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Toward a Science of Honors Education

Beata M. Jones

Texas Christian University, b.jones@tcu.edu

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The secret of change is to focus all of your energy not on fighting the old, but on building the new.

—Socrates

As Sam Schuman wrote in 2004 and as George Mariz points out in his lead essay for this issue of *JNCHC*, the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) and academics alike have long recognized the importance of research in honors. Cambridge Dictionary Online defines "research" as "a detailed study of a subject in order to discover information or achieve a new understanding of it." Given the roots of U.S. honors in the liberal arts, U.S. practitioners who have written for *JNCHC* have often been driven by the research models of their home disciplines. With fifteen years' worth of publications, *JNCHC* contains a vast array of inspiring, reflective essays about honors practices (e.g., Frost on "Saving Honors in the Age of Standardization"), captivating case studies (e.g., Davis and Montgomery on "Honors Education at HBCUs: Core Values, Best Practices, and Select Challenges" and Digby on her program at Long Island University, C.W. Post Campus), and an occasional survey across institutions reporting "The State of the Union" in

honors (e.g., Driscoll and England). In contrast, our European honors colleagues, often coming from disciplines rooted in the sciences, have begun in recent years to advance a systematic study of honors that has yielded a more generalizable understanding of our field, e.g., Wolfensberger's books in 2012 and 2015.

Sadly, there seems to be little cross-pollination of the European ideas within the U.S. about the teaching of academically talented students. For example, NCHC's current website guidelines on "Honors Teaching" make no use of Wolfensberger's research. Further discouraging is the fact that the website makes no reference to any evidence in support of the recommended pedagogical guidelines in "Honors Course Design" even though the site houses a "Bibliography of Journals and Monographs Consolidated."

While both continents' approaches to studying honors help us "achieve a new understanding" of honors and become more effective honors practitioners, we need an honors research agenda to produce evidence-based practice. As Mariz points out in this issue, "Ours is a data-driven age." We work in an age of accountability and the need to demonstrate not only what we do but how we make a difference. Constructing a comprehensive research framework to guide our pursuits and taking stock of what we already know about teaching academically talented students can allow us to prioritize items on the vast horizon left to explore and to develop a more systematic study of honors. The ultimate goal of such an endeavor is not only to achieve a more holistic understanding of the dynamics of our field for the sake of knowing, which is a fine endeavor in itself for honors academicians, but also to transform our practice based on research and the inspiring stories that embellish the research findings.

In 2004, Schuman pointed out the need for a more systematic study of the honors field, advocating more rigorous honors scholarship related to honors students, faculty, courses, curricula, pedagogy, historical analysis, and miscellaneous issues. I would like to reiterate his sentiment and offer this essay as:

1. A manifesto to all honors practitioners in the U.S. and around the world to join forces and develop an honors research agenda; and

2. A call to the NCHC to serve as the archive and the promoter of such an agenda as well as the associated research findings.

Seeking to bring together a diverse body of knowledge into a coherent whole, I make the following suggestions:

1. We should learn from the related disciplines that inform our practice, such as instructional design, higher education administration, organizational behavior, psychology, sociology, anthropology; and

2. We should borrow from our rich backgrounds to build helpful research frameworks for the study of honors through the prisms of our disciplines and the field of education.

The unique contextual variables of our universities make it challenging to study honors phenomena across different settings and to generalize findings, which are often cited as obstacles to engaging in more systematic pursuits of honors science. However, keeping track of all the moderating variables will make it possible for us to improve our understanding of honors.

A computer scientist by training, a business faculty member by choice, and an honors education enthusiast by passion, I have a background that colors my ideas about research. I seek models and frameworks to inform my practice, and I then want to embellish them. Using the theory of organizational behavior and instructional design, I want to begin building a comprehensive framework for the study of honors. I offer this paper as an attempt to capture and organize in a systematic manner what we might wish to study in honors and why, citing relevant prior explorations of the topics. To be sure I identify the important issues, I concentrate on the identification of key attributes vital to the study of honors rather than on their specific measures. I encourage my honors colleagues to help embellish the framework proposed in this paper and propose complementary frameworks, colored by our backgrounds, that will enable us to refine and advance a rich honors research agenda. With the help of NCHC and through collaboration, we might be able to accomplish the following:

