CHAPTER THREE

Should We Start an Honors College? An Administrative Playbook for Working Through the Decision

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INTRODUCTION

Acknowledging that the number of honors colleges across the U.S. has increased 50% between 2016 and 2021 suggests the answer to the question posed in my title is a resounding "yes!" This recent expansion has also occurred on the heels of robust growth during the previous two decades. Yet there are good and bad reasons to start an honors college or evolve an honors college from an existing honors program; and there are also fine reasons *not* to start an honors college. While those reasons will vary across institutions—as every local context is different—some common questions and considerations can guide stakeholders as they dig into strategic thinking about the opportunities and costs surrounding an honors

college. This essay lays out some of those questions in seeking to provide guidance around what can be both an exhilarating and harrowing journey.

Let's start with a scenario typical in higher education. A new president or provost rolls into town looking to make a mark. They want visible change, a material object they can point to suggesting the institution is "on the move." These days, transitioning an honors program to an honors college or starting one from scratch is increasingly part of the standard playbook. And why not? Honors colleges present opportunities for enrollment lift, provide a tangible fundraising opportunity, and can move the needle on an institution's academic profile, among other benefits. In short, senior administrators can appear to be *doing* something. But is it a good idea?

Many institutions skip over the question of "*should* we start an honors college?" and proceed directly to "*how can we* build an honors college?" Ignoring the former in favor of the latter is a grave mistake because there are many reasons *not* to transition to an honors college or at least not do so in a given moment.

- **If the honors curriculum is not built out fully**, it is going to be difficult to scale the operation—a greater number of students showing up at your door without being able to move through the curriculum in a timely fashion will result in frustrated undergraduates and low persistence and completion rates.
- **If an honors program already has some unaddressed problems that require attention**—perhaps with resources, in staffing or advising, or low student satisfaction—moving to an honors college model will simply exacerbate those problems and make them more entrenched and thus more difficult to address. Your house should be in order before a major transition.
- **If you are simply changing the sign over the door without identifying strategic aims being served by the move from an honors program to an honors college**, you are

doing your institution and its students a disservice. "Fake it until you make it" is not a recipe for long-term success: students have many choices in the marketplace and are looking for programmatic distinctiveness and material differences between institutions. "You get extra perks if you join the honors college" is not a compelling positioning statement.

- **If you don't have the full support of senior administration**, creating the necessary momentum around personnel investments, fundraising, and elevation of the position of honors on the university org chart, which are required for success, is going to be difficult.
- **If your honors program is in wonderful shape and there's the risk of losing something special**, the move to an honors college may not be worth it. Strong community, a culture of innovation, positive collaboration with campus partners, a history of distinctive traditions, and a powerful curriculum should not be taken for granted and won't automatically transfer to the new model. The Hippocratic oath of "first do no harm" applies here.

Just as there are good reasons for *not* starting an honors college, there are many compelling rationales for why an institution might wish to move toward that new model, including some of the following advantages.

- **Scale**: honors colleges tend to be bigger than honors programs and, as a result, can present opportunities for operational efficiencies.[1]
- **Autonomy**: honors colleges tend to have more control over their operations, especially in the areas of curriculum, staffing, and enrollment management.
- **Visibility**: honors colleges tend to have a bigger footprint and thus are more visible both internally and externally, which can lead to more opportunities for collaboration with other units across campus and with community partners.

- **Enrollment lift**: enhanced visibility creates an opportunity to increase the size of the honors student population and sometimes improve the quality of cohorts you are attracting to the institution.[2]
- **Advancement opportunities**: honors colleges, often supported by an advisory board, can provide compelling cases for donor support and tend to be more on the radar of development offices.
- **A seat at the table**: because honors colleges are typically led by deans, they offer the unit a chance to contribute to key conversations about academics at the university through participation on the deans' council.
- **Staffing**: honors colleges provide a greater opportunity to secure faculty lines in the unit and build out the administrative support structure: a quarter of respondents to the "2021 Census of U.S. Honors Colleges" indicated they have dedicated faculty lines, a figure that climbed to roughly 50% for R1 institutions (Cognard-Black and Smith 64).
- **Build out programming**: a larger budget, more support personnel, and a greater number of students allow an honors college to increase its co-curricular programming and thus provide more opportunities for students. An honors college may also prompt the addition of a residential component, as over three quarters of honors colleges in the 2021 census conducted in association with this monograph indicate the presence of residential housing (Cognard-Black and Smith 63).

