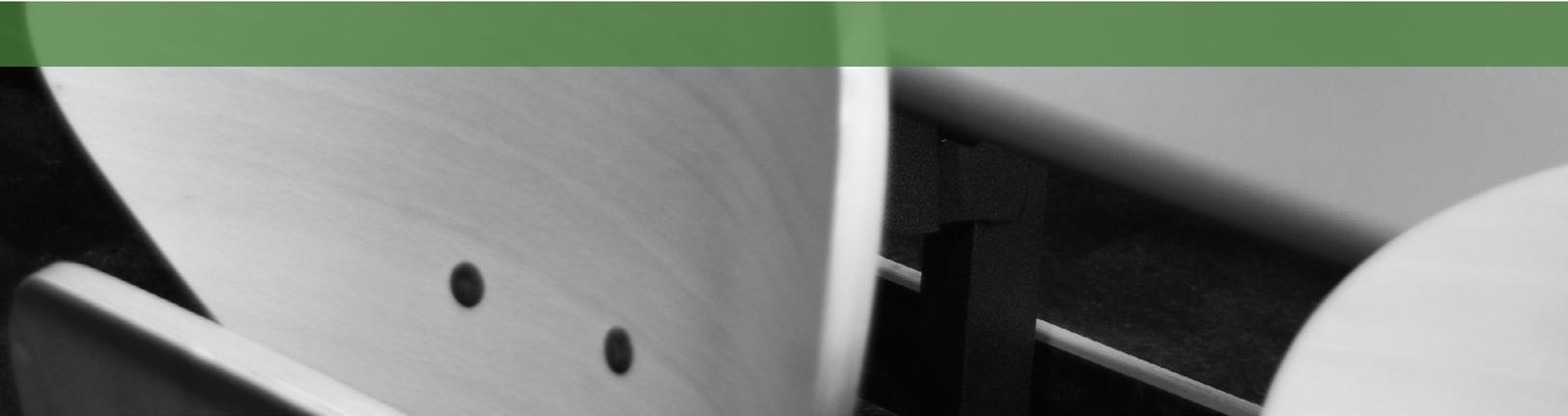




# **Honors Enrollment Management: Toward a Theory and Practice of Inclusion**



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The very title of this paper might seem contradictory. After all, don't honors programs and colleges, by definition, exclude students through selective admission and retention practices, as well as through other less overt sorting procedures? The authors of this report conclude that honors programs and colleges could better serve students and their home campuses by re-examining honors enrollment practices, many of which have historically privileged some populations of students over others.

In recent years, the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC)—an organization that represents over 800 honors programs and colleges from around the world—has directly challenged historical privileges in honors education through annual conference programming with themes such as “Just[ice] Honors (2017),” “Learning to Transgress (2018),” “Disrupting Education (2019),” and “Big Hearts, Big Minds (2020).” Keynote and plenary speakers, including Bryan Stevenson, Nikki Giovanni, Walter Kimbrough, and Jennifer Eberhardt, have addressed systemic racism, social justice issues, implicit bias, and the need for more inclusive approaches in higher education. During the past three years, NCHC Board members have conducted workshops and seminars at AAC&U meetings focused on inclusive models for honors education, while in 2017 NCHC emphasized its commitment to this work by issuing a formal, board-approved “Diversity and Inclusion Statement” as an extension of its [“Definition of Honors Education.”](#) All of these efforts, from conference programming to organizational programming to strategic planning around diversity efforts, address historical inequities in honors education and provide a new language for talking about honors. While conferences, speakers, and statements laid the groundwork, this report offers examples about how this work might be conducted at the institutional level--especially via enrollment management practices--and why it is so crucial.

While these approaches will not appeal to all, this report is intended for a broad audience of higher education administrators—presidents, provosts, enrollment management and admission officers, honors deans and directors—who might consider how honors programs and colleges can lead diversity and inclusive excellence efforts on their campuses.

Key actions that honors programs and colleges can take to engage in inclusive excellence work include:

- **FRAME HONORS IN INCLUSIVE WAYS SO THAT ALL STUDENTS CAN SEE THEMSELVES IN THE PROGRAM'S LANGUAGE**
- **MARKET AND ADVERTISE HONORS TO ALL POTENTIAL STUDENTS RATHER THAN A SELECT FEW**
- **REIMAGINE “INVITATION ONLY” PATHWAYS INTO HONORS TO INCLUDE AN OPEN APPLICATION PROCESS**
- **DEVELOP HOLISTIC HONORS ADMISSION PRACTICES THAT INCLUDE TEST OPTIONAL, TEST FLEXIBLE, OR TEST BLIND APPROACHES**
- **DEVELOP TRANSFER-IN OPTIONS THAT PROVIDE SEAMLESS TRANSITION FROM ONE PROGRAM TO ANOTHER**
- **FOSTER RELATIONSHIPS WITH COMMUNITY AND CAMPUS PARTNERS (Latinos in Action, AVID, McNair, Clemente, etc.)**
- **ELIMINATE BARRIERS TO ENTRANCE IN HONORS PROGRAMS AND COLLEGES (Application Fees, Enrollment Fees, Minimum Entrance Requirements)**
- **ELIMINATE BARRIERS TO CONTINUED PARTICIPATION IN HONORS PROGRAMS AND COLLEGES**

