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What College Presidents Need to Know about Honors Colleges

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ABSTRACT

In just the past few decades, honors colleges have increasingly become an important feature of the undergraduate experience at public universities across the nation. From the recruitment of students in order to help stem “brain drain” from a state to the cultivation of alumni donors, an honors college can play a critical role in an institution’s overall success. This article will discuss five specific areas that college presidents need to know about how honors college function and the issues they often face, with the goal of furthering an executive leader’s knowledge of these programs.

1. For better or for worse, there is no standard model for honors colleges

A common misconception is that there is a universal model for how honors colleges should operate. Although there are certainly some shared values and practices across most honors colleges, there are important differences that need to be understood, especially when a president takes over a new institution. Here are some questions a new president should ask leaders of the institution’s honors college:

- **Administration** – What is the administrative structure of the program? Who does the leader of the honors college directly report to at the university? Does this feel like the appropriate reporting structure?
- **Staffing** – How large is the honors college staff? Is the size of the honors faculty/staff in line with what would be found at comparable institutions?
- **Curriculum** – Are all undergraduate majors included in the honors college? If so, is there a common honors curriculum for all students in the college or do requirements vary based upon major?
- **Faculty** – Are there faculty members without administrative responsibilities who report directly to the dean or director? How is honors coursework funded? Is there a culture at the university of tenure-track and tenured faculty wanting to teach honors students? If not, what can be done to incentivize faculty to teach honors students? Does the Honors College have its own dedicated faculty lines?
- **Undergraduate Students in Honors** – What percentage of the undergraduate population is in the honors college? Is the percentage just right or should it change? How do we determine the right-size of an honors college?
- **Admissions** – How is a student admitted to the honors college? What is the relationship between the honors college and undergraduate admissions? Does the honors college have its own recruitment staff, or does it rely on the undergraduate admissions counselors for recruitment?

- **Undergraduate Research** – Does the honors college require undergraduate research to graduate with honors? What does this process look like for an undergraduate student? If there is no research thesis requirement, what sorts of capstone experiences do honors students have?
- **Study Abroad** – Does the honors college require study abroad? Are there study abroad programs available exclusively for honors students? Are there financial incentives offered to honors students to encourage study abroad? Does the Honors College support its own study abroad experiences?
- **Students Fees** – Does the honors college charge a student fee? If so, what impact is that having on accessibility, especially among students from underrepresented populations and geographies?
- **Fundraising & Alumni Relations** – Are there development staff members who focus on fundraising efforts for the honors college? Are there multiple offices in their portfolio or do they focus solely on honors? Do these individuals report directly to the development/advancement office or to the leader of the honors college?

Even within a group of peer institutions, the answers to these questions can vary widely. New presidents should seek this information within the first few months at an institution.

2. Honors can play an important role in your institution's ability to recruit in-state students

Honors colleges are increasingly playing an important role in reaching new student enrollment goals at public universities. A well-run honors college bolsters the recruitment of students who fall into two very distinct categories. First, there will always be students who are concerned about the larger undergraduate enrollments that are typically found at a public university, causing them to fear that they will “just be a number, not a name.” Joining an honors college can help alleviate many of these concerns, especially if students have access to honors courses that have lower enrollments along with increased interaction with faculty members. Research also shows that student-faculty interactions can help a college student's academic self-concept and overall motivation (Komarraju, Musulkin and Bhattacharya, 2010). Honors colleges can therefore serve as both an important recruitment and retention tool for the university.

Another group that should not be overlooked are the highest academically achieving students in your state. Beginning in their sophomore year of high school, these students are inundated with information about competitive colleges and universities from all over the country. The nationalization of college recruitment has accelerated in recent decades. According to Strayer (2016), “the number of out-of-state freshmen attending [public colleges and universities] has nearly doubled since 1986” (n.p.). The demand for out-of-state students will likely only increase in the years to come as colleges and universities expect to see the available pool of traditional college students significantly decrease during the latter part of the 2020s, especially for institutions in the Northeast and the Midwest (Grawe, 2018). Not surprisingly, high-achieving students, especially those who qualify for lucrative financial aid packages, will continue to have more viable out-of-state options than the average high school senior, a significant concern for elected officials who see these students as future drivers of economic development and prosperity within their state. A successful honors college can be an important recruitment tool for

any public university, especially one that excels in creating a meaningful college experience that also prepare students for their post-graduate lives. In turn, the university will be able to strengthen the argument to elected officials that it plays an important role in the state's long-term economic development.