1. Create a rich and evidence-based set of guidelines for all of us in honors; and

2. Better showcase how we make a difference and thus increase institutional support.

THE FRAMEWORK

For the purpose of this analysis, I am viewing honors units as organizations according to the definition by Greenberg and Barron as "a structured social system consisting of groups and individuals working together to meet some agreed-on objectives" (4). To comprehend the dynamics of honors programs and run them effectively, we may borrow from organizational

behavior theory, which uses three levels of analysis in its research: individuals, groups and organizations, recognizing the need for all three levels of analysis (Greenberg and Barron 5). In the context of honors, we would thus analyze honors stakeholders at the individual level of analysis, honors courses at the group level, and honors programs and colleges at the organizational level. We should also recognize that honors organizations do not exist in a vacuum and that their external environments shape the realities of running the programs or colleges and vice versa. Therefore, the framework for honors investigation will use four levels of analysis and identify their relevant attributes/characteristics (see Figure 1). In the remainder of the paper, I briefly describe each level of analysis and the attributes that might be of interest for us to study, relating them to the existing *JNCHC* publications and other relevant literature.

INDIVIDUAL HONORS STAKEHOLDERS

A stakeholder is a person who has interest or concern in an organization. We can categorize the multiple honors stakeholders, according to their level of interest in honors, as primary or secondary (see Table 1).

Primary stakeholders in honors are the honors students, faculty, staff, and program directors or deans since they are the ones most vested in honors education. Secondary stakeholders, less invested in honors education given the nature of their association with honors units, include honors alumni, honors board members, honors committee members outside of honors, friends of honors, and university administrators.

To determine how to run an effective organization, one may find it helpful to analyze the attributes of the organizational stakeholders from a lifecycle perspective. Figure 2 presents the attributes that might be of interest to study within each honors stakeholder group. These stakeholder attributes are

FIGURE 1. THE FRAMEWORK—ANALYSIS LEVELS

External Environment

Honors Programs/Colleges

Honors Courses

Honors Stakeholders
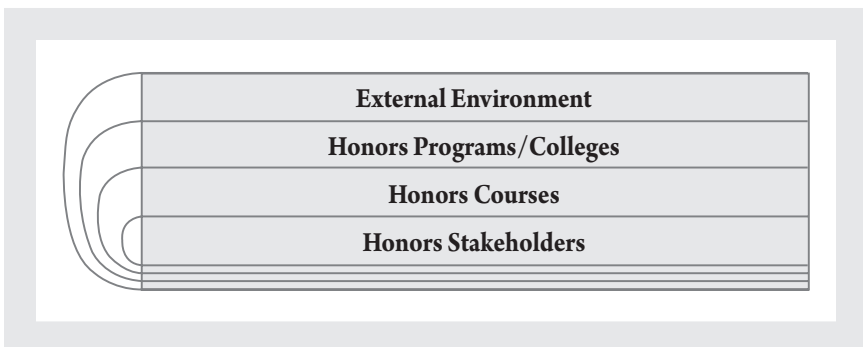
particularly important to understand for the primary stakeholders. Following is a list of areas that an honors organization should understand in order to operate effectively, including citations of resources that provide information about each area:

1. The profile of their faculty and students: Achterberg, 2005; Blythe, 2004; Brimeyer et al. 2014; Carnicom & Clump, 2004; Castro-Johnson & Wang, 2003; Clark, 2000; Edman & Edman, 2004; Freyman, 2005; Grangaard, 2003; Kaczvinsky, 2007; Otero, 2005 ("What Honors"); Owens & Giazzoni, 2010; Rinn, 2008;

2. What students and faculty joining honors expect: Hill, 2005;

3. How best to recruit students: Eckert et al., 2010; Nichols & Chang, 2013;

4. What orientations to honors the students need to be successful and what motivates them to excel: Clark, 2008; Weerheijm & Weerheijm, 2012;

5. How to retain students: Cundall, 2013; Eckert et al., 2010; Goodstein & Szarek, 2013; Keller & Lacy, 2013; McKay, 2009; Nichols & Chang, 2013; Otero, 2005 ("Tenure"); Salas, 2010; Savage et al., 2014; Slavin et al., 2008; Smith & Zagurski, 2013;

6. How to develop students while they are a part of honors: Ochs, 2008;

7. How to recognize students' achievements and offer feedback as well as appropriate rewards for those achievements: Guzy, 2013; Hartleroad, 2005;

8. How to understand the characteristics of successful honors students and faculty: Wolfensberger, 2004 & 2008; Wolfensberger & Offringa, 2012; and

TABLE 1. HONORS STAKEHOLDERS

Primary Stakeholders	Secondary Stakeholders
Honors Students	Honors Alumni
Honors Faculty	Honors Board Members
Honors Staff	Friends of Honors
Honors Administrators	University Faculty and Staff Outside of Honors
	University Administrators

9. What effects honors programs have on students: Karsan et al., 2011; Kelleher, 2005; Long & Mullins, 2015; Shushok, 2006.