## Frame Honors In Inclusive Ways So That All Students Can See Themselves in the Program’s Language

Approaches to honors recruiting and admission have historically been relatively narrow and restrictive: focused on GPA and test scores, language around superiority, and emphasis on benefits or perks. Such approaches have privileged a very limited portion of a university’s potential student body. Not long ago, the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC)’s own language about honors contributed to notions of exclusion. Prior to 2014, NCHC supported this statement: “Honors programs are based on the belief that superior students profit from close contact with faculty, small courses, seminars or one-on-one instruction, course work shared with other gifted students, individual research projects, internships, foreign study, and campus or community service.” Indeed, the acceleration of honors education in the 1950s was brought about by the Inter-University Committee on the Superior Student (ICSS), whose newsletter was titled, [“The Superior Student.”](#) One finds it hard to imagine such language being used today.

NCHC has taken great strides over the past decade to change perceptions about honors education. The organization’s definition of honors and statement on diversity and inclusion have reframed honors education in ways that both capture the vast diversity of honors programs and colleges around the world and the students that these programs serve. In fact, many honors programs that are housed at institutions like two-year colleges and public regional universities have long championed access as part of their missions rather than exclusion or superiority. In recent years, NCHC has updated language used to describe students who participate in honors (or who might potentially participate in honors). Gone is the terminology of “gifted,” “superior,” or “high achievers.” In its place, the 2017 NCHC “Statement on Diversity and Inclusion” speaks of “academically motivated and high-potential learners from all communities.” Altering the language used to categorize, publicize, and describe honors creates possibilities for welcoming new and increasingly diverse populations of learners by allowing prospective students to “see” themselves as fitting within an honors community.

Views about what constitutes academic achievement (and its corresponding measures) have tended to be defined very narrowly, as they historically emphasize cognitive performance via GPA and standardized test scores at the expense

of other non-academic markers of success: resilience, emotional intelligence, growth mindsets, and curiosity to name a few. Honors programs and colleges can create more welcoming environments by focusing on noncognitive attributes or other capabilities, which have not been traditionally valued in the academy, rather than relying on the metrics of GPA and test scores. The [Honors Living-Learning Community \(HLLC\) at Rutgers University-Newark](#) provides one such example about how these new ways of thinking about honors can create more diverse and engaged students. The Rutgers-Newark HLLC openly challenges past concepts of honors education by “redefining the notion of ‘merit’ to cultivate the untapped talent of increasingly diverse new generations.” This approach and the language used by the Rutgers-Newark HLLC opens the door for students who might not have previously imagined themselves as welcome in honors. According to scholar [David Kirp](#), “the success of Rutgers’s approach confirms the value of enabling students to understand that they are full-fledged members of a caring community—that they belong.”

Changing student demographics and more diverse notions of student success require universities and their honors programs and colleges to reevaluate older markers of achievement. Recent work by demographers highlights the shrinking demand for most areas of higher education due to factors such as cost, migration patterns, and lower child-bearing rates following the Great Recession. In order for honors programs and colleges to survive, they must speak to a more diverse population of incoming future students. [Nathan D. Grawe](#) notes that by 2026, the available college-aged population will decrease by 15%, while [Jon McGee](#) argues that demographic, economic, and cultural disruptions suggest that higher education will have “more, not less, difficulty with college access and opportunity.” In geographical areas of growth, like the West and Southwest, demographers predict that the student populations that will expand most significantly are from communities historically underrepresented in higher education.

In order to fully engage in work that advances diversity and inclusive excellence goals in honors, institutions need first to examine how their honors programs and colleges speak about themselves to potential participants and how that language might create barriers to access for some students. How can students see themselves in your program? How might language centered on terms like “gifted,” “talented,” and “high achieving” exclude students who do not self-identify in those ways, particularly those who are first generation, from low income families, or who did not participate in high school gifted programs or take AP or honors classes (or even

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have access to those opportunities)? How can honors programs and colleges articulate the advantages of learner-centered, creative, and personalized education to students from diverse backgrounds? And, how can they do so in a way that allows potential students to see themselves grow and succeed within those programs?