While the above list is enticing, a few caveats are worth mentioning. These advantages are not present in every case and will only evolve over time with careful planning and through the collaboration and support of other units and senior administration. We also should not overplay the differences between honors colleges and honors program, for as NCHC's "Shared Principles and Practices of Honors Education" remind us, the common characteristics of honors programs and honors colleges far outnumber the

differences, hence the framing adjective "shared." Likewise, there are numerous highly successful honors programs that are far more mature than some underdeveloped honors colleges, so we should not make value judgments about the two different organizational forms. Honors colleges are not a good in and of themselves, and simply moving to this model does not mean that the advantages above will necessarily accrue.

In fact, programs that transition to an honors college and grow their honors student population significantly can anticipate facing some new problems. One of the most common challenges will be trying to cultivate and maintain community. Small honors programs have a built-in advantage in that students and faculty can develop relationships more easily. Often, such programs have high concentrations of students from the arts and sciences, further creating a sense of shared experience. Word of mouth around the traditions of honors can be passed along easily and often without intention—there is a kind of inertia to the community-building effort. But as you scale the operation and bring more diverse populations into the honors space—more students from professional programs; transfer students who have not experienced your first-year programming; more students with different life experiences, identities, and varied academic preparation—community will not take care of itself. Program distinctiveness and clear marketing materials around what honors means will help mitigate some of these effects. Additionally, affinity groups, strong peer mentoring programs, community engagement coordinators, and residential programming can point you in the right direction, but you will need to be intentional about new ways of thinking and new ways of addressing advantages you may have taken for granted in an honors program. Failure to address such challenges will also likely lead to collateral damage in reduced retention and persistence rates, confusion around program identity, and even negatively affect the academic performance of students.

The process of starting an honors college from scratch or evolving one from an existing honors program will differ in significant ways. The latter approach is much more common according to the 2021 census, with 89.1% of respondents indicating their honors

colleges grew out of existing honors programs. So while starting with a blank slate offers some freedom, this essay imagines its primary audience consists of readers adapting a current program into an honors college. Although I am suggesting one particular chronology in this essay, different institutional circumstances will dictate these steps be staged in a variety of ways.

By the way, a chapter in Peter C. Sederberg's volume on honors colleges by Bob Pepperman Taylor, "How to Create an Honors College," raises some excellent questions worth considering, even though much has changed in the two decades since he was appointed dean of the honors college at the University of Vermont. And following the orientation of Sederberg's volume, that essay focuses on the particular *characteristics* of an honors college: admissions, curriculum, personnel and governance, student makeup, and budget, among others. This chapter—which is informed by recent survey data and the variety of options that have sprung up during a period of significant growth in honors colleges—can be paired profitably with Taylor's essay by those looking to map out a game plan for institutional change.

PURPOSE

In an interview about motivation and learning, author Daniel Pink once explained the following:

> When kids ask, "Why are we doing this?" we often dismiss it as an annoying question when, in fact, it's a pretty darn good one. And we need to be able to answer it—not to placate the kids, but because there's a rich body of evidence showing that when people know why they're doing something, they do it better.

That fundamental question "Why are we doing this?" is often on the tips of the tongues of students in classrooms, but it less frequently makes its way into the planning meetings of administrators, which may explain why so many organizations lurch from fad to fad each time a new leader surfaces or why so many strategic planning processes seem so lifeless and doomed from the start. "Why are we

doing this?" should be a question that kicks off any discussion of moving to an honors college. Institutions should have clear answers to that important question not only because good answers will help buttress leaders of the effort during what is usually a long process but because various constituencies will need to hear compelling reasons to support you: boards, donors, administrators, as well as faculty, students, and staff. In an environment of limited resources, institutions owe members of their communities a clear rationale for why investments are being made in one unit over others. Ultimately, leaders need to be able to articulate what the honors college is *for*.

