

CHAPTER FIVE

"It Is What You Make It": Opportunities Arising from the Unique Roles of Honors College Deans

JEFF CHAMBERLAIN
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH FLORIDA

THOMAS M. SPENCER
TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY-KINGSVILLE

JEFFORD VAHLBUSCH
APPALACHIAN STATE UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION

Honors college deans have unique roles at their institutions. They carry the title of "dean," but they often have significantly different duties and responsibilities than their disciplinary decanal colleagues. Honors deans sit on higher administrative bodies such as the deans' council and answer to the provost but typically have smaller budgets and fewer, if any, faculty who answer

directly to them. According to the 2021 “Census of U.S. Honors Colleges,” fewer than 27% of honors colleges have dedicated faculty lines although that figure climbs to 50% for R1 institutions (Cognard-Black and Smith 64). Of necessity, honors deans are heavily involved with the day-to-day, on-the-ground operations of their colleges, including recruiting students and finding faculty to teach them. Honors deans often depend on the resources of other colleges and units for their success. Since the colleges they run are not rooted in a particular discipline or set of disciplines, and since they operate in unique ways, honors deans often fit uneasily into traditional university governance and can be overlooked or given short shrift. Honors deans are also expected to be fundraisers but face more logistical challenges than their non-honors decanal colleagues. The chapter in this volume by Andrew Martino speaks to the special fundraising opportunities tied to leading an honors college. Nevertheless, honors deans often have fewer staff members to help with development work and fewer alumni in their databases. In addition, all honors college alumni are also graduates of other colleges on campus and therefore must be shared. Of course, honors colleges that have established a culture of community and engagement may graduate students who feel more affinity with honors than with other units and may later become willing donors.

Honors deans would seem, therefore, to defy easy categorization. The challenges that come with this hybrid role are obvious, but the opportunities may not be. This chapter shows that honors deans, despite—and sometimes because of—their unique situation, can play pivotal roles in their institutions, prompt transformative change across the university, and model best practices in higher education. But much depends, of course, on the person who takes up the role. To effect real change, honors deans must have initiative, creativity, and strong skills in persuasion and negotiation. Honors deaning is not for the faint of heart, but for those willing to accept the challenges, it can be one of the most significant and fulfilling positions in higher education.

The conclusions developed in this chapter are based on interviews the authors conducted with two dozen honors deans from

a variety of institutions, both public and private, and the honors colleges over which the interviewees presided served from two hundred students to several thousand. Despite these wide divergences, the themes that emerged were remarkably consistent. Interviewees were assured of confidentiality in particular matters, but they readily agreed to have their names listed at the end of this essay. (See Appendix A.)

UNIQUENESS OF THE HONORS DEAN ROLE

There is (or should be) no question: honors college deans are deans. They head distinct colleges and have the same (or nearly the same) responsibilities as deans from other colleges: they bring vision and strategic direction to their colleges; advocate and lead; manage and administer; problem-solve and troubleshoot; mentor and develop; promote and implement university initiatives; and bear ultimate responsibility for the success of their college, faculty and staff members, and students. Honors college deans typically report to and serve at the pleasure of the provost; sit on deans' and provost councils or their equivalents; attend meetings and interact with members of the institution's board of trustees; work with the development office and raise funds; and capitalize, or try to, on whatever *gravitas* and influence may come with the title of "dean."

Without exception, the honors college deans we interviewed also agreed that their honors dean role is substantially and importantly different from the roles of other academic deans at their institution. Certainly, some spoke of being treated at one time or another, and often especially at the beginning of their decanal tenure, as "second-class" or "lower-class" deans, or of having been overlooked, excluded from key discussions, or not invited to certain events with the other academic deans. Since honors colleges tend to be relatively small, and since only about a quarter of honors colleges possess their own faculty lines, most honors college deans do far less promotion and tenure work than their non-honors dean colleagues, and most also deal with fewer personnel matters. Nearly all the honors college deans we spoke with devote serious time and energy year-round to marketing their colleges and to recruiting

students; to recruiting faculty from across the university to teach in and engage with the honors college; and to engaging students in shared governance and in social and co-curricular activities. But the honors college deans also all agreed, each in their own institution-specific contexts and with their own specific programmatic examples, that the uniqueness of the honors dean role, at least at institutions willing to invest in their honors colleges, also brings with it extraordinary opportunities for innovation, collaboration, and positive transformation, both within their honors colleges and across their universities.

