

INTRODUCTION

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Given that the first book-length treatment of “the honors college phenomenon”—so designated by its editor Peter C. Sederberg—was intimately intertwined with the generation of the National Collegiate Honors Council’s (NCHC) 2005 “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors College,” it seems apropos that this newest volume arrives on the heels of the organization’s 2022 release of a new set of standards, the “Shared Principles and Practices of Honors Education.” That document supplants the original two sets of “Basic Characteristics” while its structure notably minimizes the differences between honors programs and honors colleges in favor of emphasizing the broad commonalities of honors education. The potential advantages that Ottavio M. Casale highlighted four decades ago in an essay entitled “Why an Honors College?” still hold in many cases, including the ability to scale programming, increased institutional autonomy, enhanced scope in serving students across the university’s entire portfolio, and the university’s endorsement of honors through collegiate status and appointment of a dean. Nevertheless, it is important to note Casale’s passing comment made late in the essay: “much of the advantage I ascribe to the Honors College concept could accrue to smaller Honors programs” (4). Therefore, in the spirit of the “Shared Principles and Practices,” this volume makes no value judgment about the worth of the two major honors models: there are plenty of outstanding, well-developed honors programs and many poorly conceived or underdeveloped honors colleges. And the differences that do exist are often tied to scale and execution rather than to sharp disparities in values, teaching and learning practices, and student composition. Instead, the authors of the nineteen essays in this book have targeted areas of focus that will help audiences better understand the

honors college model, guide those thinking about such possibilities on their own campuses, and assist experienced leaders wondering how to improve particular areas of an already-established honors college. The monograph also surfaces challenges and opportunities that are particular to honors colleges in the belief that highlighting them can lead to improvements in operations, culture, and learning outcomes, to name just three areas.

While honors colleges may have been a “phenomenon” during the decade (1995–2005) that Sederberg worked toward the document that became the “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors College,” honors colleges are no longer a niche product; instead, they are a core feature of many university portfolios. When John Madden conducted a survey in 1993, he rustled up 23 honors colleges (Sederberg, “Characteristics” 41), while Sederberg’s subsequent 2003 survey was sent to 69 honors colleges, of which 35 replied (27). The 2021 survey conducted in conjunction with this project was transmitted to 248 honors colleges. Clearly, growth is the name of the game in honors education: as numerous authors in this volume note, honors is a source of enrollment strength in undergraduate higher education even as other sectors are pressured; and honors colleges, in particular, have grown significantly in number over the past three decades.

It is not difficult to fathom why honors education has been such an area of strength. Honors programs and especially honors colleges have long embraced many of the solutions that higher ed leaders have sought more recently in areas tied to student belonging, wellness support, innovative course design, student-centered pedagogies, and bridges between the curriculum and co-curriculum. Honors programs and honors colleges have enjoyed the flexibility and autonomy to innovate and, importantly, are not shackled with some of the institutional and disciplinary restrictions that can hamper other school-level units. Eric Hayot’s 2021 essay exploring the crisis in humanities disciplines—which he ties in part to “stale” majors and curriculums and the unhelpful way in which the field is framed for external audiences—seeks solutions tied to transcending disciplines. What if we organized the humanities classes, he

asks, around “the names of their best and most important ideas, and not by the names of their calcifying disciplinary formations?” (“The Humanities”). Such a change, he argues, may help students see the value of the educational enterprise and stem plummeting enrollments in the humanities. In his book that dives into these ideas in more detail, Hayot seeks to collapse disciplinary boundaries in faculty appointments and recast the curriculum around skills-based and thematized modules (*Humanist Reason* 170). Of course, Hayot’s aspirations are being fulfilled in many honors programs and honors colleges, which may partly explain the demand for honors across the country. Some examples in this monograph, such as discussions of problem-based curriculums, transdisciplinary collaboration, externally facing programs that serve local communities, culturally responsive advising, and ways in which honors colleges lead in diversity and equity work, demonstrate how honors colleges are often sites of experimentation and invention. These practices position honors as a “Laboratory for Innovation,” very much along the lines advocated by the “Shared Principles and Practices of Honors Education” (National Collegiate Honors Council 4).