Not only should it be clear *why* an institution is starting an honors college, but the creation of such a unit should meet some clear institutional *need*. Perhaps a university wants to create a space for pedagogical experimentation in the classroom; perhaps it is looking to increase the number of motivated students to work with faculty on undergraduate research; or perhaps giving the honors unit more institutional autonomy will unleash curricular innovation across academic programs. In all these cases, questions about purpose should take place amidst conversations about institutional mission, vision, and values. NCHC's "Shared Principles and Practices of Honors Education" leads off by highlighting how the honors college both "aligns itself with the mission of the institution" (1) and advances strategic priorities because that synergy should inform everything that follows. And subsequent conversations around key practices—such as admissions, teaching/learning, and co-curriculum—should be framed and informed by the institution's mission, vision, and values. If a university has gone all-in on global learning, then the honors college should reflect or complement that orientation.

The other reason conversations around purpose are so essential is that they will ultimately inform the metrics by which the effort will be judged. If no clarity around the reasons for starting an honors college exists, then the institution will not know whether the project has been successful down the road. If the primary purpose is growing enrollment, then increases in student numbers should be tracked to determine success; an effort driven by fundraising

should identify target amounts of donor dollars. The answers to questions around purpose and need should be buttressed by data and ultimately result in a written case statement that lays out the case for an honors college: here's where we are going; this is why we are going there; and here's what we need to get there. The corollary to Pink's observation above that learners will be more successful when they know why they are being asked to do something is that research has shown that employees will be more engaged when they have a clear sense of the goals the unit is aiming for (Bezuijen et al.). By clearly delineating objectives and key results (OKRs), you are more likely to attract allies to your cause.

Speaking of metrics, there are certainly instrumentalist reasons that may inform an institution's decision to move to an honors college. For example, some states are increasingly allocating funds through their university systems based on performance metrics that take into account factors that may be improved by the presence of an honors college, including enrolling high-achieving students, increasing persistence and graduation rates, and demonstrating post-graduate success, to name three. As stated on the "Performance Based Funding" website of the State University System of Florida, one guiding principle is to "reward Excellence or improvement." This example is one of many where an investment in an honors college can move the entire institution forward. Do note, however, that this increased focus on metrics can cut both ways. State-mandated performance-based funding approaches may limit student credit hours at an institution or restrict classes outside a major program—both of which will have a negative impact on honors offerings. Elevating honors to a place alongside other colleges at the university may also subject the honors college to evaluation along the lines of revenue generation or expenses tied to FTEs and Student Credit Hours.

WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED?

The "2021 Census of U.S. Honors Colleges" suggests that in about a third of cases, the president or other members of senior administration initiated the effort to move to an honors college.

Nevertheless, conversations around whether a transition to an honors college is a good idea and, if so, what the final product might look like should involve a wide range of stakeholders, including current faculty, staff, and students in honors, honors program alums, and leaders in advancement, student affairs, enrollment management, and academic affairs. Campus representatives from outside honors will also provide useful insights. Having such conversations will be easier if an institution has an established history of honors, an existing culture on which to build, faculty and staff with experience in honors education, and a track record of how honors has interacted with other units on campus. On the other hand, those past experiences can also sometimes limit the perspective of those involved in planning conversations. For example, if an honors program has never employed its own faculty—instead depending on "borrowing" the faculty of other programs and leaning heavily on departmental honors and honors contracts—it may be harder to envision how a standing honors college faculty might fit into the institutional culture of the university or college. Likewise, if a program has employed a Great Books curriculum, conceiving of and implementing different models like problem-based learning, for example, may be hard. In these cases, having NCHC-trained site visitors investigate the current situation, prompt stakeholders to describe their aspirations, and generate a report outlining some strategic opportunities that may inform the local conversation can be helpful. Calling for such assistance is especially important (perhaps even obligatory) if a campus has no expert on honors education or no experienced voice helping shape the transition process. For a fraction of the cost of for-profit outfits that offer consulting services across the entire portfolio of higher education activities, NCHC consultants who focus on honors education can play a crucial role in helping a program move forward with its plans for an honors college.

Anyone who might be impacted by the decision to move to an honors college should have the opportunity to weigh in at some point and in the most transparent fashion. Transparency will create good will just as furtiveness will create suspicion and resentment

across campus. In the case of my own institution, during the process of transitioning to an honors college, I engaged in year-long dual conversations about the what, why, and how with 1) individual schools and the faculty governance system and 2) the senior administration and advancement staff who needed to hear the fundraising case and understand how the plan for expansion aligned with the strategic goals of the institution. A campaign feasibility study can lay the groundwork for a significant and extended fundraising effort as well as help stakeholders understand what is and is not possible. At my own institution, it was important that the entire faculty vote on the creation of a new unit—even after the faculty senate unanimously endorsed the proposal. I made sure to seek out known opponents of the plan to hear them out during individual conversations, even if I was fairly certain my comments would do little to change their minds. In the end, 93.3% of faculty who voted approved of the motion to create Westminster's fifth school, a move subsequently passed by the board of trustees and then accepted by our accrediting body. At larger universities where the full faculty rarely vote in such a manner, the faculty senate and the board will be the focus of attention.