Similarly, scholars should research other stakeholder groups to better understand how the attributes of each individual stakeholder group contribute to success in honors, as described by Frost in "Success as an Honors Program Director: What Does it Take?"

HONORS COURSES

The field of instructional design and our own honors practices offer rich frameworks for analyzing courses in honors, suggesting preferred ways to design and teach them. The details of effective course design and its classroom implementation are two areas in which honors administrators may guide their faculty.

FIGURE 2. STAKEHOLDER ATTRIBUTES OF INTEREST
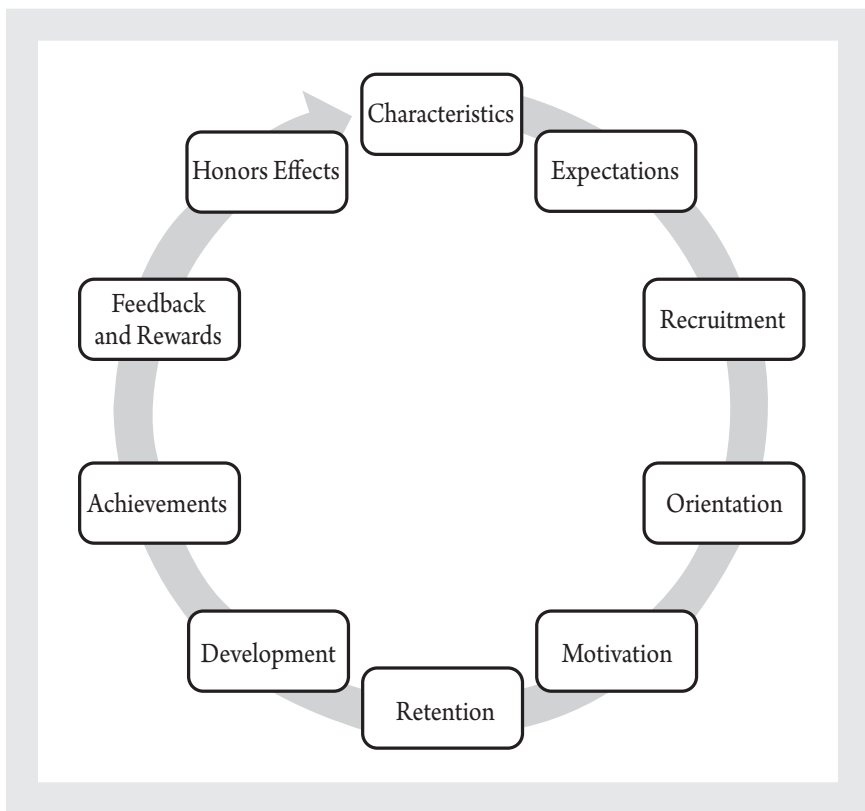
In assessing the design of a course for significant learning experiences, Fink recommends exploring the relationships between (a) desired learning goals, (b) feedback and assessment, and (c) teaching and learning activities within a context of (d) situational factors at the university (see Figure 3).

To develop strong honors courses, we need to closely align the desired learning goals, teaching and learning activities to achieve the goals, and feedback and assessment mechanisms. According to NCHC's "Honors Course

