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# Bringing Professional Honors Communities into NCHC

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**Abstract:** In response to the issue’s lead essay (Fazioli, 2022), the author warns that if honors programs and professional organizations fail to engage with preprofessional students and programs, the opportunities for building impactful relationships with stakeholders, realizing growth potential, and developing quality educational offerings in honors will be missed. Offering tangible ways to bring professional school colleagues and their students into honors and the global honors community, the author urges NCHC to meet this imperative if it is to articulate its commitment to solving the problems facing our world today and realize its collective mission.

**Keywords:** higher education—honors programs & colleges; professional education; educational change; learned institutions & societies; Texas Christian University (TX)—John V. Roach Honors College

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In “Who Owns Honors?” K. Patrick Fazioli (2022) argues the need for the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) and for honors programs and colleges around the country to improve outreach to preprofessional students, an agenda that he argues is crucial given the declining enrollments in humanities; increased enrollments in career-oriented majors; and today’s diversity, equity, and inclusion imperatives. Surprisingly for 2022, we are still exploring whether the liberal arts own honors education despite the above-mentioned realities of academic environments. If our honors programs and our professional organization fail to engage with preprofessional students and programs, we miss the opportunity to have an impact on some of our stakeholders, we limit our growth potential, and we lose the chance to grow the

quality of our educational offerings, diminishing the diversity of perspectives brought to the table by our program participants.

According to the recently published NCHC Shared Principles and Practices of Honors Education (NCHC, n.d.-b), “The honors program or college aligns itself with the mission of the institution, responds to its strategic plan and core values, and embraces student-centered practices while actively welcoming diverse faculty, professional staff, and students into its community.” Therefore, honors programs and colleges should attract and retain students and faculty beyond the liberal arts by offering appropriate paths through the curriculum that enable students of all majors to complete honors education at their institutions. By intentionally crafting honors opportunities for all students and focusing on inclusive excellence, programs and colleges can grow their memberships and diversify the student body. This diversification creates opportunities for a better quality of educational experiences for all, often leading to better course outcomes or improvements in programs by enabling interdisciplinary collaboration. Ongoing improvement creates enthusiasm about honors, which often translates into better honors applicants in subsequent years, elevating the profile of the university. The continuous honors innovation strategy has worked well at Texas Christian University (TCU), where the number of applicants continues to increase, allowing the academic profile of accepted students to continuously improve.

Over the years, the need to grow a diverse honors student body has been recognized widely by a multitude of universities in the United States and abroad. A web search for “business honors program” yields over fifty institutions in the U.S. offering such programs. Additional web queries with similar terms return more names of business honors programs around the country, making one wonder if we still need to advocate more vigorously for college-level honors beyond the liberal arts. Many universities have already recognized the importance of enriched education for their talented honors students in business (e.g., Jones & Watson, 2009; Levinson & Mandel, 2013; Urda, 2012; Yoder, 2017), nursing (e.g., Guy et al., 2020; Lim et al., 2016; Petersen et al., 2021), education (e.g., Bishop and Sitason, 2007), engineering (e.g., Brewster et al., 2014; Giazioni, 2007), and other disciplines (e.g., Bormans and Weerheijm, 2015; Khan & Morales-Menendez, 2012; Kutzke et al, 2020; van Dijk, 2012a and 2012b), suggesting that honors educators have already been supporting preprofessional students, whether in their discipline-specific programs or in their university-wide programs.

Some business schools often offer separate, highly coveted business honors programs within their colleges and in collaboration with the university

honors that bring attention to honors education and entice other talented business students to join honors. These are the “separate but equal” honors programs within university honors (e.g., Texas Christian University, n.d.; Jones and Watson, 2009), where students can satisfy university honors requirements by completing business courses. While the program at Texas Christian University Neeley School of Business, called Neeley Fellows, supports a little over 2% of the business students, the program’s desirability, and the subsequent awareness of the university honors program’s desirability, have motivated 14% of all business students to participate in university honors.

Other business schools choose to offer preprofessional honors programs as separate and complementary to the university honors (e.g., University of Cincinnati, n.d.; University of Oregon, n.d.). In this model, the professional school works separately from the university honors program to enable preprofessional honors students to complete the various honors program requirements outside of university honors requirements. Alternatively, some universities have opted to institutionalize their business honors programs as separate degree programs/business honors majors, allowing for additional selection of another major in a business discipline or outside of business (e.g., University of Texas, n.d.; Texas A&M University, n.d.). Another model of honors for preprofessional students, offered, for example, by the University of Houston (n.d.), has a wide range of curricular offerings across majors, minors, and accelerated 3+2 and 3+3 undergraduate and graduate professional options.

The most common strategy for engaging preprofessional students in honors is to encourage them to complete the university-wide honors offerings. Within this approach, the support for preprofessional students is offered by creating collaborative learning environments, such as the one at the Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences (Miltenburg & Weerheijm, 2018), called Innovation Lab. In this model, preprofessional students can pursue professional excellence while working in a multidisciplinary environment, solving real-world, complex problems. In the most popular arrangement in the U.S., the preprofessional honors students satisfy some of their honors requirements by taking honors classes meeting university general education requirements (e.g., Adelphi University, n.d.; California State University Fullerton, n.d.). The wide variety of models and arrangements for working with preprofessional students is encouraging, suggesting an opportunity for our professional honors organization, NCHC, to capture that preprofessional population into our community.