DISTINCTIVENESS

For decades, the standard value proposition for universities housing honors colleges was to explain that "we offer the benefits of a small liberal arts experience in the context of a large research university and all its attendant resources." Combine that claim with the presence of additional opportunities (or perks) such as honors-specific scholarships, priority enrollment, and upscale housing, and you have the standard set-up of the turn-of-the-century honors college. Indeed, of all the institutions with an honors college surveyed in the 2021 census, 84.8% report offering priority registration to honors students, 77.2% provide dedicated residential housing, and over 70% offer some form of honors scholarships. Yet with such uniformity in approach and the explosion in the number of honors colleges across the U.S., institutions are increasingly having to work harder to differentiate their honors offerings in a progressively

more crowded market. Given recent and long-overdue conversations about equity in higher education, which make such "perks" reserved for a select group of students unattractive if not unjust, the time is right for honors colleges to position themselves in the marketplace in more creative and substantive ways. The ski industry in my own state of Utah offers an instructive case in point. Nine world-class resorts operate within one hour's drive of my office, so by necessity each has carved out a niche in the market to remain relevant and attract a particular type of consumer. Deer Valley caters to high-end consumers who don't think twice at grabbing a $22 burger for lunch at Stein Erickson; Alta is restricted to skiers only and relishes its old school, locals vibe; Brighton welcomes the teenage boarder community, and sprawling Park City has gone all-in on the "Vail experience," for better or worse. The ski industry knows that trying to be everything to everyone is a quick path to irrelevancy, a lesson most colleges and universities are still struggling to learn. If you are one of a dozen honors colleges in Virginia, you better be able to explain clearly how the experience of your students differs from that of those in the other eleven honors colleges.

Aaron Basko begins his 2022 discussion of the perils of the "generic college" by wondering why higher education has "so much trouble with differentiation," the quality he identifies as the "secret sauce of success." This dilemma certainly applies to honors colleges, which sometimes coast along on vague promises about enhancing a student's undergraduate education rather than embracing sharp differences in curriculum, programming, and the student experience. Yet distinctiveness is the name of the game these days, as we see in most industries—media, film, music, restaurants, skiing—where targeted programming wins the day. After all, consumers have never been more sophisticated, never had more choice, never had more resources at their fingertips that allow them to scrutinize the quality of a product. We shouldn't fool ourselves into imagining that our students don't approach the selection of an honors college in the same manner. Yet benefits abound in having the courage to stake out a distinctive program: clarity about mission will guide curricular and co-curricular programming choices, will make it

easier for enrollment management and marketing staffs to pitch the program, and will have a positive impact on retention. Brand loyalty occurs when an organization makes a clear and distinctive promise and then actually delivers on that pledge.

As mentioned above, being distinctive takes courage, especially in an industry that is deeply conservative and resistant to change. Boards may be reluctant to embrace difference if they are too far removed from the program portfolio while senior administrators having to sell change may not want to take too many risks for fear of being held accountable if things don't work out. Yet the history of innovation in honors education—which has shown leadership in areas such as interdisciplinary curriculums, place-based learning, student-centered pedagogy, and team teaching—makes it a perfect space in which to experiment. Indeed, NCHC's "Shared Principles and Practices of Honors Education" speak to this historical culture of innovation by detailing the many ways an honors college (or program) can serve as a "laboratory of innovation" (4). It is also important that the question of distinctiveness be considered not only in terms of the marketplace an honors college is operating in (i.e., the most common external competitors) but in terms of other units on campus, particularly the general education program, if the honors college offers an alternative pathway through the general education requirements.[3] Tougher grading or additional work are not compelling position statements: honors should not be harder but different. Thus, when stakeholders consider the move to an honors college, they should take advantage of this transition opportunity to avoid making themselves in the image of one hundred other honors colleges. They should strive for a distinctive experience that is well-aligned with the culture, mission, and strategic goals of the larger institution: distinctive aspects of a program should serve some larger purpose. Just as small classes are not a good in and of themselves—although you'd be hard-pressed to know that by all the college marketing materials touting that feature—interdisciplinary approaches to education need to be tied to some ancillary outcome. In the case of my program, that curricular feature helps students practice having conversations across difference and develop their

own voices in community, two key learning outcomes for our honors college. For Aaron Stoller at Colorado College, what he calls "critical interdisciplinarity" serves a different function, which is to "advance democratic aims" ("Case" 34). In both cases, the function of the distinctive feature is clear.