Figure 3. Criteria for Assessing Course Design (Fink 2)
[reproduced with permission of Fink]
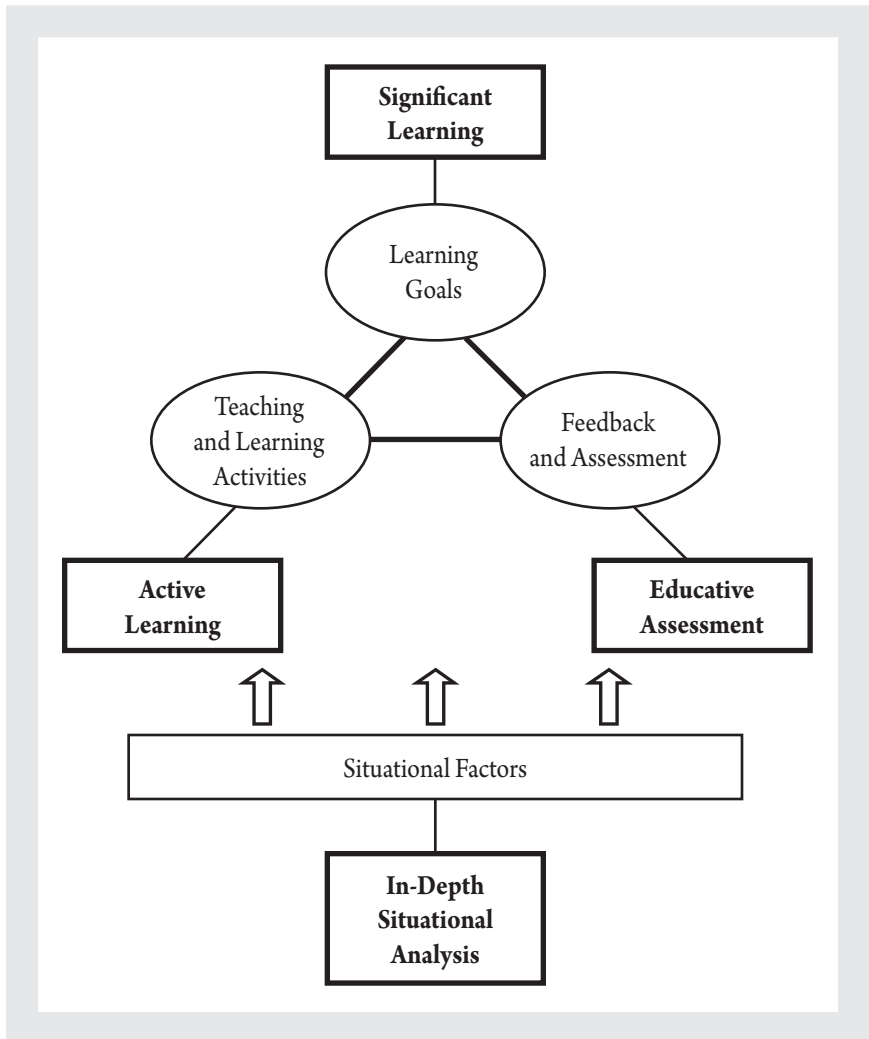
The major criteria are shown in bold.

Design," desired learning goals might entail effective development of the following:

1. written and oral communication skills,

2. ability to analyze and synthesize a broad range of material,

3. critical thinking skills,

4. creative process, and

5. analytical problem solving.

These desired learning goals appear to be rather generic, and non-honors courses often embed them as well. According to West, the particular goals of honors education might also involve developing self-reflectiveness, passion for learning and sense of wonder, and ability to collaborate, appreciate diversity, and tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity. These goals suggest that honors courses "should contribute to students' intellectual, emotional, moral, and social maturity" (3), preparing individuals to excel in the world. If the goal of honors education is to evoke excellence in the world that our graduates will be entering, perhaps an appropriate set of learning objectives might also include Newmeier's *Meta Skills: The Five Skills for the Robotic Age*. Newmeier advocates development of the following five metacognitive skills:

1. Feeling: a prerequisite for the process of innovation, feeding empathy, intuition, and social intelligence.

2. Seeing: the ability to craft a holistic solution, also known as systems thinking, which helps solve complex, non-linear problems of the Robotic Age.

3. Dreaming: the skill of applied imagination, which yields innovation.

4. Making: "design thinking" that requires mastering the design process, including skills for devising prototypes.

5. Learning: the ability to learn new skills at will, producing learners who know what and how to learn just in time for a new problem.

Given the changing realities of education in the twenty-first century, research on course outcomes and current practices might suggest an up-to-date set of desired learning goals for our honors courses.

Honors faculty members can explore teaching and learning activities within honors courses through the prism of:

1. Relevant pedagogies used in courses: Mihelich et al. on Liberation Pedagogy; Braid on Active Learning; Machonis on Experiential Learning; Wagner on Inquiry Learning; Scott & Bowman on Project-Based Learning; Wiegant et al. and also Fuiks on Collaborative Learning; Camarena & Collins on Service Learning; Braid & Long on City As Text™; and Williams on PRISM; and

2. Characteristics of specific learning activities used in courses: Chickering and also Johnson on choices offered and community building; Wolfensberger on engendering academic competence; and the NCHC website on modes of learning in "Definition of Honors Education." (See Table 2.)

