



# NCHC Shared Principles and Practices of Honors Education

*Adopted by the NCHC Board of Directors: February 16, 2022*

These shared principles and practices encompass qualities of honors education that are often present across a [wide spectrum of institutional settings](#). Rather than containing a summative checklist of items to be acquired and counted, the principles and practices seek to spark generative conversation around how honors education can help transform an institution and the students it serves. In that respect, many of these principles and practices are aspirational even though they may not necessarily be applicable to all honors programs or colleges. They balance innovation at the local level with the need for standards across the broad and diverse sector of honors education. The principles and practices position students at the center of honors education and celebrate the wide diversity of approaches to honors, one of the key strengths of our community. Because growth and new ideas are at the center of honors education and its principles and practices are constantly evolving, this document serves as an open invitation to all members of the academy to participate in this ongoing project. Most importantly, the principles and practices 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.

## Mission, Vision, Values

### Mission Alignment

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.

- It employs program-wide goals and student learning outcomes that further its own clearly articulated mission to serve its diverse student population while also supporting the overall aims of the institution.
- Honors programs and colleges routinely develop and revise their program/college missions and strategic plans to ensure alignment with institutional planning and goal setting, including the development of a diversity strategic plan that reflects the mission and values of the institution in this area.

### Strategic Partnership

The honors program or college is part of the institution's strategic planning process because it can play a key role in advancing institutional goals around enrollment, yield, retention, and graduation rates; enhancing institutional prestige through student achievement; supporting innovative pedagogy across units; sustaining campus-wide diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts; and advancing alumni engagement, among other crucial strategic objectives.

- An institution looking to emphasize innovative teaching strategies might invest professional development dollars in the honors college or program because its faculty are typically drawn from across the institution and thus can carry these innovations back to their home units.

### Inclusive Excellence

The honors program or college provides a locus of visible and highly reputed standards and models of inclusive excellence for students, faculty, and professional staff across the campus. It strives to serve undergraduates drawn from all of the many campus communities and explores practices that allow it to reach the broadest and most diverse populations.

- As stated in NCHC's Diversity and Inclusion Statement, honors education "supports and values inclusive excellence by promoting educational equity and non-discriminatory practices. As an organization of institutions, honors educators, students, and staff, it is our responsibility to promote the inclusion and success of academically motivated and high-potential learners from all communities, understanding that each of us holds varied, intersectional identities. We make inclusive excellence possible by understanding that differences between and among us are strengths. In response to historical, cultural, and institutional restrictions that have limited student access to honors education and the hiring of diverse faculty and staff, the NCHC is committed to modeling best practices in inclusion, and to using inclusive leadership strategies, research, and partnerships with other organizations to help honors colleges and programs pursue honors practices and programs that serve and empower all communities."

# Administration

## Administrative Position

Honors programs or colleges are typically situated administratively within Academic Affairs while also being uniquely positioned to build strong partnerships with Student Affairs and other administrative units across campus like Admissions, Advancement, Housing (where available), and Alumni Affairs, among others. Honors should take advantage of this unique positionality to collaborate with a wide range of partners across campus.

- Honors colleges and programs can often serve as a “third space” on campus that link Academic Affairs and Student Affairs (and other offices) because of the unique nature of the programming that takes place in the unit, thus allowing honors to serve as an important cross-campus conduit for information and ideas.

## Reporting Line

The honors director or dean typically reports to the chief academic officer of the institution or appropriate designee, though institutional context may dictate variations to this approach.

- Honors should have direct access to academic affairs leadership—however such access is ultimately achieved—through regular reporting to the CAO, a leadership council, or some other means.
- In acknowledgment of the complexity of this institution-wide role, the leadership term allows for long-term planning and sustainability of the honors program or college through mechanisms like a clear reappointment process for the dean, director, or coordinator.

## Recruitment and Admission

A clearly articulated admissions philosophy and transparent admissions process reflect the larger goals and aims of the honors program or college and help identify the targeted diverse student populations. The honors program or college is directly involved in admitting students and employs a wide range of [inclusive practices](#) that ensure honors is attracting and supporting diverse student populations while also serving students from, as much as possible, all majors and programs.