RESOURCES

NCHC's "Shared Principles and Practices of Honors Education" is quite clear on the matter of resources. At the start of the section on "Infrastructure and Resources," the first principle explains, "The permanence and stability of an honors program or college is ensured through adequate infrastructure and resources, including an appropriate budget as well as appropriate faculty, professional staff, and administrative support when necessary" (6). While it is up to institutional leaders to decide how they understand the modifier "appropriate," the subsequent language around how to put this principle into practice is unambiguous: "Honors does not depend on the good will and energy of particular faculty members or administrators for survival; instead, the program is fully institutionalized so that it can build a lasting tradition of inclusive excellence" (6). In short, universities should not run an honors college on the cheap nor outside the typical channels of institutional practices. It is not unusual for honors programs that have evolved over time to have staffed classes through long-standing oral agreements with individual program chairs or deans, covered operational expenses through the generosity of a provost who locates funds to support honors on an ad hoc basis, or managed administrative tasks through the efforts of a staff member in another unit who takes on honors as an additional responsibility. Such tenuous arrangements will break under the weight of scale; thus, planning conversations around moving to an honors college model provide perfect opportunities to lay out clearly how the new unit will be fully institutionalized. The honors leader should not have to approach other units looking for a handout if the chair, provost, or staff member who had previously given cover to honors moves to another position or leaves the institution. The structure must be stable. An honors college requires its own

independent budget with clear lines of funding for programming and staff. Calculations around budgeting may acknowledge that honors often functions as a service unit that may not fit easily into university budget models based on credit generation or number of majors. Honors colleges, of course, serve other invaluable roles tied directly to finances, such as attracting high-achieving students to an institution before they go on to major in individual programs; establishing significant records of achievements in undergraduate research, fellowships, and graduate placement that are often trumpeted by the university for purposes of fundraising and recruitment; and producing alums with strong affinity for both honors and the institution, which translates into high giving rates. In short, honors college students provide an excellent ROI for an institution.

One tactical question involves when to fundraise for an honors college. One approach is to raise money before converting an honors program to an honors college, securing funds to underwrite the operations of the new unit in advance of its launch. Another option is to methodically scale the operation and then tout a record of success for donors. No single right approach exists. Honors leadership, however, should work with advancement and senior administration to be clear on the matter of naming rights: what would it cost to name the new honors college? Barrett, one of the best-known honors colleges in the U.S., was named in January 2000 upon a $10 million commitment to Arizona State University by former Intel CEO Craig Barrett and his wife, Barbara, who graduated from ASU ("History"). The Kilachand Honors College at Boston University emerged in 2011 from a $25 million pledge from Rajen Kilachand, president of the Dodsal Group (Jahnke). Other honors colleges have been named for significantly more modest sums: the Clarke Honors College at Salisbury University, for example, was named on the basis of a $1.5 million gift (*Clarke*). The key point is that naming an honors college only happens once: institutions should resist underselling this opportunity, though some universities may have strict formulas tied to operational expenses, leaving deans little latitude in budget discussions or efforts to identify naming targets.[4] In some cases, an honors college has been established in honor of

a significant member of the community without a corresponding gift, as is the case with the Irvin D. Reid Honors College, whose name recognizes the first African American president of Wayne State University.

For public universities, funding questions can sometimes get wrapped up in state politics because the institution's budgeting process must travel through the state legislature and ultimately the governor's office. This circuit can lead to some unfortunate outcomes. In the case of the Florida Gulf Coast University Honors College, for example, the Florida legislature approved $1 million in one-time funding in 2017 to launch the honors college, only to have Governor Rick Scott veto that allocation (among other higher ed requests) because "FGCU should be able to self-fund those projects based on other funding it has received," according to press reports of the decision (Bland). The story has a happy ending because the university provided its own funds and the FGCU Honors College is thriving, but the case demonstrates that the process can be bruising.