While Fuiks and Gillison claim that there is no single model for teaching an honors course, Wolfensberger suggests in *Teaching for Excellence* a single signature honors pedagogy, with three distinct themes. I believe we can refine Wolfensberger's pedagogy for honors faculty, closely aligning characteristics of teaching and learning activities with assessments and desired learning goals as well as the needs of today's society to prepare students for twenty-first-century realities (Davidson; Lopez-Chavez and Shepherd; Wagner; Wesch).

Honors instructors can examine the frequency and types of feedback offered (formative vs. summative) as well as the structure of the feedback and assessment (informal comments vs. rubrics). (See Table 3.) Relevant

TABLE 2. RELEVANT DIMENSIONS OF HONORS TEACHING AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Examples Relevant to Honors Pedagogies	Characteristics of Honors Learning Activities (Wolfensberger, 2012)	Modes of Honors Learning in NCHC's "Definition of Honors Education"
Active Learning Inquiry Learning Project-Based Learning Collaborative Learning Service Learning City As Text PRISM	Choices Offered Community Building Engendering Academic Competence	Research & Creative Scholarship Interdisciplinary Learning Service Learning & Leadership Experiential Learning Learning Communities

research in these areas can be found in Brown; Carnicom and Snyder; Haggerty et al.; Otero, "Grades"; Ross & Roman; Snyder and Carnicom; Wilson. Understanding what type and structure of feedback might work best within different educational contexts might help us better structure our course.

Situational factors at the university will affect not only the design of honors courses but their outcomes (see Table 4). The factors include the course's (inter)disciplinary setting, class size (Zubizarreta, "The Importance of Class Size"), the characteristics of students in the learning environment (Ladenheim et al.; Merline), and the resources available within the course, e.g., budget available to support field trips, support staff to work with students, appropriateness of physical space and support facilities, and technology used to help achieve learning outcomes (Randall; Yoder; Zubizarreta, "The Learning Portfolio").

The success of honors course implementation depends on many variables related to characteristics of the faculty, the course, the student, and the context. Fundamental tasks of teaching involve having solid knowledge of the subject matter, managing the course, designing learning experiences,

TABLE 3. RELEVANT DIMENSIONS OF FEEDBACK AND ASSESSMENT IN HONORS

Assessment Type	Assessment Structure
Formative	Informal Comments
Summative	Rubrics

TABLE 4. SAMPLE SITUATIONAL FACTORS IN HONORS COURSE DESIGN

Relevant Situational Factors in Honors Course Design
(Inter)Disciplinary Setting
Class Size
Characteristics Of Students
Budget
Support Staff
Physical Space
Support Facilities
Technology

and interacting with students. According to Fink in "Transforming Students through High-Impact Teaching Practices," the five high-impact teaching practices include:

1. changing students' view of learning,

2. learning-centered course design,

3. team-based learning,

4. service learning, and

5. being a leader with the students.

Faculty in honors might also learn from Slavich and Zimbardo, who present the specific elements of transformational teaching, and from Wolfensberger, Drayer et al., who have proposed an Integrative Model of Excellent Performance (see Figure 4), which also sheds some light on what a successful course implementation might entail. Further studies need to examine closely the relationship between student, course, and context to offer helpful guidelines for effective honors course implementations in different disciplines and settings.

HONORS PROGRAMS/COLLEGES

Scholarship on honors programs and colleges has a long history in honors research and is the most studied level of the proposed framework, with multiple publications available for honors administrators; see, for instance, Long's *A Handbook for Honors Administrators*, Sederberg's "Characteristics of the Contemporary Honors College: A Descriptive Analysis of a Survey of NCHC Member Colleges," and Schuman's *Honors Programs at Smaller Colleges* and *Beginning in Honors: A Handbook*. Table 5 presents typical attributes of honors organizations that have received attention in the literature. The NCHC website clearly elaborates the differences in these attributes for honors programs versus honors colleges; see NCHC's Basic Characteristics of an Honors Program and Basic Characteristics of an Honors College; Achterberg's "Differences between an Honors Program and Honors College"; and Sederberg's *The Honors College Phenomenon*.