## **Market and Advertise Honors to All Potential Students Rather Than a Select Few**

Whom do we target for honors recruitment? Whom do we leave out? Once an honors program or college shifts the language of honors to become more inclusive, it is important to ensure that that language is communicated to all student who might benefit from honors. One of the first barriers that potential students experience in regard to access to honors education, particularly when it involves first generation, low socioeconomic status (SES), or students from underserved populations, is how those programs limit the pool of students to whom they market and recruit. Quite often this process begins by using a list generated through admission purchases (or name buys) to send emails, postcards, invitations to honors events, or personalized letters to students who meet a prescribed minimum GPA and/or standardized test score. In many ways, this process closes the door for motivated and otherwise qualified students who might be able to demonstrate aptitude, resilience, and academic potential through means other than GPA or test score. When programs and colleges limit access at the very top of the funnel, they significantly diminish the likelihood of entry at other points in the recruitment cycle.

At Bowling Green State University (BGSU), students do not encounter minimum GPAs or test scores on the honors college admissions webpage. Instead, the honors college employs welcoming language that encourages any motivated student to apply. Rather than list quantitative requirements, BGSU focuses on qualitative measures. What are they looking for in an applicant? According to their [student-facing website](#), “An ideal honors student will show us their curiosity, passion, motivation, and drive. We look not only for your past accomplishments, but your future potential when joining the Honors College. Outstanding applicants to the Honors College are curious, take risks, display self-motivation and reflection throughout their application.” Instead of discouraging potential applicants who might not view their academic records as “worthy” of honors, BGSU takes a holistic approach. They state, “there is no GPA and test score which will guarantee you admission to the Honors College, but there is also no GPA and test score which will count you out.”

If honors programs or colleges adopt the type of inclusive language described above, then they might be able to broadcast that message to all potential incoming students at their institution. This outreach might include having honors appear in messaging from the Office of Admissions to all prospective students or in broad messaging alongside other enhancement or enrichment programs (offices of undergraduate research, study abroad, McNair, etc.). Honors should appear on the university’s main webpage and/or as a prominent link on the website for the Office of Admissions. Ultimately, the goal should be for all prospective students to be aware of the honors program and college on campus and how honors might enhance any motivated student’s undergraduate career.

Honors programs and colleges should also consider outreach activities in languages other than English. For example, one strategy is inviting Spanish-speaking faculty, staff, and students to participate in recruiting fairs, parent events, and high school recruitment opportunities. Another is partnering with offices on campus that conduct outreach to non-English speaking students, whether through offices of Latinx studies and student support or international student affairs. Conducting webinars, which can be attended live or asynchronously, can reach potential students, even those in different time zones. Providing promotional materials in multiple languages will ensure that the honors website is easily translatable and absent of idioms and expressions that are not easily translated into other languages.

## Reimagine “Invitation Only” Pathways into Honors to Include an Open Application Process

Another hurdle that honors programs and colleges often place before prospective students is access to the honors application itself. To be clear, we are not arguing that honors programs and colleges need to accept all applicants, although some incredibly successful programs do just that. Instead, we contend that allowing any self-motivated student to apply for admission to honors can create an inclusive environment that will attract students who might otherwise not initially see themselves in an honors program or college. Placing a link to the honors application directly on the webpage for the Office of Admissions or having the Office of Admissions include a link to honors in their communication with prospective students will expand outreach. Universities that use the Common App might consider including the honors application as a component of the university one, so that students have ready access as they apply to the institution. Perhaps, even more radical, honors programs and colleges might consider allowing prospective students to apply directly to honors before submitting their application to the university. If the honors application is separate and free, it provides an opportunity for an honors program or college to truly recruit students to the institution and serve as a front door for interested students to learn more about the institution. Of course, adopting this type of open application requires expanded communication between honors and admissions to ensure that prospective students ultimately complete their institutional applications.

Finding the honors application is not the only hurdle for some potential applicants. Many honors programs and colleges have priority deadlines for applications and decisions. For some students from low SES backgrounds or who are the first in their families to attend college, early deadlines can create their own hurdles. While a student might have applied to the institution early in the recruitment cycle, it is possible that they did not fully understand opportunities available to them at the institution until later in the decision-making process. Quite often, students in these situations wait until financial aid packages are completed before exploring additional campus opportunities. How might priority deadlines and an early end to the recruitment cycle disadvantage these students? How open is the honors program or college to recruiting or accepting applications late into the spring or even early summer (after financial aid packages are extended)? Can and honors program or college reserve financial aid or honors scholarships for students who apply later in the cycle? What opportunities do prospective students have to attend special recruitment events for honors if they apply later in the recruitment cycle?

Providing opportunities for all prospective students to apply to honors (and at various points in the recruitment cycle) can create a more inclusive environment that invites previously overlooked student populations to consider honors education as an option.

