to February 2010. Generally each search would begin by browsing links and sublinks from Academic and Prospective Student pages, where honors program web pages usually reside. Sometimes I had to do in-site searches to find information about honors programs tucked away in online catalog pdf files. The search terms and limited phrases I used included "honors," "honors program," "scholars program," and "fellows program." If these methods did not provide evidence of an honors program, I assumed that the institution did not have one. This method is not immune to error, but I believe it provides an acceptably accurate way of finding out where honors programs exist; it is also clear and simple enough that different researchers can join the effort and complete a national survey rather easily.

RESULTS

What follows is a digest of my survey of what four-year institutions in the Northeast states have honors programs and colleges. In each of the following tables the number of institutions in a particular category is given, followed (in parentheses) by the percentage value of that number as a whole of the category in a given row. Rows indicate various institutional categories (such as basic classification, size, selectivity etc.). Columns indicate whether or not institutions have an honors program (Tables 1–6), NCHC membership (Table 7), and honors college status (Table 8). After each table below, I provide a brief discussion of that set of results.

Table 1: Honors in the NE

	With Hons	No Hons	Total
All four-year schools in NE	288 (68.4%)	133 (31.6%)	421

Most four-year post-secondary institutions in the Northeast have an honors program, but there are regional variations, as we see below.

Table 2: Honors by State

	With Hons	No Hons	Total
Connecticut	15 (75%)	5 (25%)	20
Washington, DC	6 (54.6%)	5 (45.4%)	11
Delaware	3 (60%)	2 (40%)	5
Massachusetts	39 (68.4%)	18 (31.6%)	57
Maryland	17 (68%)	8 (32%)	25
Maine	6 (37.5%)	10 (62.5%)	16
New Hampshire	9 (60%)	6 (40%)	15
New Jersey	24 (85.7%)	4 (14.3%)	28
New York	77 (68.8%)	35 (31.2%)	112
Pennsylvania	82 (75.2%)	27 (24.8%)	109
Rhode Island	7 (87.5%)	1 (12.5%)	8
Vermont	3 (20%)	12 (80%)	15
			[421]

States where the proportion of honors programs is significantly below the regional average, such as Maine and Vermont, generally have a high proportion of small or very small liberal arts colleges. The breakdown above is intended to help us better understand the marketplace for honors in a particular state.

Table 3: Honors by School Type

	With Hons	No Hons	Total
All public 4-year	108 (81.8%)	24 (18.2%)	132
All private NFP 4-year	180 (63.4%)	104 (36.6%)	284
All private for-profit 4-year	0 (0 %)	5 (100%)	5

Honors is most common in public four-year institutions, and, while significantly less common in private not-for-profit institutions, it is still well-represented there. Public universities have long been home to honors programs as they attempt to attract strong students who might otherwise attend prestigious private institutions. Since private colleges tend to include a higher proportion of smaller institutions, it is perhaps not surprising to see fewer honors programs among them.

The trend of greater representation of honors in public than in private institutions is similar to one noted by Long, who reported honors programs in 37.5% of public and 7.8% of private institutions in New England, and in 36% of public and 17.5 % of private institutions in the Middle Atlantic States. Her numbers are considerably lower than those presented here because she depended on the 1997 *Peterson's Guide to Honors Programs*, so she was drawing information from a self-selected population of NCHC member programs that sent information about themselves to the guide. Naturally, that population would be considerably smaller than the one studied here.

In a time of austerity, the existence of honors at a large majority of public institutions in the Northeast might argue for their continued presence and enhancement in any particular public institution. As we might expect from anecdotal evidence, honors is not part of the structure of for-profit colleges and universities in the Northeast.