- While traditional criteria like GPA and standardized test scores may be employed, written essays, interviews, and other holistic tools will help advance inclusion, access, and equity in admissions and ultimately strengthen the program.
- In recruitment and other marketing materials, honors is framed in inclusive ways so that all prospective students can see themselves represented in the program’s public image.
- Honors programs and colleges can become more inclusive by reimagining the “invitation only” pathway into honors to include an open application process where any prospective student can apply to the honors program or college.

## Retention

The honors program or college employs policies that clearly specify requirements needed for retention and satisfactory completion. Those policies acknowledge the varied needs of diverse populations of students who develop academically and socially at different rates due to a wide range of personal, environmental, socio-cultural, and systemic factors by eliminating artificial barriers for continued participation and success.

- Practices such as not setting an artificially high GPA retention requirement, establishing a year-long probationary period for students to return to that standard, and allowing students to petition to remain in honors if they see the program as still well aligned with their academic goals are three such inclusive approaches to retention.

- In communication with students who fail to achieve the retention standard, rather than employing punitive language about “being removed from” or “kicked out” of honors, the program or college should consider more neutral language like “no longer eligible to continue taking classes in honors,” for example.

### Articulation Agreements

When appropriate, two-year and four-year programs and colleges have articulation agreements by which honors graduates from two-year programs who meet previously agreed-upon requirements are accepted into four-year honors programs or colleges, which is another important method of ensuring access to honors education by diverse populations of students.

- Articulation agreements should ensure a smooth transition into the honors program or college while also integrating transfer students fully into the honors community.

### Faculty Governance

The honors program or college has a standing committee or council of faculty members that works with the dean, director, or other administrative officer (as well as with any standing honors college faculty, if applicable) on issues related to honors curriculum, governance, issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion, policy, development, and evaluation deliberations, among other activities.

- The composition of that group represents the colleges and/or departments served by honors and thus elicits support for the program or college from across the campus.
- Situating such a committee within the faculty governance system can ensure credit for service and also help institutionalize honors further in the college or university, if such a practice fits with the institutional culture.

### Student Governance

A diverse range of honors students are assured a voice in the governance and direction of the student-centered honors program or college.

- Representation can be achieved through a student committee that conducts its business with as much autonomy as possible but works in collaboration with the administration and faculty to maintain inclusive excellence in the honors program or college.
- Honors students may be included in the institutional governance system, serving on the advisory/policy committee as well as constituting the group that governs the inclusive student association. Assigning an annual budget to the student committee will ensure they are empowered to lead.

## Teaching & Learning

### Curricular Requirements

Given the wide variety of ways students now satisfy university or college curricular requirements, honors programs and colleges benefit from as much curricular flexibility as possible.

- The curriculum of the honors program or college is designed so that, when appropriate, honors students may satisfy general education requirements, complete major or disciplinary requirements, speak to issues of diversity, equity, inclusion and global understanding as well as preprofessional or professional training requirements, and participate in community-engaged learning and research.
- Honors programs and colleges offer a sufficient number of classes at a variety of days/times to ensure students have enough options to persist in the program. If programs continue to struggle to offer adequate course selection options, they should explore other modes by which students can satisfy requirements.

## Curricular Scope

Given the variety of honors colleges and programs across the world, students can connect with honors through a variety of honors options, both curricular and co-curricular.

- Some programs lean heavily on a robust curricular model where honors courses make up some, most, or all of a student's general education requirements, while others may engage students through co-curricular experiences like experiential learning, arts events, leadership training, civic engagement, etc.
- For programs containing a robust honors curriculum and/or honors college that award degrees, a target of 20-25% of a student's credit hours in honors is typical, while few fall below 15%.

## Curricular Modalities

Curricular requirements are satisfied in numerous ways, including stand-alone honors seminars (often interdisciplinary in nature), departmental honors, cross-listed classes, and [honors contracts](#).

- Whatever the method of delivery, systems exist to ensure that all honors classes are well-aligned with the mission of the honors program or college.
- Honors programs and colleges also often include multiple curricular pathways containing different levels of credit hour requirements, some of which might be tied to an honors certificate or honors degree. While some of those pathways may culminate in a thesis or capstone experience, not all will, especially at two-year institutions.