## Develop Holistic Honors Admission Practices That Include Test Optional, Test Flexible, or Test Blind Approaches

### The Current Landscape: Challenges and Opportunities

The [National Center for Fair and Open Testing](#) (FairTest) reports that more than half of all four-year colleges and universities will no longer require standardized tests for fall 2021 admission. In fact, by June of 2020, FairTest discovered that “fully 85% of the *U.S. News* ‘Top 100’ national liberal arts colleges now have ACT/SAT-optional policies in place. . . . so do 60 of the ‘[Top 100](#)’ national universities.” Challenges to testing during the global pandemic in the spring of 2020 led one author in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* to ponder, “[Will the coronavirus end the SAT?](#)” These national conversations about the efficacy and utility of standardized

testing have direct impact on honors programs and colleges across the nation. As universities [move away from standardized testing in the age of COVID](#), how will these policies impact honors, particularly those programs that have relied on standardized test scores to inform admission decisions? Furthermore, how will a shift away from test scores change a system of merit-based scholarship formulas that privilege students with high test scores? And, will senior administrators be comfortable not leaning on honors populations to enhance traditional metrics that might improve their standings in publications like the *US News* “Best College” rankings, a decision that should be increasingly easy now that test scores make up only 7.75% of a school’s overall mark?

The COVID-19 global pandemic does not deserve all the credit for recent moves away from test scores. For years, scholars and admissions officers have questioned the reliability of standardized tests to predict student success and pointed to the role of tests in exacerbating social inequality: Students from underserved populations have less access to educational resources that such tests are designed to measure and often cannot access expensive test preparation courses and materials. A [2007 paper by researchers at the University of California](#), for example, concluded, “scores on standardized admissions tests such as the SAT are much more closely correlated with students’ socioeconomic background characteristics” than aptitude or academic potential. Recently the [University of California System has taken action](#). In 2020, the UC Board of Regents approved a test optional policy through the 2023-2024 recruitment cycle. A more recent study by [Rebecca Zwick reached similar conclusions](#). She concluded that standardized test scores most closely align with socioeconomic status. None of this should be news to honors educators or readers of the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* (JNCHC). In fact, JNCHC (the flagship journal for the National Collegiate Honors Council) has published research containing similar conclusions

for more than a decade. These realities pose uncomfortable questions for honors programs and colleges: have we been depending on admissions practices that are systemically tilted in favor of students from privileged backgrounds? And, if so, how do we change those practices?

### **Possible Approaches to Honors Admission**

How do we make the admissions process more inclusive and equitable, especially given the historical dependency on test scores for admissions to honors? The 2014-15 NCHC membership survey indicated that only 65% of honors programs and colleges imposed a minimum standardized test score. Of those that did, the median minimum requirement for applying to honors was a score of 26 on the ACT or 1,200 on the SAT. Recently much of the work around inclusive admissions has centered on holistic review of applicants. Rather than focus exclusively, or even much at all, on GPA and standardized test scores, honors admission processes might consider adopting one or more of the approaches below. Honors directors and deans might benefit from familiarizing themselves with general best admission practices via the National Association of College Admissions Counseling (NACAC). In recent years, NACAC has directly confronted issues of inequity and exclusion in college admission processes. In a recent column, NACAC President [Jayne Caflin Fonash challenged college leaders](#) to dismantle systemic racism in college admission standards and procedures when she proclaimed, “NACAC condemns racism in all its forms and is dedicated to advancing efforts to address the systemic inequities and ongoing injustices within education and the nation at large.” Even more recently, and in the midst of NCHC drafting this report, [NACAC issued one of its own](#) that questioned the very role of standardized tests in admission decisions, concluding, “After we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions, we cannot simply ‘go back to normal. . . . The tenuous grasp we hold on many of our habits and policies has been further loosened and we must adapt if we are to continue to fulfill our duty to the public good.”

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As organizations, such as NACAC, advocate for the reexamination of test scores in a post-pandemic world, can honors colleges and programs serve as locations for experimentation in enrollment management? After all, honors has long been a space for pushing boundaries and being creative about the educational journey. Through this new view, honors might serve as a proving ground for academic innovation and collaboration in spite of or even in [opposition to historical institutional structures and hierarchies](#). Might the type of holistic admissions practice that some honors programs and colleges employ become models for their greater institutions?

Holistic admission often requires that committees consider noncognitive measures in determining admission criteria. One of the primary concerns around moving to a more holistic evaluation of applicants is how to scale an effort that no longer depends on easily sortable criteria like test scores and GPAs--what is one to do with 3,000 applications to an honors college? The Honors Program at the University of Wisconsin—Eau Claire cracked this nut some years ago. Starting in 2010, the program began recruiting and training between twelve and twenty faculty, staff, and senior honors program students per year to help holistically evaluate applications. In 2012, the University of Wisconsin System Board of Regents recognized the honors program with a [Regents Diversity Award](#) to acknowledge the difference that this process and the holistic review of applications made on the honors program and the university as a whole. In receiving the award, faculty fellow David Jones asked, “If you learned English after early childhood and have a 23 ACT in reading but a 31 in science, should you be disqualified from honors admissions?” Extensive review of a student’s application can help an honors program or college identify students who reflect the program’s core values, rather than merely reflect metrics once considered as benchmarks for academic achievement. After implementing these changes at the University of Wisconsin—Eau Claire, the program’s director, Jeff Vahlbusch, continued this work as Dean of the [Honors College at Appalachian State University](#). There, Vahlbusch calls on many campus partners to participate in the evaluation of honors applications, which has the secondary benefits of expanding diversity and inclusion work across campus while also positioning honors as a leader in this work.