Table 4: Honors by Carnegie Basic Classification

	With Hons	No Hons	Total
Master's L	97 (85.8%)	16 (14.2%)	113
Master's M	39 (83.0%)	8 (17.0%)	47
Master's S	22 (75.9%)	7 (24.1%)	29
Bacc Arts & Sci	43 (44.8%)	53 (55.2%)	96
Bacc Diverse fields	39 (60%)	26 (40%)	65
Doctoral Rsch	15 (78.9%)	4 (21.1%)	19
Doctoral High Rsch	20 (87.0%)	3 (13.0%)	23
Doctoral Very High Rsch	13 (44.8%)	16 (55.2%)	29
[All doctoral institutions	48 (67.6%)	23 (32.4%)	71]

The Carnegie Basic classifications are due for a revision this year, so these data are likely already out of date, but they illustrate the prevalence of honors at a variety of different kinds of institution. The definitions of these categories are available on the Carnegie Foundation's website. Master's institutions boast the greatest proportion of honors programs (from 75.9 to 85.8%) although this proportion is matched by doctoral research and doctoral high-research institutions. Where the prestige of the institution attracts high-achieving students on its own (as is likely the case in some baccalaureate and some doctoral very-high-research institutions), we see the percentage of honors programs dropping off somewhat. However, in both of these categories, we still see 44.8% of institutions offering an honors program.

Table 5: Honors by Institution Size

	With Hons	No Hons	Total
Very Small	27 (44.3%)	34 (55.7%)	61
Small	114 (65.5%)	60 (34.5%)	174
Medium	113 (80.1%)	28 (19.9%)	141
Large	34 (75.6%)	11 (24.4%)	45

The Carnegie Foundation classifies very small institutions as having fewer than 1,000 students, small institutions as having 1000–2,999, medium institutions as having 3,000–9,999, and large institutions as having more than

10,000 ("Carnegie Classification"). Smaller institutions are less likely to offer an honors program than larger ones, probably because of limits on institutional resources as well as the difficulty of creating a small honors community within an already small student body. A slightly larger proportion of medium institutions than large ones boast an honors program although this difference may not be significant. Some of the larger doctoral very-high-research institutions encourage their students to participate in departmental honors and do not have a centralized honors program, which may be a manifestation of a wider division between general-education-based honors programs and department-based, research-driven honors.

Table 6: Honors by Selectivity

	With Hons	No Hons	Total
Not available	10 (32.3%)	21 (67.7%)	31
Inclusive	52 (71.2%)	21 (28.8%)	73
Selective	149 (83.7%)	29 (16.3%)	178
More Selective	77 (55.4%)	62 (44.6%)	139

The Carnegie classification of selectivity is painted with a broad brush. Inclusive institutions either do not provide first-year test score data or those data indicate that they have a fairly open admissions policy. Selective institutions' first-year-student test scores place them in "roughly the middle two-fifths of baccalaureate institutions." More selective schools have scores that place them in "roughly the top fifth of baccalaureate institutions" ("Carnegie Classification"). This broad definition groups schools such as Harvard and Princeton with schools such as my own, a regional public master's university. Allowing for the roughness of the measure, however, we can see that inclusive and selective schools most often host honors programs, probably because they need honors to attract and retain the best students. That said, this measure is so broad that it likely overlooks distinctions within the categories that may be interesting. Perhaps a future study might consider adding more fine-grained admissions data from IPEDS in order to study the correlation between honors and selectivity.

Table 7: Honors Program Membership in NCHC by Carnegie Basic Classification

	In NCHC	Not in NCHC	Total
All Honors (n=288)	172 (59.7%)	116 (40.3%)	288
Master's L	73 (75.3%)	24 (24.7%)	97
Master's M	25 (64.1%)	14 (35.9%)	39
Master's S	13 (59.1%)	9 (40.9%)	22
Bacc Arts & Sci	12 (27.9%)	31 (72.1%)	43
Bacc Diverse fields	16 (41.0%)	23 (59.0%)	39
Doctoral Rsch	11 (57.9%)	4 (21.1%)	19
Doctoral High Rsch	14 (70.0%)	6 (30.0%)	20
Doctoral Very High Rsch	8 (61.5%)	5 (38.5%)	13
[All doctoral institutions	33 (68.8%)	15 (31.3%)	48]