Only a few studies analyze the interrelation between the attributes; one of these is the discussion by Bartelds et al. of the relationship between mission, performance indicators, and assessment. Numerous honors practitioners, however, have contributed articles to the NCHC literature on

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FIGURE 4. THE INTEGRATIVE MODEL OF EXCELLENT PERFORMANCE (WOLFENSBERGER, DRAYER, ET AL.) [REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF WOLFENSBERGER]
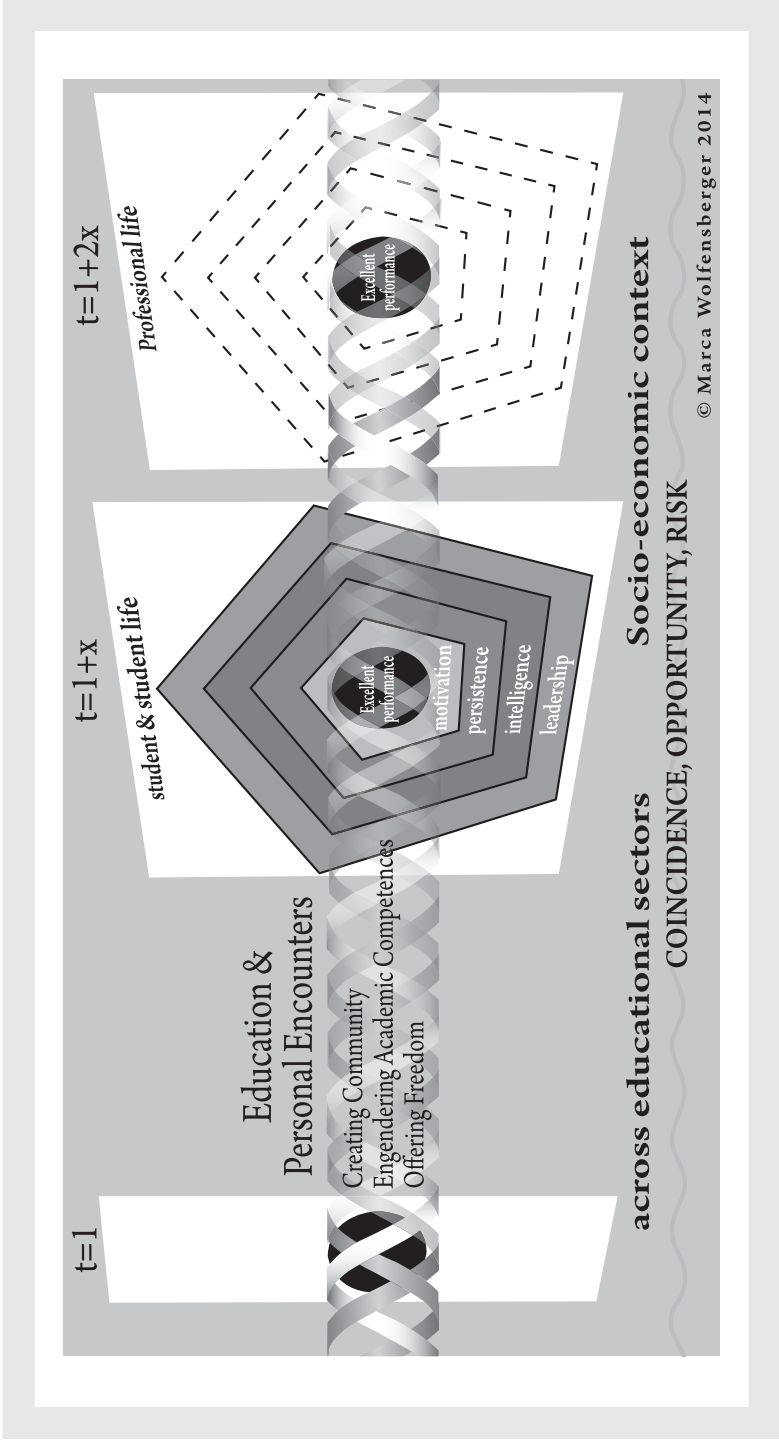
TABLE 5. KEY ATTRIBUTES OF HONORS ORGANIZATIONS