Two-year institutions, particularly open-access colleges, run into similar concerns about having enough time to evaluate honors applications holistically in a pool that is not culled by traditional metrics. How do honors deans and directors review applications effectively when students are sometimes applying to the institution mere days before classes start, thus requiring that applications be reviewed on a rolling ba-

sis? These students’ tardiness (by traditional standards) may have everything to do with uncertainties surrounding family obligations, childcare, work schedule, or the college application process rather than lack of motivation or capability. In such situations, could honors deans and directors design their application process so that the applications are 1) easy for students to access, 2) easy for students to submit, and 3) easy for an honors dean or director to review? Perhaps a system could be implemented wherein the application comes directly to those conducting reviews as applications are submitted so that they can be reviewed on a rolling basis.

Beyond campus examples, many sources exist in the general world of admissions practices to help honors directors, deans, and admission committees develop holistic approaches to admission. As more and more universities are either eliminating test scores for general admission or adopting test optional practices, it might be helpful to examine how each of these practices influences honors admission processes.

### Test Optional Approach

In a test optional approach, students decide whether to submit a standardized test score for consideration by the admissions committee. In a [recent study by NACAC](#), researchers discovered that test optional policies lead to “increase in overall applications as well as increase in the representation of URM students (both numeric and proportionate) in the applicant pool and the freshman class.” As more and more universities move toward test optional policies, honors programs and colleges might find it difficult to require students to submit scores for honors admission. More importantly, honors programs and colleges that require submission of test scores might exclude a large population of students who opt not to take nor submit standardized tests for general college admission. In their study, [NACAC researchers](#) discovered that one quarter of students at test optional institutions did not submit scores (and this was before the pandemic). These pressures will force honors programs and colleges to develop admission processes and procedures that allow for non-submitters at test optional institutions.

It is important to note that test optional approaches to admission do not result in those students being considered for merit-based scholarship funding. James Lucindo, head of the Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice at the University of Southern California, reminds us, “[test optional policies do not act in a vacuum](#).” Lucindo suggests that simply moving

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to test optional policies will not increase diversity goals without accompanying changes to scholarship funding models. For example, in 2001, the state of West Virginia implemented a high school merit scholarship (PROMISE Scholarship) based on high school GPA and standardized test scores. While this initiative drove up the number of overall honors students at the state's flagship university, West Virginia University (WVU), it did little to increase the number of students from low-income households or those from historically underserved populations. After nearly a decade of implementation, [researchers at WVU concluded](#), "there is a direct relationship between fewer low-income students getting PROMISE and fewer low-income students being in the honors college." These trends in student merit funding extend well beyond West Virginia or honors, as [Suzanne Mettler](#) reminds us, "Over the past thirty years . . . our system of higher education has gone from facilitating upward mobility to exacerbating social inequality." Since many universities and state governments link merit-aid models to test scores and high school records, they are largely also linking that aid to students from a higher socio-economic background. By reimagining both admissions processes and honors scholarships, honors colleges and programs can be part of much larger changes.

### **Test Flexible**

Test flexible options permit students to submit standardized test scores either in part or in full to different campus units for consideration. For example, students might submit their test score in math for course placement, but withhold their test scores for both general admission and funding purposes. In this case, test flexible options provide students with the agency to submit all or part of their testing history to units where it might benefit them. For honors programs and colleges, this process might provide an opportunity for students to submit their test scores for general admission to the

university but withhold scores for admission to honors. In effect, this policy requires that admissions or scholarship committees change the weighting of application reviews based on the applicant's decision to submit or withhold test scores. While this approach does provide maximum flexibility, admission committees and application readers/raters might implicitly bias non-submitters by assuming that their scores would have been low had they submitted them.

### **Test Blind Approach**

Test blind approaches exclude test scores altogether in order to emphasize other components of the application and remove implicit bias. Consequently, emphasis can be placed on noncognitive factors, such as leadership, resilience, motivation, sense of social responsibility, or other non-quantifiable measures that might better reflect the aims of the honors program or college and the mission of the institution. Much like test optional policies, test blind practices work best when merit aid reflects the same practice.