INSTITUTIONAL POSITIONALITY

Honors programs have historically been situated all over the organizational map of institutions. Sometimes they are housed within individual schools, sometimes they float in a liminal space in or adjacent to academic affairs, and sometimes they stand alone without a home. Some universities may have multiple honors programs spread across schools. In many cases, honors sits in organizational tension with disciplinary programs in ways that often go unspoken, though in a recent *JNCHC* essay, Aaron Stoller surfaces that tension explicitly when he calls out

> the binary framing of labor in the academy, which is split between the so-called "academic" and "non-academic" domains. . . . The former is devoted to the production and dissemination of "legitimate" (i.e., disciplinary) knowledge and is, therefore, the only domain in which one can gain expert status. On the other hand, the labor within the "non-academic" domain, which includes virtually all

> other institutional functions, is rendered non-theoretical and non-intellectual. This binary explains why many universities classify honors colleges and programs as "non-academic" versus the degree-granting "academic" units of, for instance, business, arts and sciences, and engineering, even though the professionals in those colleges and programs carry the same credentials, teach similar course loads within internal honors curricula, and publish equivalent research. ("Honors" 44)

Indeed, I served as a program reviewer at one state university where the honors college was required to complete the assessment process designed for administrative and educational support units rather than academic programs, resulting in some odd metrics of evaluation that periodically did not apply, given their heavy emphasis on "users" and "services." While Stoller highlights this organizational friction to set up his invitation to the honors community to create a "third space" for its activities, an alternative approach is to work within the existing system by firmly situating honors colleges on the academic side of the house, complete with all the appropriate trappings: robust budgets, dedicated faculty lines, degrees, and a seat at the deans' council table. Whatever route a university decides to take, it should be clear up front where the honors college is positioned on the institutional org chart and what that positionality means for the honors college and other units on campus. It seems foolish to devote significant time, energy, and resources toward an honors college and then not assign it the necessary autonomy to thrive.

DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND ACCESS

One of many improvements in NCHC's new iteration of the "Basic Characteristics," the "Shared Principles and Practices of Honors Education," is that they infuse the work of diversity, equity, inclusion, and access across the spectrum of honors activities.[5] The approach suggests that the DEIA lens should inform the full scope of work in honors instead of being considered an isolated add-on or

a mere afterthought. As suggested above, one of the earliest questions an institution needs to answer as it considers transitioning to an honors college is "what is honors for?" The answer to that question will inform what the honors college looks like and the way its practices reinforce the unit's mission, vision, and values and support the strategic goals of the larger institution. But just as important as that initial question is "*who* is honors for?" And in considering answers, an institution must wrestle with the exclusionary history of honors education, both its origins in a mid-twentieth-century culture shaped by anxieties about "falling behind" in STEM and other fields and subsequent practices limiting eligible populations for honors because of very narrow definitions about how talent and potential are measured in the admissions process. Some of these tendencies have been exacerbated by the insidious focus on prestige that originated after *U.S. News and World Report's* first annual rankings of colleges and universities in 1983. As former Reed College president Colin Diver notes in his new book exploring the disastrous impact of this phenomenon, there are many "games" that institutions use to "chase" high test scores, which has resulted in a perverse system he refers to as "rankocracy" (x). Honors programs and colleges have often been complicit in this project because they have been employed by institutions to attract students with strong ACT and SAT scores and thus have helped move the needle on ranking metrics tied to high scores; however, to be fair, other excellent honors programs and colleges at regional universities counter that imperative with explicit access missions that honors supports.

Honors education has matured significantly in its engagement with diversity issues in the past decade and numerous successful honors colleges across the U.S. employ inclusive enrollment management practices. Institutions looking for models not tied to traditional practices of exclusion can readily find plenty of examples. My own honors college does not restrict application to students who hit certain GPA or test score benchmarks nor does it factor test scores into the decision to admit. This practice has achieved considerable momentum across higher ed during the COVID crisis because many institutions embraced test-optional approaches. All