Honors is easy to conceptualize or caricature, especially from the outside, as a field whose purposes and practices seldom change, as an elitist place consisting of exclusive practices that serve and add value only to the educational experiences of small groups of privileged, high-achieving, and driven students. Honors colleges and programs are often therefore assumed to be exclusive campus islands that focus mostly on themselves and their students' academic success. Honors practitioners at many institutions, of course, know differently, and nearly every honors dean we spoke with aligned themselves with the strong push toward diversity, equity, inclusion, and community and civic engagement that has featured ever more prominently in national conversations and practices in honors education over the past 15 or so years. (See, for example, the National Collegiate Honors Council's (NCHC) 2020 position paper, *Honors Enrollment Management: Toward a Theory and Practice of Inclusion*.) As a consequence, many deans emphasized that they conceive of their roles and perform their work on their campuses as *service*, not only to their own honors colleges and honors students, but to the other colleges and departments at their universities and to their universities as a whole and the communities that surround them. Honors colleges recruit, advise and mentor, connect to opportunities, develop, support financially, retain, graduate, and stay in productive touch with diverse students from every college and in every major across the university.

Of equal significance: many honors colleges become campus centers for programmatic, curricular, and pedagogical innovation and entrepreneurship; for student-faculty research and creative

collaboration from any and every major; for the use and dissemination of various high-impact educational practices; for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary opportunities; and, increasingly, for partnerships between the university and its various surrounding communities. In fact, NCHC's new "Shared Principles and Practices of Honors Education" highlight this potential for innovation in honors as one of its key principles:

In fostering student-centered practices, the honors program or college serves as a campus laboratory for diverse students and faculty to experiment with pedagogical and curricular innovation. Honors is well-positioned to serve as an innovation hub because interdisciplinary spaces tend to be generative, students have self-selected into a program focused on challenge, team-teaching can lead to cross-disciplinary experimentation, and honors education is a locus of scholarship on novel educational practices. (4)

Honors deans thus happily and necessarily have the welfare of the whole university and of its individual components as a focus of their work and part of their responsibility. Resources dedicated to honors colleges and honors programs, especially those designated to spark innovation and student-faculty collaboration, also help students, faculty, and programs across the whole university.

Nearly every honors dean we talked to underlined what they characterized as their relative independence. They felt far less bound by rules and conventions and therefore much freer to shape their colleges and curricula and to pursue student and faculty opportunities than their fellow academic deans. Many deans we talked to offered variations on the notion that "we can do what we want." Others said: "We can innovate; that's the wonderful part," "We can give great faculty free reign and opportunities to develop courses and programs important to them," and "We can expect faculty to innovate for us." Described by one dean as "centers for innovation," honors colleges bring together students, faculty, and sometimes staff in courses and initiatives that may not have found support elsewhere. More than a few honors deans put it this way: "Honors deans can say 'yes.'" Or simply: "Honors says 'yes!'"

In the same way, honors deans running colleges and programs that serve students and engage faculty from every academic department on campus cannot permit themselves to be siloed and must always be among the most active units on campus and perhaps the academic unit most dedicated to outreach and relationship building and nurturing. All aspects of the honors dean job require that deans work actively and supportively with and across colleges, departments, and programs; successfully with both academic and student affairs; and actively to forge and to strengthen productive connections in communities beyond the university. With their strong ties to and knowledge of the always innovative pedagogies and cutting-edge practices of NCHC members across the U.S. and the world, honors deans can also offer unique perspectives and fresh approaches that can enrich their institutions.