In 2018, the [Honors College at Northern Kentucky University](#) (NKU) adopted a test blind policy for both admission and the awarding of honors scholarships. Rather than include test scores as a component of the admissions process, the NKU Honors College focused on essays meant to gauge student motivation, resilience, and social responsibility, as well as a review of a student's work, extra-curricular, and volunteer activities. Application reviewers and raters remain blinded to an applicant's test score and high school GPA. Since the NKU Honors College emphasizes self-motivation, personal growth, and community engagement, these became preferred entrance qualifications in evaluating an applicant's files. In fact, these factors contribute 75% of the admission rubric used to determine both admission and honors scholarships. In the end, each application was reviewed by an admissions counselor and an

honors-affiliated faculty member. This had the added benefit of helping to educate the office of admissions about the qualities and qualifications that the honors college sought in future applicants.

NKU is a mid-sized public regional institution with a mission to serve first-generation and low SES students. As a result of the above changes, the NKU Honors College saw a dramatic increase in those populations, as well as students from other underserved populations. Despite concerns from some that these new honors admissions practices might inhibit student success, first-year retention in honors dramatically increased for the 2018 cohort and first-year college GPA (3.5) for that cohort remained steady as compared to ten previous years of honors cohorts. In essence, students felt more connected to the honors college and decided to continue in the program while academic performance remained on par with prior years.

Implementing change to long-standing honors admission practices is difficult, and it is important to both catalogue those changes and collect data about their efficacy. Honors programs and colleges will want to keep records throughout the process about who applied, who matriculated, and who persisted in their programs in order to document the outcomes of enrollment management experimentation. These records are not always kept at the university level and, more often than not, need to become part of a culture of data collection with the honors college or program itself.

## Develop Transfer-In Options That Provide Seamless Transition from One Program to Another

Honors programs and colleges at four-year universities need to do more than simply formalize articulation agreements that rarely see the light of day. They should publicize these relationships in ways that place them on equal standing with other recruitment materials and practices. When they do, institutions must make clear the benefits and processes for students to engage and complete honors as a transfer student. As [Patrick Bahls](#) at the University of North Carolina, Asheville, argues, “The structure of the honors curriculum has a strong impact on students’ successful completion of

honors requirements. Transfer students, who typically face a shorter time to graduation and less flexibility in their focus on major coursework, are more strongly impacted than others.” Are most honors classes and opportunities targeted to students in their first two years? Does the program include honors opportunities within majors, where many transfer students will be enrolled in their shortened time at your institution? If the honors curriculum is not intentionally designed to accommodate transfer students, or even those who begin at your institution after the first year, then the honors program or college may be missing an opportunity to include post-traditional students.

[Philip Frana and Stacy Rice](#) offer some examples of how articulation agreements between two- and four-year institutions can both provide access for transfer students and create a welcoming experience for those students beyond the transfer of classes. For example, hosting honors social events that invite honors students from local or regional two-year programs can begin the process of building community even before students transfer to your institution; allocating financial aid and scholarships for honors transfer students who are often excluded from traditional form of institutional merit-aid can alleviate financial stresses and enable new transfer students to take full advantage of what honors offers, and creating a foundational “gateway” class for transfer students that seeks to achieve many of the same outcomes as first-year seminars for honors students can build a sense of community and allow transfer students to bridge their two-year and four-year experiences.

At the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), for example, the Honors College identified a gap in the transfer student experience. Consequently, they developed a transfer first-year experience program that included a course to introduce students to available resources and opportunities at the university. The class includes visits from faculty across campus who discuss their research and provide openings for potential student-mentor relationships to begin. It also required students to identify applied learning experiences and receive peer and instructor feedback on their application materials. Applied learning became a focus of the seminar based on feedback gathered from past transfer students who felt that the shortened timeline of their UMBC experience made it particularly difficult to find professional experiences outside of the classroom. The transfer seminar and transfer first-year experience help accelerated that process and facilitate collaboration.

Two-year institutions with honors programs and colleges should also be thinking about these issues. After all, cam-

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*Building an inclusive honors enrollment management approach requires much more than simply setting aside test scores. This work must take place on many different fronts and requires the help of campus and community partners.*

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pus-to-campus articulations are unlikely to materialize out of thin air. Honors deans and directors at two-year programs should determine where their graduates often transfer and work with those honors programs and colleges to communicate curricular needs and pathways. They should also try to demonstrate how their programming might ready students for work at the junior-level upon transferring. For example, if students who graduate from one two-year institution transfer most commonly to a four-year university whose honors program centers on community-based research, then the two-year honors program or college might consider working foundational skills in community-based research into its own curriculum to prepare students for this later work. Early conversations between deans and directors can yield opportunities for discussions about how four-year institutions can support transfer students, how two-year institutions can adapt their curricula to fit the needs of the four-year programs, and what partnerships are available between the institutions that can mutually benefit students, faculty, and leadership of both colleges.