potential Westminster students are given the option of expressing interest in the honors college on Westminster's Common Application, and honors application materials are evaluated holistically. Honors is not positioned as "better" but as one of two distinct pathways through the general education requirements, one that is appropriate for any sufficiently prepared Westminster student excited by an interdisciplinary curriculum and a discussion-based classroom environment. NCHC's recent position paper, *Honors Enrollment Management: Toward a Theory and Practice of Inclusion*, details a series of specific steps honors programs and colleges can take to make their enrollment management practices more inclusive as well as examples of institutions that have been successful in instituting such steps.[6] Some of those practices include using marketing material to frame the honors experience in inclusive ways, opening up the application process and minimizing test scores in ways I have mentioned above, creating multiple routes into the honors college for populations beyond the traditional first-year student, removing barriers to entrance and continued enrollment in honors (such as expensive participation fees and overly restrictive probation standards), and collaborating with campus and community partners committed to DEI work.

Other important questions related to diversity, equity, and inclusion should also be asked as an institution considers transitioning to an honors college. For example, how will honors cultivate a sense of belonging among students who have been historically underrepresented in higher education in general and in honors education in particular? For Terrell L. Strayhorn, because a "sense of belonging is a basic human need, a fundamental motivation, sufficient to drive behaviors and perceptions" and its "satisfaction leads to positive gains such as happiness, elation, well-being, achievement, and optimal functioning" (9), that feature of a student's experience is really a matter of equity: those students who do not have as strong a sense of belonging in honors are not being given as sufficient an opportunity to be successful as other students. And once you decide such support is important, what does that support look like? How will you position the honors college relative to other campus units in

terms of questions of privilege: for example, the 2021 census shows that four out of five honors colleges employ priority registration for their honors students. How will you explain that benefit and what kind of message does it send to the rest of campus? While there can be good justification for this special treatment, that rationale should be made explicit to the community and framed less as a perk and more as a necessity tied to the circumstances of the honors college curriculum and student population.

Additionally, how will you collect data so that you are making data-informed decisions around DEI work? For example, will you develop a robust climate survey in order to understand how students are experiencing the curriculum and co-curriculum and whether they see themselves in the program the institution is offering? And how will you share data among faculty and staff so they have a sense of the population they are serving? It would be tragic, for example, for staff who worked in an honors college with a significant proportion of students who are Pell eligible to not be steering those students toward the U.S. State Department's Gilman International Scholarship Program to support study abroad for low-income students due to erroneous assumptions about the demographics of the college's student population. In support of the efforts above, what kind of professional development will you be offering your honors college faculty and staff so they are equipped with the tools necessary to enhance student belonging? For example, will they be trained in the sort of robust culturally responsive advising laid out by Elizabeth Raisanen in another chapter in this volume? She notes: "Holistic academic advising and related programming must play a central role in any honors program or college with a true commitment to inclusivity because advising work is the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion . . . " (348). Will faculty have the tools to employ inclusive pedagogies of the sort called out in NCHC's "Shared Principles and Practices of Honors Education"? They involve "inclusive teaching practices reflected in course design, syllabus construction, classroom climate, learning activities, and modes of assessment, practices that acknowledge the varied experiences, identities, backgrounds, and learning differences of students" (4). Finally, are

you willing to go beyond merely addressing these kind of baseline questions and be even more aspirational by positioning the honors college as a visible leader in DEI work on campus? Potential activities include partnering with other campus stakeholders (McNair, first-gen programs, veterans centers) on innovative yet challenging programming; ensuring a comprehensive curriculum that not only attends to diversity but centers it; regularly assessing your climate and designing strategic plans that have measurable goals in response to what you learn in that instrument; and aggressively recruiting students of color, first-gen students, LGBTQ+ students, and veterans.

CONCLUSION

Myriad pitfalls and frustrations will surface during the journey to create an honors college—that's simply part of the deal in trying to effect change in higher education, one of the most conservative institutions in existence. I mention a few of the most common ones here although you're likely to encounter other surprises on this journey.

- **Not everyone will be supportive of your effort to create an honors college**: jealousy from other units and kneejerk resistance to change are facts of life on university campuses. Do not be put off by this opposition nor take it personally; instead, attempt to bring critics into the fold. Even if they don't change their minds, they will respect that you were willing to hear them. Frame the honors college case in terms of how it can potentially help other units: by providing enrollment lift for individual majors; by offering professional development opportunities for faculty through innovative teaching arrangements; by creating new programming—like an Office of Fellowship Advising, for example[7]—that serves the entire campus; by presenting occasions to collaborate with other programs on requests for shared faculty lines. An honors college can and should provide lift across the institution.