We must add that the independence of honors deans and honors colleges also comes with increased risks: honors deans and colleges are often far more exposed or vulnerable to changes in upper administrations than non-honors deans and their colleges. They are more vulnerable because honors students are not tied to particular majors and because 75% of honors colleges lack faculty lines. As Richard Badenhausem notes, honors leaders might “advocate for faculty lines since they lend stability to scheduling, provide allies in making the case for honors, and put a human face on potential budget cut-backs” (21). Our fortunes in honors can change overnight, positively or negatively, with a change in staffing above us or a change in administrative “heart.” Negative examples were not rare in the interviews we conducted, but positive examples abound as well.

HONORS DEANS AND THE NIMBLENESS OF HONORS EDUCATION

Although honors colleges are often constrained in resources, they are much less constrained by institutional tradition, rules, and procedures. The NCHC has always maintained that honors colleges and programs should be “laboratories of innovation,” and according to the vast majority of deans interviewed, they are that indeed. Deans spoke about having much more freedom to innovate in

curriculum and pedagogy than most non-honors deans. In many cases, honors courses counted toward the university's general education program, but they did not have to fit precisely the template or standard disciplinary categories of courses outside of honors. Honors deans can often hire the most creative faculty at the institution to teach in unique ways. Some of the examples of this flexibility included using place as text, doing "virtual study abroad" during the COVID pandemic (and, when it worked well, afterwards), employing team teaching with faculty from different disciplines, incorporating design thinking, and developing student leadership by having upper-class honors students teach and tutor first-year students. Honors deans can often, therefore, create and run, as one dean put it, an "incubator for innovative education."

Programs from one college typically do not influence or affect programs in another, but here honors colleges are also different. Since honors usually has students in virtually every major at the university, honors can have a positive influence on curriculum development, enrollment growth, university-wide programming, pedagogy in other units, and even unique programs that have no other home. Some deans spoke of having helped to promote and shepherd through university governance programs such as departmental honors or honors in the major. Honors deans can encourage deans of other colleges to promote departmental honors or other approaches to upper-division honors and can work with chairs of departments to develop such programs. One dean spoke of developing a task force of faculty from every college to create general guiding principles for departmental honors. He then elicited support from other deans, every one of whom welcomed the ideas and invited him into meetings with chairs to pitch the idea. He then started to see program after program develop unique, enriched offerings in their majors. One task force suggestion was to give students in majors the option to take a graduate course or two (at the undergraduate tuition rate, if possible), which then also helped fulfill the university's goal of growing graduate programs since many of the students who took such graduate courses as an undergraduate continued on at the institution. Some honors colleges keep

honors-in-the-major programs centralized, but even where they are distributed among the colleges and departments, honors can still be a catalyst for significant curricular development and for fostering remarkable student achievement. An honors college may also have a tangential influence on the classroom environments in other units merely through the presence of honors students bringing their experience with innovative honors pedagogies into these adjacent spaces. Moreover, faculty having taught in honors team-teaching arrangements can influence or bring that experience into the courses in their home department.

Honors can also sponsor other university-wide programs. A faculty member approached one honors dean about the possibility of joining the United Nations Academic Impact (UNAI) program. UNAI is a network of universities working to fulfill the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), so the first step was finding out what was being done across campus to address the SDGs. The honors dean took the matter to the deans' council and received a positive response. Each of the deans agreed to survey the departments in their colleges, which produced a long and impressive list of ways in which units were already fulfilling the expectations of UNAI. The honors dean worked with a faculty member to summarize the findings and develop an application for the university to become a member of UNAI. The university was accepted, and this initiative not only benefitted the whole university, but it centered honors in the nexus developing at that university to address global issues. The honors dean's seat on the deans' council and his good connections with faculty members made it possible for honors to be the galvanizing force for such a significant and transformative initiative for the whole university.

Deans spoke often about how they frequently took on or fostered programs that were not championed or did not fit in other units or colleges on campus. In some cases, faculty came to the honors college with a proposal because no other unit was interested or prepared to support an idea. One honors college, for example, began an esports program in which a club and varsity team worked in partnership with student affairs, and more than a few

have developed entrepreneurship or innovation programs. Honors deans have created annual themes for the institution and invited and coordinated activities for the whole university around them. Some deans have started undergraduate research journals. During COVID-19 honors deans were some of the first to adopt virtual study abroad.