## Inclusive Pedagogies

Not only are the voices of historically minoritized and underserved populations represented in readings and other course materials, but honors faculty also employ a wide range of inclusive teaching practices reflected in course design, syllabus construction, classroom climate, learning activities, and modes of assessment, practices that acknowledge the varied experiences, identities, backgrounds, and learning differences of students.

- Honors programs and colleges support this goal by offering cultural competency training and workshops on inclusive pedagogies.

## Departmental Honors

If an institution employs departmental honors offerings, the honors program or college has some coordinating responsibility over those offerings, since those pathways may be difficult for students to navigate without such central oversight. Lack of oversight may also result in parallel honors programs—including staff redundancies and multiple honors advising arms—and confusion around what unit on campus “owns” the term “honors” or what constitutes an honors experience at the institution.

- The honors college or program collaborates with programs offering departmental honors to ensure that such classes are well aligned with the honors mission, learning outcomes, and any distinctive honors-specific pedagogies (for example, discussion-based learning).

## Laboratory for Innovation

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.

- The honors curriculum may be enhanced by colloquia, undergraduate research, independent-study options, and experiential learning components such as study abroad, service-learning, and academic conference participation, among others. These “high-impact practices” reflect the essence of honors education as “deeper, broader, and more complex.”
- Experimentation might extend beyond pedagogy to [inclusive admissions practices](#), student mentoring, and co-curricular programming, among other areas.

## Honors Faculty

Honors faculty are selected based on their preparation for and commitment to the pedagogy and curriculum of the program or college, their ability to provide intellectual leadership and mentoring for diverse students, and willingness to support the mission of honors.

Selection processes help support the hiring of faculty and professional staff who have been historically underrepresented in higher education, as noted in NCHC's [Diversity and Inclusion Statement](#). Faculty with dedicated lines in the honors program or honors college also play a significant role in program or college governance and operations.

- Like all academic units on campus, an honors program or college depends on consistent faculty staffing of its classes whenever possible, whether that takes the form of dedicated faculty lines in honors, shared faculty lines with other units, or honors “fellow” arrangements that attach disciplinary faculty to honors for a fixed amount of time. These stable staffing arrangements allow honors the autonomy to operate similarly to other units on campus and ensure pedagogical sustainability to meet the needs of students.
- When appropriate, such faculty lines are not only housed within honors, but also earn tenure from the honors program or college, according to specific requirements determined within the honors program or college.

## Global Orientation

Honors programs or colleges support the growing higher education emphasis on internationalization.

- This goal may be achieved through a three-pronged approach: increasing the number of international students through productive partnerships and collaborations; expanding opportunities for students to study abroad; and re-envisioning diverse curriculum to integrate global issues and concerns.

## Regular Assessment

The honors program or college regularly assesses and evaluates program goals and learning outcomes as articulated in the NCHC's [Definition of Honors Education](#) and modes of honors learning, and as appropriate to the institution's culture and mission, while also acknowledging that the project at the center of honors education is transforming student lives.

- If aligned with the institutional culture, the honors program or college should be included in the institution's regular program review cycle.
- The honors program or college may draw on the expertise of [NCHC's pool of trained program reviewers](#).

## Co-Curriculum

### Co-curricular Opportunities

In addition to curricular offerings and programs, honors programs and colleges provide multiple, diverse opportunities for students to participate in civic engagement, leadership, cultural programs, community service, and other extra and co-curricular activities. While expectations for student involvement in such extra and co-curricular activities vary across institutions, assuring that such opportunities play a vital role in building a community of scholars and in preparing honors students for leadership roles and professional challenges through which they will exert a positive impact on local, national, and global issues is a significant goal of honors education.

- A robust peer mentoring program ensures that new honors students are connected to the many co-curricular opportunities across campus and within the local community via experienced peers.
- Civic engagement programming offers students a chance to connect their academic work and leadership training with off-campus partners on projects that have a positive impact on the community.

## Fellowships

Honors programs and colleges prepare students for additional opportunities—during undergraduate study and beyond—available through nationally competitive fellowships and scholarships, especially students who have been historically underrepresented in higher education.

- Recognizing that honors students often make strong candidates for fellowships, the program or college collaborates with or even oversees the campus' dedicated fellowship director or office of fellowships, mentors students through the complex, competitive processes, partners with faculty across disciplines to identify appropriate honors candidates for specific opportunities, and secures institutional support from higher administration as appropriate.
- Honors programs and colleges that prepare students for nationally competitive scholarships and fellowships or graduate study actively and intentionally recruit and mentor students from diverse backgrounds in order to increase the overall number of such students receiving these types of awards, entering graduate programs, or eventually become members of the academy.