Transfer shock is a well-documented experience among even top-achieving students graduating from community colleges—one often based in culture shock, rapid change, and questions around their sense of belonging on a new (and often larger) campus. The partnerships that grow out of honors articulation agreements, along with prolonged and sustained conversations, can help two-year institutions prepare students for the next leg of their academic journey while also helping four-year institutions understand where students have been and what they will need as they make this transition.

In addition to creating pathways for transfer students, options to participate in honors after matriculation are important to students who have been historically underrepresented in honors. Some first-generation students and those from lower-SES backgrounds often will not have heard of honors opportunities prior to admission. In many cases, they might not fully understand what honors has to offer and delay applying or considering honors as an option. These hesitations

can come from very real places: anxiety about adjusting to college, having to work long hours at paid work to finance their education, or not having friends who were applying to the program. Honors administrators should recognize these concerns and celebrate post-traditional pathways, rather than view them as a “lesser” experience. Programs that create such learning opportunities in authentic ways will find their honors populations richer and more diverse for those efforts.

## **Foster Relationships With Community And Campus Partners (Latinos In Action, AVID, McNair, Clemente, Etc.)**

Building an inclusive honors enrollment management approach requires much more than simply setting aside test scores. This work must take place on many different fronts and requires the help of campus and community partners. On campus, honors should intentionally partner with programs that support students from first generation cohorts, low-SES backgrounds, and other marginalized populations by having faculty and staff who lead those programs teach in honors, mentor honors students, and regularly talk about these campus opportunities with all honors students. If your campus is one of the 150+ institutions lucky enough to have a McNair Scholars program, whose focus has been on inclusive excellence since 1986 by creating pathways to PhD programs for groups historically underrepresented in doctoral studies, then honors should be collaborating with McNair on programming such as a speaker series, undergraduate research opportunities, and the mentoring of students. At [Westminster College](#) in Salt Lake City, the Assistant Director of Honors annually provides individual success coaching to each McNair student; the Director of McNair co-teaches an honors seminar entitled “Science, Power, & Diversity; and

the two programs have co-sponsored workshops by visiting scholars on issues of diversity in science. Not surprisingly, Westminster honors students are typically overrepresented in each year's McNair class.

Likewise, off-campus partners who are committed to diversifying higher education can be strong allies in this work. For the past three years, Westminster's Honors College has hosted students from a local Latinos in Action program on campus for a half day of programming: visits to classes, meetings with students, and discussions about what it means to attend college. Crucially, these activities are not formal recruiting programs but are rather opportunities that break down barriers and allow students to envision themselves in settings that have not always historically welcomed them. The dean and other personnel from the college have worked with students in their school setting on academic workshops and financial aid seminars to provide additional resources and build trust.

The [University of Maryland, Baltimore County Honors College](#) partners with the Baltimore City Public Schools System to create mentorship programming and financial aid scholarships for students who participate in these programs and matriculate to UMBC. These steps are in addition to the work that the honors college does in coordinating with the university's flagship inclusive excellence [Meyerhoff Scholars Program](#). While building internal and external partnerships to diversify the honors student body are important, [Simon Stacey \(Director\)](#) and [Jodi Kelber-Kaye \(Associate Director\)](#) of UMBC's Honors College, remind us, "Diversifying an entering class is obviously the essential first step. But it is, arguably, more important still to support the members of a newly diversified class all the way to graduation, and beyond."

## Eliminate Barriers to Entrance in Honors Programs and Colleges (Application Fees, Enrollment Fees, Minimum Entrance Requirements)

Many barriers other than test scores make it difficult for students from less-privileged backgrounds to access honors education or even imagine themselves in such a setting. In some respects, this situation is about inertia: each additional requirement--especially those involving resources--serves

to slow down the progress toward honors by students who already find themselves weighed down by other systemic challenges. Application fees to honors, on top of application fees for the general institutional application, signal that honors is "extra" and is more accommodating and accessible to those students with resources and means. Such fees should be eliminated.

Even more insidious are "participation" or "program" fees, which according to the most recent NCHC member survey, are used by 17% of honors colleges, with the average fee being \$552 per year. The median was \$425, the low was \$50, and the high was \$1,500, though in the case of that last institution, the annual honors fee has since been raised to \$2,000 a year, which means that honors supplemental fees alone would fund a large percentage of tuition at most public universities in the country. Even if such institutions claim to waive such fees or provide partial discounts, they send a message that honors is a community that is most welcoming to those with discretionary income, a place set off from the general university community.