The proportion of institutions hosting honors programs that are members of the National Collegiate Honors Council is significant because it bears on the perennial debates that take place about honors accreditation and best practices. These discussions will not likely affect institutions that are not members of NCHC. The table above categorizes institutional honors programs by NCHC membership. As it turns out, according to the latest list from NCHC, most four-year schools with honors programs in the Northeast are members. While there is room for more NCHC representation in all basic classification categories, baccalaureate institutions are relatively under-represented, perhaps because of an unwillingness or inability on the part of smaller institutions to pay NCHC dues or to fund student travel to NCHC conferences.

Table 8: Honors College Designation by Carnegie Basic Classification

	Honors Colleges	Other Programs	Total
Total Hons. College Designated	32 (11.1%)	256 (88.9%)	288
Master's L	10 (10.3%)	87 (89.7%)	97
Master's M	2 (5.1%)	37 (94.9%)	39
Master's S	0 (0%)	22 (100%)	22
Bacc Arts & Sci	2 (4.7%)	41 (95.3%)	43
Bacc Diverse fields	0 (0%)	39 (100%)	39
Doctoral Rsch	5 (33.3%)	10 (66.7%)	15
Doctoral High Rsch	6 (30%)	14 (70%)	20
Doctoral Very High Rsch	7 (53.8%)	6 (46.2%)	13

Finally, Table 8 presents us with the number of honors units that are designated as honors colleges rather than honors programs. The rise of honors colleges has been the subject of increasing research. Peter Sederberg provided an initial, selective survey at the national level in the NCHC monograph he edited in 2008, titled *The Honors College Phenomenon*. The data presented above include all four-year honors colleges in the Northeast region and can help us understand where honors colleges tend to reside in the educational market and, over time, to quantify and analyze any changes in their popularity.

DISCUSSION

This study is a simple first step in assembling a body of data on honors in the Northeast. The results presented here are broadly descriptive rather than analytical, bringing together my survey of honors with data from the basic Carnegie classifications. My speculations about institutional funding for honors and the place of honors in the educational marketplace do not yet rise from the realm of anecdote to that of hypothesis, but further analysis might allow for this sort of investigation.

Surveys of this sort can be used and misused for a variety of reasons in the era of data-driven strategic planning. We might limit our studies to exemplary institutions in order to hold up the results as a kind of high standard to which all honors programs or colleges should aspire. We might also carefully choose institutional peers who do worse than we do in some aspects of

honors program assessment in order to show our provosts that our programs are superior. The purpose of this survey, by contrast, is to get an overall understanding of honors as it is, not as it is occasionally idealized or denigrated; I present it as a historian interested in a little-studied aspect of American higher education and as an honors director seeking to understand just how my program fits into the wider scheme of honors education.

This study can be expanded, with assistance, to survey all four-year institutions in the United States and might be the inspiration for a regional or national survey of honors at two-year institutions. I would be happy to work with other honors faculty and students interested in contributing to such projects. Assuming that the Internet does not change drastically in the next decade (perhaps the riskiest assumption made in this paper), I suggest that such a survey be repeated to document changes in honors programs over time. Another way of expanding this survey might be to add data from other sources (such as IPEDS) and to apply various statistical analyses to try to tease out the factors that might predict the likelihood of a given institution having an honors program; this was done by Long although, as mentioned above, she was working from a limited sample. Finally, and most ambitiously, the data gathered here might result in a list of honors deans and directors' e-mail addresses, which could be used to send out a well-designed questionnaire in order to better understand the size, funding, support, and other features of honors programs. Presuming a good participation rate, such a survey could provide much better information about honors than has been available previously. I would be happy to work with others if any reader should think these proposals an interesting research opportunity.

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