3. Student success initiatives are important for honors students, too

Enrolling new honors students is important; helping them be successful in college and beyond is even more crucial. Student success initiatives are critical to a public institution's ability to improve both its retention and graduation numbers, especially in an era of state legislatures moving more toward performance-based funding models (Dougherty et al., 2014). When an institution plans its student success efforts, it is essential that honors students are considered as part of the plan. University presidents should consider the following:

- **Mental Health** – How is the institution supporting the mental health of honors students? Neumeister (2004) found that gifted students that often have perfectionist tendencies, which can lead to a variety of mental health issues along with a severe fear of disappointing others. It is imperative that honors students have access to mental health counselors who can address issues that are often found within the population.
- **Students of Color** – How is the university supporting the needs of honors students of color? What is the honors college's plan to address issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion within its student population? These plans are critical at any institution, especially at a predominantly white institution (PWI).
- **First-Generation College Students** – How is the university supporting the needs of first-generation college students? Are there mentorship opportunities available for these students? Even though they may have a strong academic background, first-generation honors students can still face a number of issues related to income, family support, and feeling included within a university community.
- **Pre-Professional Programs** – What is the quality of the institution's pre-professional programs? Do they have placement rates that are comparable to peer institutions? Are students getting a quality experience throughout the advising process? In a similar vein, does the school have a high-performing office of post-graduate fellowships?
- **Tutoring Services** – Are tutoring services available for honors courses? Honors students may come to the university with strong grades and test scores, but there is still a possibility that they may lack certain skills that are vital for all college students (e.g. analytical writing, critical thinking, etc.). In other cases, honors student may have felt pressure to choose a specific major instead of pursuing a passion and are simply unprepared for the rigors of that specific program.
- **Residence Halls** – What is the quality of the residence hall experience for honors students, especially those in the first year? Are there buildings or floors exclusively dedicated to honors students? Is there quality programming that's being offered in the residence halls?

Student success initiatives are incredibly important, but there may be a tendency at the institution to put almost all of the focus of these initiatives on non-honors students. Although the needs of

honors students may be different, there should still be student success programs aimed specifically at this population.

4. Quality honors curriculum requires investment, both in terms of finances and faculty labor

Student success initiatives are critical, but for most honors students, the classroom environment and their interaction with faculty members will likely have a significant impact on their college experience (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). As higher education budget models evolve and more efficiencies are sought, a common concern among honors deans and directors is what impact these changes will have on the classroom. From a purely financial standpoint, this concern is often warranted because small honors courses a) bring in less tuition revenue with fewer students enrolled and b) can have higher labor costs if there is an expectation that a tenure-track or tenured faculty member teach the course. This issue can be particularly acute at honors colleges that do not charge a student fee that can help support curricular initiatives.

Another consistent curricular concern for honors deans and directors is the recruitment of top faculty to teach honors courses. This can be a particular issue at RU/VH institutions that have high research standards for faculty seeking tenure and promotion. Why would a faculty member teach an intensive honors course that could potentially take away time spent on research? This is not to mention the time spent writing letters of recommendation students will need after the course. Considering these circumstances, incentives are necessary. In some cases, money can be allocated to the honors college to provide extra compensation to faculty teaching honors courses as overload or to “buy them out” of an inload course they were expected to offer for their home academic department. Knowing the financial realities of most institutions during national crises like economic downturns or even pandemics such as Covid-19, an alternative is to adjust tenure and promotion guidelines to encourage faculty to teach honors courses. An adjustment like this would likely be difficult to design and implement at most institutions, but it may be worth starting a dialogue with both the provost’s office and the honors college leadership if there are concerns about faculty recruitment for honors courses.

5. With all things honors, focus on the long-term return on investment

There is no denying that in order to build a strong honors college, investment from the institution is critical, with private donations often having to supplement some portion of the enterprise. That said, it may be difficult to initially measure success of an honors college. Presidents should not expect an instant shot up the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings after a major investment in honors, even if the number of entering students with high test scores spikes. A well-run honors college should help with the gradual improvement of the institution’s retention and graduation rates, but those gains can easily be offset if the university is not adequately supporting the rest of the student body. Even in the world of post-graduate fellowships, only a small handful of elite institutions in the country consistently have students win the Rhodes, Marshall, and Truman Scholarships each year. If a president is looking for a quick fix to what currently ails a university, an honors college by itself will not serve as a magic elixir.

Honors colleges should indeed have measurable goals for the program to meet. That said, any collected data, both positive and negative, should be considered within a framework that the honors college has developed to convert successful students into alumni who will provide some form of support to the institution over the rest of their lives. The quality of an undergraduate experience clearly shapes alumni perceptions (Gaier, 2005). Simply put, the better the student experience, the better the long-term perception of the university will be over time. This is especially true if an alum can trace post-graduate success to specific aspects of the honors college experience, from faculty mentorship to a research experience that led to admission to a top graduate school. A student-centered honors college is expensive to run for so many reasons, but if it can improve alumni perceptions over time, the return on investment will be significant. Young alums may only make financial contributions to the annual fund, but their willingness to support new student recruitment efforts and, in some cases, mentor current students interested in a specific professional field are invaluable. Over time, these engaged honors alums could transition from annual fund giving to more significant donations as their net worth increases. To cultivate these donors, the honors college will need adequate development staffing, a small expense considering the potential returns that can help improve the long-term health of an institution.

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