Honors Colleges in the 21st Century contains the work of 56 authors representing 45 different institutions, which makes this the largest and most comprehensive group of honors leaders ever to appear in print together discussing honors colleges. Particularly notable is the fact that eleven of the chapters are co-authored by individuals from different institutions. I am grateful for the generosity and grace of so many who readily agreed to my suggestion they collaborate with others, in some cases with complete strangers! A wide range of institutional perspectives are represented: public and private, large and small, R1 flagships and regional, two- and four-year, religious and secular, and HBCU. The professional positionality of writers is similarly diverse, including faculty, staff, and administrators. Because the diversity of settings in which honors education takes place is one of its great strengths, this volume is not meant to provide a single prescriptive account of how honors colleges should be set up or run. The book very much endorses the framing comments in NCHC’s “Shared Principles and Practices of Honors Education,” which “acknowledge

that honors programs and colleges exist in vastly different institutional and environmental contexts, possess a wide variety of missions and approaches, and have varied access to resources to bring about these outcomes” (1). The authors hope similarly that its contents will, like the “Shared Principles and Practices,” “spark generative conversation around how honors education can help transform an institution and the students it serves” (1).

Less an all-inclusive handbook and more a collection of targeted essays that offer insights into key areas of honors colleges—fundraising, advising, administration, curriculum design—as well as conceptual testaments of the historical context of honors colleges, accounts of transitioning from an honors program to honors college, and reflections on supporting LGBTQ+ students in honors, the book breaks down different facets of the honors college model so they can be considered in their full context. This book is intended for numerous audiences:

- Those considering starting or transitioning to an honors college: administrators, honors leaders, task forces, and other stakeholders;
- Those who currently lead or work in honors colleges who are interested in building out a particular feature, such as the enrollment management operation, DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) programming, or innovative curriculum, of their organization;
- Those wanting to better understand honors education, which is sometimes the source of confusion for boards, presidents, provosts, deans of other colleges, and staff across campus.

For those first entering the honors space as a new leader, this book will be an invaluable resource: not only is honors sometimes mysterious, but the field has changed drastically during the past two decades. Even honors program faculty and staff who have no interest in honors colleges or those who stand completely outside honors could benefit from some of the insights in a number of these chapters, like those on stewarding donors, culturally responsive advising, curricular innovation, or DEI work.

The book is also quite different from Peter C. Sederberg's first essential volume on honors colleges. Most essays in *The Honors College Phenomenon* explore the material and structural qualities of honors colleges as they were understood in their earliest iterations by using case studies showing how they were aligned with individual "Basic Characteristics," while a few concluding chapters offer examples of creating or recreating honors colleges. This structure is tied to Sederberg's advocacy for a supplement to the "Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program" that would identify the features of honors colleges, so it is a volume very much about the administrative nuts and bolts of the model. While still crucial for anyone hoping to learn more about honors colleges, Sederberg's volume is framed through the lens of national standards no longer in place and offers a portrait of honors education that is somewhat passé. For example, just as the earlier "Basic Characteristics" didn't include the words *diversity*, *equity*, *inclusion*, or *access*, *The Honors College Phenomenon* mentions these crucial ideas just incidentally, only several times in passing within its 150+ pages. This current book is informed by NCHC's new national standards and centers issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and access in many of its essays and devotes an entire section of the monograph to those topics in four chapters explicitly focused on how honors can lead in diversity work. Other chapters in *Honors Colleges in the 21st Century* also demonstrate the substantial amount of work that remains to be done in this area. None of the essays in Sederberg's volume contains a list of secondary references, which is partly due to its authors staking out new ground. The articles in this volume, however, are grounded in the robust research about honors education, teaching and learning, and administration from the past half century—numerous chapters contain full-blown literature reviews of their topics.