The mission of NCHC is to “support and enhance the community of educational institutions, professionals, and students who participate in collegiate honors education around the world” (NCHC, n.d.-c). NCHC engages approximately 900 institutions, their faculty, staff, and students, and provides training opportunities and events to build and sustain honors education. Some of the institutions that NCHC currently serves also offer business honors programs (e.g., Texas Christian University, n.d.; the University of Houston, n.d.; Texas A&M University, n.d.), yet there is a disconnect between NCHC and these professional honors programs. An examination of the last five years of NCHC publications reveals two faculty contributions related to best practices in business honors (Boyar, 2020; Yoder, 2017) and three business student contributions to the Value of Honors Education in *JNCHC* (Beason, 2022; Miller, 2022; Nunez, 2022) out of 44 that were contributed to the volume. The study of the last five years of honors conference programs shows consistent contributions from at least a handful of business students in the research poster competition (e.g., Johnston, 2021; Lotay, 2017; Maness, 2019; Papenkov, 2018) and an endeavor to create a business honors community within NCHC by Kim Larkin from Suffolk University. Larkin offered a Business Honors Program Consortium session at the NCHC annual conference in 2017 and a Business/Professional School Honors Program Special Interest Group session at the 2018 NCHC annual conference. The 2018 session resulted in the creation of the NCHC Business Honors Special Interest Group; this group currently has 46 members from 31 universities across four countries (the U.S., the Netherlands, Saudi Arabia, and Ecuador), spanning public (e.g., Arizona State University) and private (e.g., Baylor University) four-year institutions as well as two-year institutions (e.g., Hillsborough Community College) in the United States. Not all the group members appear to be from the business field, and the forum on the NCHC website is not active.

Clearly, there is an initial interest from the professional honors programs to engage within the NCHC community, but perhaps the NCHC community could more effectively target these potential members to pull them into the organization. NCHC is missing the opportunity to share its resources and years of expertise with the professional stakeholders they are supposed to support according to its mission. The organization also misses the opportunity to grow its membership by not directing at least some of its messaging toward the new professional school members. The various professional members could help NCHC offer more diverse programs, bringing a wealth of perspectives with them that would potentially enrich the quality of NCHC programming. By focusing on bringing the professional community into

NCHC, the organization could better align with its current NCHC strategic imperatives focused on diversity and inclusion as well as the strategic imperatives of advocacy and partnerships that prioritize efforts to raise awareness of NCHC as the premier organization for honors education (NCHC n.d.-a). Below are a few ideas of how bringing the professional honors community into NCHC can be accomplished.

First, it would help if the NCHC Board of Directors acknowledges the paucity of professional schools within the NCHC membership and makes it a priority to grow that niche, consistent with its current strategic imperatives, as outlined above. Once the need for growth of professional school members is recognized, the expansion can be translated at the annual conference planning meetings into general session tracks attractive to professional school honors, e.g., business, nursing, education, and other professional tracks. Simply creating these tracks will not bring the professional honors community to NCHC conferences; the NCHC programming must be accompanied by intentional outreach to professional communities to make them aware of the opportunities available to them within the NCHC organization.

Additionally, the editorial boards of NCHC journals and the NCHC Pub Board can issue calls for submissions relevant to professional honors, e.g., best practices in professional honors programs, or UNESCO Sustainable Development Goals (UNESCO, n.d.) in the honors classrooms, offering current general membership the opportunity to invite colleagues outside of the liberal arts to contribute to NCHC publications and conferences. The approach of soliciting contributions from stakeholders traditionally not interested in submitting to NCHC journals was successfully implemented with the issue focusing on the value of honors education, where various university presidents contributed essays (Forum on the Value of Honors, 2015). Another NCHC publication focused on best honors practices in the sciences and mathematics (Buckner & Garbutt, 2012). The approach adopted to create these volumes could also be adopted when implementing new annual/regional conference tracks or virtual roundtables, where we pull new contributors into our NCHC community with targeted communications. The publications and the conference presentation opportunities can motivate professional school colleagues to join us at the NCHC conferences, publish in NCHC outlets, and eventually join the organization.

Once a critical mass of professional school members in NCHC is achieved, the next step would involve creating an NCHC Professional School Committee that can advance the professional development needs of these new NCHC stakeholders. Also, being intentional about including

a professional school colleague in the slate running for the Board of Directors would increase the visibility of these colleagues, perhaps enticing others from the professional schools to seek professional advancement through NCHC. An ad hoc committee of the board could also look into other ways of championing professional member involvement with NCHC, researching and addressing the needs of these colleagues. K. Patrick Fazioloi's (2022) lead essay for this Forum on "Beyond the Liberal Arts" provides additional ideas for outreach to professional honors program members.

"Who Owns Honors?" is no longer a relevant question to ask. The liberal arts disciplines are not exclusively worthy of honors. Thinking otherwise is inconsistent with the mission of honors education, its professional organization's mission, and the reality of honors education. All our talented students and faculty, regardless of their disciplines, need access to honors education if we are to thrive and help unleash the human potential that makes our world a better place. Together, we can "wrestle with universal problems of human experience" (Andrews, 2015, p. 8) in an interdisciplinary manner that addresses solutions to problems that mar our current world. Therefore, we as NCHC members at large, NCHC Board of Directors executives, NCHC editors of publications, and NCHC committee members have the responsibility to create avenues that will bring our professional school honors colleagues to our organization.

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