## Honors Community

One of the hallmarks of honors education is the community that emerges from a shared experience featuring intense student-to-student and mentor-to-student interaction in an engaging learning environment. While honors students establish affinity with many different groups on campus, the connection to honors is often one of the earliest because they enter the institution as part of an honors cohort and first encounter campus as a matriculated student in an honors orientation. Like student-athletes, for example, honors students self-select into a program with distinct characteristics at the start of their college careers, which strengthens bonds across the group. These features position honors as a potential hub on campus that may connect many different units – academic and co-curricular – because honors students tend to be drawn from all majors. As a result, the institution supports this community by providing adequate financial, physical, and personnel resources.

- Honors orientation programming is used to establish community early in honors students' careers but also does not take place in isolation. Such programming provides opportunities to bring different units across campus together in support of student engagement, for example in a service project serving the institution's local community or via City as Text™ programming.

## Student Professional Development

Honors programs and colleges provide professional development opportunities for students, thereby supporting a wide array of administrative tasks, raising the visibility of honors, and improving programs in ways that remain authentic to students.

- Honors student leaders may be called on to help recruit prospective students, serve on faculty and staff search committees, interact with donors, design co-curricular and social programming, and serve as peer mentors, among many other activities.

# Infrastructure & Resources

## Personnel and Budgetary Resources

The permanence and stability of an honors program or college is ensured through adequate infrastructure and resources, including an appropriate budget as well as appropriate faculty, professional staff, and administrative support when necessary.

- Honors does not depend on the good will and energy of particular faculty members or administrators for survival; instead, the program is fully institutionalized so that it can build a lasting tradition of inclusive excellence.

## Program Fees

While some honors programs or colleges may employ additional fees to participate in honors, such practices limit access and equity.

- Such programs may wish to consider scholarship waivers for low-income students and be cognizant that such fees may signal that honors spaces are more welcoming to privileged students.

## Honors Advising

In acknowledgment of their need to satisfy requirements for multiple programs, honors students receive honors-related academic advising from qualified faculty and/or professional staff. Additionally, when appropriate to the institutional culture, priority enrollment is provided to active honors students in recognition of the scheduling difficulties caused by the need to satisfy both honors and major program requirements, as is often the case with other distinctive populations like student athletes or student veterans.

- Advisors are trained in and employ inclusive-based advising strategies so that rather than serving as mere sources of information they can provide student-centered growth opportunities to a diverse body of students.

## Honors Spaces

Like all units on campus, honors programs and colleges best cultivate a distinct identity and serve their diverse populations with appropriate physical spaces. Such designated locations are especially important to honors programs and colleges because their students are drawn from majors across campus and because of the important role they often play in recruiting. As a result, the institution provides adequate, accessible, and inclusive spaces that are welcoming to all honors students, faculty, professional staff, and administration.

- One such communal space might include residential facilities—where appropriate to the institution—in which honors students are housed together and receive honors-designed curricular and co-curricular programming like Living-Learning Communities; and in the form of classroom spaces that are well-aligned with honors pedagogy (for example, seminar rooms that best serve discussion-based honors courses).
- While some honors programs may be able to establish community without dedicated space, the wide variety of opportunities detailed in the NCHC monograph [Housing Honors](#) suggest the many advantages of creating locations for members of the honors community to interact. For programs and colleges with significant commuter populations, attention is paid to creating spaces that allow such students to feel connected to campus and the honors community.

## Alumni Engagement

Because graduates often have a strong affinity for the honors program or college and its community, honors programs and colleges typically engage in robust alumni outreach through an advisory board and other mechanisms. Advisory boards may be involved in advocacy, alumni engagement, fundraising, student mentoring, and recruitment, among other activities.

- Honors advisory boards not only provide excellent opportunities to enhance engagement with honors graduates but they provide an opportunity for the institution to vet potential candidates for other alumni-related leadership opportunities like the Board of Trustees, Foundation Board, or Alumni Board.

An [abridged version](#) of NCHC's *Shared Principles and Practices* is also available.