This volume is also framed through the data collected in a 2021 survey, the most wide-ranging survey of honors colleges ever conducted, though it is important to note that the data were drawn from 166 honors colleges during the 2020–2021 academic year, which was severely disrupted by the COVID global pandemic. I

am grateful to honors staff and administrators who took the time to respond to the extensive survey instrument when they were so busy attending to disruptions of their own operations. The pandemic also brought about major shifts in the way many institutions did business: expanding online classes, shifting to more inclusive enrollment management practices like test optional allowances, and experimenting with inclusive pedagogies such as flexible attendance policies, ungrading, and more varied modes of assessment. Remembering that such changes to operations may have an impact on future data tied to class demographics or retention and persistence rates is important. These current data were collected during a period of sharp pivoting away from some legacy practices. My hope is that this disruption—while horrible in so many ways—will also lead to more inclusive processes becoming the standard in honors education, for example like those laid out recently in NCHC’s position paper, *Honors Enrollment Management: Toward a Theory and Practice of Inclusion*.

The first two sections of this monograph examine the past, present, and future of honors colleges. Historian Christopher A. Snyder provides important context for the volume by tracing the roots of honors colleges to earlier educational models such as the medieval university, the liberal arts colleges of Colonial America, and the German-inspired research university of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Snyder reminds us that many key features of the Oxford tutorial system like critical thinking and student-centered learning are transformed and updated in twentieth-century American honors education. While this adaptation has the advantage of taking place in the relatively affordable space of a public research university, according to Snyder, a collateral effect may be the negative impact on private colleges. If liberal education continues to decline, Snyder wonders whether “honors colleges [can] carry the banner of liberal education into a more equitable and diverse future” (16).

Guided by a robust survey instrument completed in 2021 by 166 institutions with honors colleges, Andrew J. Cognard-Black and Patricia J. Smith draw up a comprehensive data-based portrait

of the twenty-first-century honors college. These long-time collaborators offer an excellent historical summary of the evolution of honors education while emphasizing some distinctions between honors programs and colleges and highlighting the key features of the contemporary honors college. Their survey instrument depicts common features of honors colleges while also acknowledging the many different models in operation, which certainly complicated their task. Without doubt, researchers will draw on the resultant data for many years going forward.

Two chapters offer blueprints for honors programs looking to transition from an honors program to an honors college. My own essay lays out the many good reasons for starting an honors college, as well as circumstances where the transition might not be warranted. It poses a series of questions stakeholders should ask during the process about who should be involved, the steps to be taken, and the likely challenges along the way; it culminates in a discussion of how to center DEI in the work of the honors college. Sara Hottinger and Clay Motley are two deans who helped oversee the transition to an honors college at their respective public universities, and, along with Megan McIlreavy and Louis Keiner, they walk readers through a step-by-step account of what that real-world process looks like. They explore the importance of a framing case statement for the honors college, collaborating with campus partners on the effort, organizational and staffing considerations, ramping up a more robust enrollment management operation, and managing financial issues such as budgeting and fundraising. They conclude with a seven-point list of key considerations for those thinking about transitioning to an honors college.

The volume next turns to leadership. Three honors college deans examine their own unique role by composing a portrait based on interviews with two dozen fellow honors college deans across the U.S. While Jeff Chamberlain, Thomas M. Spencer, and Jefford Vahlbusch note that this administrative position “def[ies] easy categorization” (138), they come down firmly on the positive side, suggesting honors deans have more flexibility, opportunity, and plain fun than the decanal leaders of other units. Two other

essays focus more on the obligations and challenges that come with the job. Honors college deans Peter Parolin, Timothy J. Nichols, Donal C. Skinner, and Rebecca C. Bott-Knutson identify the many responsibilities that confront them in their daily work, including the imperative to diversify their student bodies, reforming curriculum, centering students in the honors experience, shepherding funds for a unit that sometimes does not fit into neat institutional resource-allocation categories, articulating the value of honors, and stewarding one's administrative team. Malin Pereira, Jacqueline Smith-Mason, Karoline Summerville, and Scott Linneman raise additional important questions in asking why the dean's role has not been more open to women and academics of color. They dig into the problem surrounding how "honors college deans look on average unlike the communities they are leading" (182) and they make some clear recommendations for addressing this challenge. The authors note the need to diversify honors college leadership pathways not only because that outcome will better serve students but because there is a moral imperative for change.