Although innovation is a watchword at many universities, there is still precious little of it. One dean spoke of a recent discussion between members of the deans' council and the president of the institution in which the other deans bemoaned the paucity of creative collaborations and interdisciplinary approaches. The deans then looked to the honors dean and said that they needed honors to help bridge the gap, to forge connections made difficult by hidebound procedures, inflexible departments, or disciplinary boundaries. Honors colleges often answer such calls. Deans spoke of bringing in faculty who are not regular instructors to teach in honors, such as engineers who led City as Text™ excursions; creating partnerships with and between other colleges; connecting programs that previously had had little formal connection (for example, engineering and business); developing initiatives with athletics departments or partnering with other units to increase diversity in recruiting; and reaching out to graduate programs to offer early assurance programs. One honors dean cultivated a relationship with a faculty member in the college of medicine because so many honors students wanted to go into medicine. That contact blossomed into a year-long course, then many courses, then an honors pre-med club, and finally an early assurance program for pre-med honors students. Another strategy employed by some deans is to invite administrators from other colleges to teach in honors: that initiative can quickly create strong relationships that burgeon into partnerships.

More than a few enterprising deans have been successful in raising funds because of the unique education that their colleges offer. Some honors deans talked about the importance of asking for a development officer to be assigned to the honors college: having one person who can dedicate time specifically to honors and adopt

the specialized vocabulary of honors education makes all the difference. Honors colleges can promote features that are often attractive to donors—unique programs, student and alumni success stories, and connections with every major and college. Scholarships are, of course, the obvious area for attracting donors since many want to support extraordinary students with merit as well as need-based scholarships for those who may have limited financial resources. One dean successfully raised \$25 million in 19 months for an endowment that will yield \$1 million in scholarships per year. The connections between honors and other colleges can be helpful, too, because it is not unusual for donors to support honors students in particular majors. To be sure, finding a niche so that the honors dean is not approaching the same donors sought by another college is a challenge, but here, too, partnerships can be formed: a pitch made jointly by deans for funding honors students in certain majors can be effective, and sometimes more effective than having only one dean asking a donor. To have an honors college endowed is, of course, highly desirable, for that access to steady resources provides more flexibility and also brings the college recognition and stability. Here again, the honors dean must have the support of the development office as well as the upper administration. If the dean is regularly communicating successes and opportunities, prospects will be much easier to cultivate.

HONORS DEANS AND THE STUDENT CONNECTION

Not surprisingly, honors deans often have more personal relationships with their students than non-honors deans. In large honors colleges, of course, it is impossible for deans to get to know hundreds of students well, but active recruiting work, involvement in co-curricular programming, and even teaching the occasional class allow many honors deans the chance to know a fair number of their students. Some honors deans find they become popular with higher university administrators because they can always find a good student to speak at a university event for alumni or donors. One dean said that the other academic deans come to him for names of good students in their own college to speak at such events.

Honors deans also have more personal relationships with faculty than are typically possible for a non-honors dean who needs to focus on faculty promotion and tenure. Being involved in promotion and tenure requires deans to maintain a certain social and/or emotional distance, something not typically necessary for an honors dean. Of course, many honors deans are still involved in these matters but at the department level, where they may vote on their colleagues' promotion and tenure. Honors deans also have closer relationships with faculty since they themselves are often still faculty members in particular departments and colleges. Such multi-faceted roles can often bring dividends for both the honors college and the departments, faculty, and students involved.

Honors deans often stay in closer touch with alumni than non-honors deans because they develop closer and more social relationships with their students. They also do a great deal more outreach that involves alumni in ongoing honors college events. Promoting the relationship between the student and the honors college, or often the honors dean, paves the way for maintaining connections after students graduate. Some deans invite graduates to connect with them on LinkedIn. LinkedIn then sends updates when people change their profiles because of completing graduate degrees, changing jobs, or getting promoted. Even if a dean does not know a student well, former students appreciate it when they receive a message from a dean congratulating them on their progress. This sort of activity on LinkedIn also gives the honors dean important connections with alumni not only as donors but as well-placed professionals who can connect the dean with potential donors in other circles. If an honors dean has created an alumni advisory board that includes older alumni, even some perhaps who may not have been honors alumni, LinkedIn can provide ways to connect with those alumni as well. Although it is rapidly falling out of favor, Facebook allows for similar connections with alumni. One dean still follows the progress of honors alumni from two prior institutions and congratulates them on achievements more than a decade after they graduated.