Guiding Principles	Governance	Culture	Curriculum	Processes	Resources	Contextual Factors
Mission	Leadership	Community	Setting	Admission	Budget	Program Size & Capacity
Vision	Structure		Coursework Required	Hiring	Scholarships	Reasons for Program Existence
Values			Co-Curricular Activities	Advising	Staff & Faculty	
Desired Outcomes			Capstone Experiences	Enrollment	Facilities	
			Technology	Growth	Housing	
			Outcome Assessment	Incentives	Technology	
				Communication		
				Strategic Planning		
				Fundraising		
				Events		
				Participation in Honors Community		
				Outcome Assessment		

individual attributes of honors organizations. For example, Clark ("Honors Director as Coach"), Godow ("Honors Program Leadership"), Mariz ("Leadership in Honors"), Schroeder et al. ("The Roles and Activities of Honors Directors"), and Zane ("Reminiscences") have looked at leadership in honors. Ford ("Creating an Honors Culture"), Mariz ("The Culture of Honors"), and Slavin ("Defining Honors Culture") have studied the honors culture, and the community aspect of honors culture has been the focus of Gillison, Stanlick, Swanson, and van Ginkel et al. Scholars have written relatively little about honors curricula considering how critical the topic is to the existence and success of honors organizations, but see Slavin & Mares. Honors organizational processes, however, have been the subject of many explorations by NCHC researchers. Green and Kimbrough, Guzy, Herron, Stoller, and Smith and Zagurski have explored honors admission. Spurrier has studied advising. Flynn, McLaughlin, and Myers and Festle have examined issues associated with honors growth while Larry R. Andrews has explored fundraising. Jones and Welhburg have discussed the need for program assessment while Lanier and Otero and Spurrier offered a framework and handbook to execute it.

The honors literature also offers advice about honors resources and their use. Railsback has offered wisdom regarding honors budgets while Taylor and also Rinn (in her essay "Academic and Social Effects of Living in Honors Residence Halls") have mused on the role of honors housing. Clauss and Cobane have examined the institutional outcomes of honors education, and Kelly has inspected the concept of the overall success of honors.

Despite all these studies, the field of honors scholarship field needs a meta-analysis of honors organizational research, shedding light on our best practices for honors in different contexts and bringing clarity to what we know and what we still need to determine.

EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

Honors practitioners have focused also on the external environments of honors practitioners, recognizing the interdependence between honors and its institutional or other contexts (see Table 6). *JNCHC* authors have identified external environment factors such as university setting (Cosgrove; Hilberg & Bankert), historical context, country and local settings (Barron and Zeegers; de Souza Fleith et al.; Khan and Morales-Mendez; Kitakagi and Li; Lamb; Skewes et al.; van Dijk; Yyelland, and numerous articles by Wolfensberger and co-authors), and assistance from professional honors organizations (Digby). The literature also contains discussions of coalitions with research

programs (Arnold et al.; Levitan), non-profit organizations (Stark), and for-profit support programs (Nock et al.), including internships, service learning, and study abroad programs. All these contexts can play a significant role in determining how an honors program or college operates and what outcomes it can generate.

CONCLUSION

While honors practitioners around the world will continue to delight us with inspirational, reflective essays about their honors practices, I hope that honors scholarship will evolve to include examinations of prior relevant research and more rigorous studies. As Schuman noted in 2004, "good scholarship is . . . generalizable. . . . [I]t articulates insights, suggests actions, or makes propositions, which are based upon thoughts and principles." The NCHC Board of Directors has designated research as one of its top priorities for the organization (NCHC, "Research"). I have made a preliminary attempt at organizing our honors discipline into a comprehensive framework that can guide our explorations and shed light on specific attributes of honors entities in the framework of their interrelationships. The framework offers an approach to deal with the inherent fragmentation of our field, which can lead to incoherence.

As we ask our honors students to push boundaries of knowledge in their research, we also should be tasked with similar challenges and model good scholarship in the field of honors education. Summarizing what we already know about honors from the annual surveys and prior studies of honors is one way to start. Analysis of the research data compiled by NCHC and available on the NCHC website is already underway, and we can continue to collaborate on further data collection. With the help of NCHC publications, NCHC

TABLE 6. KEY FACTORS OF HONORS EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENTS

Honors Organization Key Environmental Factors
University Setting
Historical Context
Country & Local Settings
Professional Honors Organizations
Government Programs & Non-Profits
For-Profit Support Programs

conferences, and orchestrated honors community work, we might be able to write a comprehensive, evidence-based *Field Guide to Honors Education* in the next five years. We will not only all benefit by better understanding how we make a difference and for whom, but we will also leave a legacy of enlightenment to those who follow in our footsteps in the next fifty years of honors.

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The author may be contacted at

b.jones@tcu.edu.