- **You will have to repeat yourself, again and again and again**: under the best of circumstances honors is confusing and often the majority of campus will be unclear about how honors works or what purpose it serves. This situation is one reason that my earlier point about distinctiveness is so important: your case should be clear, and distinctiveness will help with clarity. And then you will need to remind members of your community in many different settings of the design of the new honors college and why the move to an honors college makes sense for the institution. In some cases, this advocacy will necessitate engaging colleagues who have preexisting ideas about what honors education is or is not or misapprehensions based on outmoded models or bad experiences with previous iterations of honors.
- **You will never have more leverage over financial decisions**—what a budget looks like, how the office and classes will be staffed, the place of honors in a capital campaign—than when senior administration decides the honors college is a good idea for the institution. Don't waste that leverage! Definitely push back against any attempt to cut corners. Have your wish list ready and be very clear about what it will take to create a fully developed honors college the institution can be proud of, one that lives up to the national standards outlined in NCHC's "Shared Principles and Practices of Honors Education." If you demonstrate you can staff your honors college on the cheap from the outset, you may be establishing a precedent and tone such that administrators will have no incentive to improve the staffing situation down the road.
- **Moving from an honors program to an honors college takes time**: it *should* take time if done properly. Having a new president simply wave a wand (Poof!) to create a new honors college might seem like an attractive prospect, but doing so will eliminate the important work of building a foundation, creating buy-in across campus, and engaging in generative thinking about what is best for students. That work is best done deliberately and in community. A model example of

this kind of thoughtful examination over time occurred at Purdue University in 2011–2012; more than eighty students, faculty, and staff broke into individual subcommittees to consider different features of the new honors college.[8] Those considering approaches to a campus-wide process would do well to read the Purdue document, which ultimately led to the establishment of a thriving honors college. Remember that it can sometimes take a year of working through the faculty governance process to get a single course approved, so bringing an entire college onboard won't happen overnight. Having said that, the process can also be perverse: I know of one state university where an honors program director tried for more than a decade to develop the program into an honors college but was blocked by a single dean on the deans' council. After that director whose efforts were frustrated for so long departed, the honors college was created by administrative fiat.

Many of the other essays in this volume will examine in granular detail important considerations involving budgeting, staffing, curriculum, advising, space, and additional features that make up a robust honors college. Likewise, the 2021 Census of U.S. Honors Colleges conducted in conjunction with this monograph provides a thorough portrait of the qualities of honors colleges across the United States. The purpose of this chapter is less to lay out the nuts and bolts of an honors college—the basic characteristics, if you will—and more to introduce the various considerations and thought exercises that can help an institution examine a possible evolution to the model. There is no right way to engage in this process of transition, especially since the proper approach often depends on organizational culture, institutional history, and current political winds. But I have tried to raise some common questions that can inform the process and lead to a successful outcome no matter what your circumstances are. When done right, honors colleges can provide enormous autonomy to serve students, create an environment for powerful faculty and staff innovation, and generate positive outcomes for the entire institution.

ENDNOTES

[1]NCHC's 2016 Census of U.S. Honors Programs and Colleges shows the mean size of honors programs at 385 students and the mean size of honors colleges at 1,023.

[2]In the 2021 Census of U.S. Honors Colleges, enrollment lift and increased visibility were the only two motivations for moving to an honors college model cited by more than half of the responding institutions (Cognard-Black and Smith 56–57).

[3]It is important to note that the quest for distinctiveness within one's own university can be an ongoing journey for honors colleges. It is not unusual for honors to offer successful programming, such as common reads, living-learning communities, peer mentoring programs, and place-based learning that then get adopted by the larger institution.

[4]The 2021 Census of U.S. Honors Colleges indicates that one third of honors colleges surveyed are named (Cognard-Black and Smith 54).

[5]In the interest of full disclosure, I co-chaired the ad hoc committee that generated the "Shared Principles and Practices of Honors Education."

[6]I also co-chaired the group that authored *Honors Enrollment Management: Toward a Theory and Practice of Inclusion*.

[7]According to the 2021 census, 45% of honors colleges surveyed house the institution's Office of Fellowship Advising (Cognard-Black and Smith 56).

[8]See Savaiano for a detailed 38-page task force report on the process that led to the creation of an honors college at Purdue University.

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