Honors deans are also significantly involved in recruiting, and this work is often best done in concert with current honors students

acting as ambassadors for the honors college. Deans have to be familiar with their students—know their majors and their personalities—so they can effectively position them to recruit a particular student or group of students. Having these personal connections with students is important because honors deans are contacted all the time to provide student speakers at events and can almost always offer a list along with their stories—although staff members who know honors students well can also perform this task.

This recruiting emphasis also allows honors deans to get to know admissions personnel and the university's recruiting staff in depth. This type of networking can pay dividends as well. If a recruiting event is effective, prospective students will meet faculty from their chosen department and begin that mentor/mentee relationship even before students arrive on campus. To make recruiting events work, the honors dean and the college staff must know faculty and honors students in many different departments and know how to connect them to prospective students. Faculty or staff may also reach out to honors deans for help with making an honors research project happen. Similarly, faculty or staff may recommend students for the honors college, and these interactions are made possible because the dean has established personal relationships with students, faculty, and staff. Honors deans also often get to know staff members whom other deans generally do not get to know as well because their job requires them to work with and coordinate with different offices, including the registrar, academic advisors, and enrollment management personnel, on a regular basis. One dean was able to put together a National Student Exchange program in about a month's time because he already knew the key people and offices and knew how to use such connections to move quickly and decisively.

Honors deans, especially if the honors college has a living/learning program, also work closely with housing staff. These connections with student affairs divisions are critical to developing a vibrant living/learning community. Such familiarity is helpful both in good times and bad. Several honors deans said that part of their job is encouraging students to take on public-facing leadership roles

such as student government officers. Many honors deans observed that honors students are often active across the campus and that it is valuable for the dean to know the students “running the place” or taking on significant roles at the university. Honors students are also prominent in student affairs positions such as resident assistants or, as already mentioned, student government officers. Some honors deans pointed out that honors students drive change at their institutions and often pursue activism within these organizations for causes such as social justice or other social or political issues.

It is a truism that donors and administrators do not invest in programs; they invest in people or, more precisely, students. This reality provides opportunities for honors college deans to pursue assistance for honors students. For example, honors colleges often sponsor undergraduate research: one dean even pursued a grant from a large private foundation focused on retaining students by involving them in undergraduate research. Faculty work hard to provide these research opportunities to good students, and most or many of those students are often honors students. Many honors deans author weekly or semiweekly email newsletters for their students that include program updates as well as a list of student opportunities. These newsletters help honors students find good opportunities. One dean has authored one of these for 13 years in three different honors programs/colleges and institutions. In fact, other departments and deans contact him to make sure their current opportunity appears in the *Honors This Week* newsletter. This campus-wide communications tool offers another important example of how honors deans serve their students as well as their faculty colleagues.

CONCLUSION

To be as effective as possible, honors deans need to be masters or at least practitioners “of all trades” and have a wide range of people skills and administrative abilities: they have to be student-focused; work equally well with faculty, staff, administrators, and members of non-academic units; be creative; use initiative; have strong negotiation skills (often from a position of real or apparent weakness);

be good ambassadors for honors and for education; and discern opportunities where many see only obstacles. Honors deans are also not likely to do well if they are glory seekers or try to compete with the other deans and colleges or seem to want to build their own kingdom. Honors deans do have one key advantage, though: they serve and collaborate with high-achieving, highly motivated, and influential students in almost every department and college in the university. When honors deans show that they can enhance the academic enterprise across the entire institution by offering new and exciting ways to engage these students both in honors and in department after department, magic can happen. We should add here that honors program directors (i.e., those in charge of honors programs who do not report to a chief academic officer) often have many of the same advantages of honors deans, but deans usually have more ability to make real differences at universities because they have closer working relationships with other deans and with the provost and typically have access to greater resources. Honors deans lose little of the working relationship with faculty and staff, but they can gain much more access and leverage and can, therefore, more easily effect change.