The immense and varied experiences of the honors leaders represented in this volume offer excellent insight into the daily operations of honors colleges. One such chapter by Erin E. Edgington and Linda Frost provides an ample overview of how honors college classes are staffed across the country. They review the costs and benefits of those different models, and they conclude with some thoughts about tenure in honors and some advice for honors college deans. Another chapter takes up donor relations, especially the work of stewarding major gifts. Andrew Martino highlights some of the special responsibilities of honors college deans, especially their role as "storyteller-in-chief" (242) who incessantly reminds students (who are future alums) how the honors college adds value to their educations while informing university stakeholders (including donors) how honors moves the institution forward. While discussing his own experience at Salisbury University's Glenda Chatham and Robert G. Clarke Honors College, Martino surveys the various ways honors college deans can keep donors engaged with the work of honors.

Some of the most exciting (and overdue) work in honors education over the past decade or so has taken place in the areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion. This monograph reflects that increased interest across many of its chapters and in a dedicated cluster of essays, the first of which explores how two programs that transitioned to honors colleges in 2017 made DEI work central to the everyday practices of their newly enlarged units. Leaders at two very different institutions, the University of Kentucky and Westminster University, offer accounts of that journey. About the former, Tara M. Tuttle and Kayla Powell describe an expansive approach to building an inclusive and equitable program through staffing changes, modifications of enrollment management practices, cultivating a sense of belonging through advising, collaborating with partners across campus, and empowering students through listening and leadership opportunities. At Westminster University, Julie Stewart was central to a similar effort grounded in a climate survey of honors college students that informed the development of a diversity strategic plan, which has had a marked effect on diversifying the honors student body and prompting other programming changes such as a wellness co-curriculum, establishment of a student diversity coordinator, diversification of student leadership, and student-led events focused on belonging.

A second chapter in this thread argues that honors colleges at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) can not only play an active role in creating inclusive spaces on campus but do so while helping students develop their abilities to bring about social change. Maintaining that these efforts go hand in hand, Susan Dinan, Jason T. Hilton, and Jennifer Willford see this work as especially important in honors because it can help dispel “institutional legacies that situate diversity as counter to quality” (278), and they chart their respective journeys through case studies that provide models for how honors can become campus leaders in DEI efforts.

In a third essay, Teagan Decker, Joshua Kalin Busman, and Michele Fazio, who all work at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, argue for honors colleges—especially those located in regional universities like their own—to act as levers of equity

to counter the “conservative mechanisms through which higher education reproduces the status quo of inequality” (301). Their rendering demonstrates how honors colleges need to shape their practices to be responsive to the populations they serve, paying special attention to issues of identity—rurality or first-generation status, for example—that might cause students to experience higher ed in a multiplicity of ways. Because of the autonomy enjoyed by honors colleges, they are especially positioned to do this work.

A final essay in this section explores how honors colleges can support LGBTQ+ students at faith-based institutions through changes to curriculum, co-curricular programming, climate, and policy. While reviewing some of the tensions between religious and queer identities, Paul E. Prill encourages honors college leaders to take advantage of the many resources available to help ensure that honors spaces in these settings are safe and inclusive. His highly researched essay argues that the autonomy and flexibility present in most honors colleges makes them especially rich sites for innovation in supporting LGBTQ+ students.

Importantly, the four chapters in this DEI unit as well as many others in the volume understand deeply that the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion must move past what Brandon Wolfe and Paulette Patterson Dilworth have dismissively referenced as the “Three F’s of food, festival, and famous people” that so often make up such efforts at many universities. Instead, the authors of this volume propose deep systemic change to the core operations and cultures of honors colleges to transform them into more equitable, inclusive, and just places.