Jim Ruebel, the late dean of the Ball State University Honors College, once said that an honors dean “can never have a bad day.” To be sure, he explained, honors deans have many frustrations, but “sooner or later” the dean would meet with a student who would make the dean’s day through their enthusiasm for engaging in cutting-edge research, for a unique study abroad experience, or for working on campus or in the community for important change. The deans we interviewed readily agreed with Dean Ruebel’s comments. And Ruebel’s successor at Ball State, John Emert, even went further: Ruebel said that “a bad day in honors is better than the best day anywhere else on campus.” There are many challenges and frustrations in running an honors college, but working with honors students is a tremendous privilege, and the opportunities for making transformational change at the institution are extraordinary if one looks for them and takes the right initiative.

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APPENDIX A

Deans and Directors Interviewed

- Adams, Charles (University of South Florida).
Zoom Interview by Jeff Chamberlain, 16 July 2021.
- Ali, Omar (University of North Carolina at Greensboro).
Zoom Interview by Jefford Vahlbusch, 16 July 2021.
- Andersen, Mark (University of Texas Rio Grande Valley).
Zoom Interview by Thomas M. Spencer, 8 July 2021.
- Appel, Heidi (University of Toledo).
Zoom Interview by Jefford Vahlbusch, 9 July 2021.
- Bailey, Rita (Kennesaw State University).
Zoom Interview by Jeff Chamberlain, 28 July 2021.
- Breuninger, Scott (Virginia Commonwealth University).
Zoom Interview by Jeff Chamberlain, 28 July 2021.
- Buss, James (University of Northern Kentucky).
Zoom Interview by Jeff Chamberlain, 26 July 2021.
- Camarena, Phame (New Mexico State University).
Zoom Interview by Jefford Vahlbusch, 26 July 2021.
- Carson, Jennifer (University of Central Missouri).
Zoom Interview by Thomas M. Spencer, 16 July 2021.
- Eisenberg, Ann (Eastern Michigan University).
Zoom Interview by Jeff Chamberlain, 15 July 2021.
- Emert, John (Ball State University).
Zoom Interview by Jeff Chamberlain, 16 July 2021.
- England, Richard (Eastern Illinois University).
Zoom Interview by Thomas M. Spencer, 12 August 2021.
- Espinosa, Juan Carlos (Florida International University).
Zoom Interview by Jeff Chamberlain, 28 July 2021.
- Frost, Linda (University of Tennessee at Chattanooga).
Zoom Interview by Jeff Chamberlain, 28 July 2021.

- Galloway, Heather (Texas State University).
Zoom Interview by Thomas M. Spencer, 9 July 2021.
- Glascott, Brenda (Portland State University).
Zoom Interview by Jefford Vahlbusch, 21 July 2021.
- Harpham, Edward (University of Texas at Dallas).
Zoom Interview by Thomas M. Spencer, 8 July 2021.
- Hottinger, Sara (Coastal Carolina University).
Zoom Interview by Jefford Vahlbusch, 21 July 2021.
- Kelly, Sean (University of Texas at San Antonio).
Zoom Interview by Thomas M. Spencer, 8 July 2021.
- Lopez, Irma (Western Michigan University).
Zoom Interview by Jeff Chamberlain, 15 July 2021.
- Perdigao, Lisa (Florida Institute of Technology).
Zoom Interview by Jeff Chamberlain, 23 July 2021.
- Rosenblum, Don (Nova Southeastern University).
Zoom Interview by Jeff Chamberlain, 26 July 2021.
- Smith, Patricia (University of Central Arkansas).
Zoom Interview by Jeff Chamberlain, 15 July 2021.
- Zierler, Matthew (Michigan State University).
Zoom Interview by Jeff Chamberlain, 26 July 2021.