A key feature of honors education has always been the centering of students in the overall enterprise, so the next section examines two ways in which that orientation plays out in honors colleges. Elizabeth Raisanen draws up a model of culturally responsive advising that centers support and belonging in this work because “advising work is the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion . . .” (348). After engaging in an extensive literature review of the role of advising in honors, Raisanen unpacks how culturally responsive advising makes the student the focus of these exchanges with university staff,

which aligns the approach with honors pedagogy, since it turns on the asking of questions and positioning the so-called “expert” as a co-learner with the student. Ultimately, this advising “furtheres the work of equity in honors because culturally responsive advisors are well positioned to help students to continue seeing themselves in honors, even when they struggle academically” (361), especially minoritized students who already face a series of structural barriers to feeling a sense of belonging in honors. Jill Nelson Granger then discusses the varied opportunities for fostering student leadership in honors colleges, blending theory and practice to demonstrate what this work looks like at different honors colleges across the U.S. Such programming pays off in increases in engagement, belonging, community, and program distinctiveness.

Given that honors education has always experimented with student learning, two chapters explore ways in which honors curricula can be a site for innovation. The first, by John Carrell, Aliza S. Wong, Chad Cain, Carrie J. Preston, and Muhammad H. Zaman, proposes an “Honors Liberal Arts for the 21st Century,” in which leaders of honors colleges at Boston University and Texas Tech University recount their process of curriculum revision that pivoted away from a Great Books approach to one combining the liberal arts and STEM in an interdisciplinary curriculum. This new curriculum emphasizes DEI, student empowerment, and global citizenship while taking on some of the world’s most pressing problems and training the next generation of ethically motivated global leaders. Digging into issues such as climate change and migration through the lens of this dynamic curriculum has allowed these two institutions to make a case for students and families that the liberal arts are not only relevant but essential to navigating today’s world.

In the second essay, Virginia Tech’s Paul Knox and Paul Heilker explain the excitement of a problem-based/project-based approach to learning. They advocate for transdisciplinary approaches to course design because they see that format as most apropos for equipping honors college students with the skills to manage the most pressing challenges of the twenty-first century. They argue honors education is especially well suited to advocate for such methodologies because

it is designed to bring together students and faculty from different disciplines. Pressing issues like “income inequality, migration, and gender inequality involve complex interdependencies . . .” (425) that cannot be solved by any one individual, group, or community in isolation; thus, it is incumbent that we train students to think broadly across fields and communities, a task perfectly suited for problem-based and project-based learning.

One of the most noteworthy advances in higher education over the past few decades has been the way universities have turned toward engaging their local communities, a development that has blunted criticisms of “Ivory Tower” institutions cut off from the world. (Indeed, some of the more recent attacks on higher ed seem grounded in the fear that colleges and universities are *too much* of this world.) Heidi Appel and fourteen other leaders of honors colleges and programs at land-grant universities explore their collaboration to construct a “fourth space” in honors for students to address intractable challenges such as food insecurity and climate change. They recommend that members of honors communities engage in this civic and community-based work. In this model, “students are not mere volunteers but participants in community-participatory problem solving founded in complex systems thinking and multidisciplinary approaches” (447); and the authors argue that honors colleges are especially well suited to house this type of active learning. In a second essay in this thread, leaders of honors colleges at three very different two-year institutions—a relatively recent phenomenon in the honors college space—identify the ways in which two-year colleges have long served their communities and draw helpful distinctions between honors programs and honors colleges at two-year colleges. Eric Hoffman, Victoria M. Bryan, and Dan Flores remind us that two-year colleges, as local and accessible institutions, are deeply invested in improving their surrounding communities.

These nineteen essays offer a broad overview of both the theory and practice of honors college education and administration in the twenty-first century, coincidentally one hundred years after Frank Aydelotte established the first U.S. honors program at Swarthmore

College. The more than four dozen voices represented in the volume collectively bring centuries of perspective on student-centered education in honors and demonstrate the striking developments that have occurred in this space over the past two decades. The authors hope that readers will benefit from those perspectives as they take up the challenging yet thrilling work of honors education at their own institutions.

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