Another barrier to entrance in honors can be the rejection letters that honors programs and colleges send to students who are not initially admitted. In order to advance the work of inclusion and admission, honors programs and colleges can take responsibility for the students that they do not admit. One approach is to word rejection letters in a way that leaves opportunities for students to matriculate into honors after attending the university. At Northern Kentucky University, for example, students do not receive "rejection letters" from the honors college. Instead, the honors college acknowledges the effort that each applicant has placed in submitting their files and gently informs them that they cannot be admitted at that time, however, the honors college offers an opening to join after matriculating to the university by noting:

We believe that you are a highly capable student and hope that you will join us at NKU in the fall. I personally invite you to visit me (the Dean) once you arrive on campus. If, after your first semester, you do well, the Honors College would like to invite you to take an honors course in the spring and seek admission as a fully enrolled honors student at that time.

The honors college at Northern Kentucky University is proactive in tracking the progress of students who applied to honors but were not admitted to the program. In fact, any student who applies and matriculates to the university, whether or not they are admitted into honors, is welcomed

to participate in honors-sponsored extracurricular activities throughout their first semester. At midterms and at the end of the semester, the honors college runs reports for those students who attended the university but were not originally admitted into honors. The college is then proactive about reaching out to those students who might have been initially “rejected” but who might benefit from honors curricula and resources in subsequent semesters.

## Eliminate Barriers to Continued Participation in Honors Programs and Colleges

Do honors programs and colleges inadvertently “tax” those students who enter these programs later in their college careers or start them with college credits previously earned from high school AP or IB classes or dual-enrollment community college classes? For more and more students seeking to cut college costs, state-funded dual credit or relatively inexpensive community college credits are highly attractive options if not actually necessary means for ensuring their college completion. As [Naomi Yavneh Klos](#), a former president of NCHC, argues, “Changing the way we invite people to honors and how we offer the initial welcome is crucial, but if our goal is to create a genuine sense of belonging, our obligations go beyond questions of recruitment to address how our programs and colleges can serve the students actually sitting in our classrooms.” In states like Tennessee and California, which offer tuition-free community college programs, students who must bear the high costs of higher education without the benefit of family support find themselves drawn to two-year institutions for their first two years of college credit—particularly

in light of the college debt crisis plaguing college students of the 21st century. As state and federal financial aid policies now penalize students for taking courses unrelated to their majors and minors, perhaps it is time to reconsider and reimagine how extra honors courses and credits might actually disadvantage students from underrepresented groups, particularly those students without the financial means to either enter four-year university programs directly after high school or extend their schooling beyond the minimum requirements in order to complete additional honors requirements.

In Linda Frost’s compelling essay, “[No Complaints, Please: Just Time to Rethink Honors](#),” she suggests that it may be time “to seriously rethink honors overall: what we are giving our students and why; who we want our students to be; what honors does for and gives to our campuses; what our *raison d’être* should be as we look to the next generation of honors.” Frost pushes us all to think about how honors might move away from credit hours and courses to focus on experiences and enrichment activities. The honors curriculum for the Honors College at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (UTC) now offers students much greater variety in the paths they may take to complete their honors requirements by capturing the students’ extracurricular internship, research, travel, service, and leadership experiences in curated independent studies, experiences that honors educators have always prized and promoted but are here augmented by structured reflections and presentations that document the students’ credit-bearing learning. Given the critical community building role that common coursework plays for incoming honors students, the UTC Honors College has developed a unique entry course not only for its freshmen, but for its transfer students, as well—most of whom enter via established articulation agreements with area community college honors programs. Given the interdisciplinary nature of this required “Innovation Lab” sequence, some students are even able to count the course among their major electives. Offer-

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*Many barriers other than test scores make it difficult for students from less-privileged backgrounds to access honors education or even imagine themselves in such a setting. In some respects, this situation is about inertia: each additional requirement--especially those involving resources--serves to slow down the progress toward honors by students who already find themselves weighed down by other systemic challenges.*

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ing honors options like these, or even [honors contracts](#) could provide more flexibility for students with existing credits or course load constraints, particularly those who are the first in their families to attend college or come from low income households. Such thinking requires innovation and creativity--the hallmarks of honors education throughout its history.

Just as inclusive approaches to honors education should eliminate barriers for applying to programs, so too should we institutionalize practices that help all honors students persist and graduate. The many honors programs and colleges that employ minimum GPAs to retain in honors and impose probationary periods before asking students to leave should question the purpose of such practices. Are these punitive processes weeding out students who might be struggling academically for reasons unrelated to academics? Could alternative measures be employed to more intentionally identify students at risk and provide them with much needed assistance and access to resources? Are these barriers to completion, which often focus on traditional metrics of student success, like GPA, leading to undue stress and compromising student mental and physical health?

As former NCHC president Richard Badenhausen explained in his [2019 presidential address](#):

we need to acknowledge that not all students arrive on campus with the same set of tools in their toolbox. Just because a new student does not possess the cultural capital that passes for currency on today's college campus and needs time to adjust to university life does not mean she should be penalized by overly restrictive or punitive academic probation standards. It makes perfect sense that those who join us from communities that are different from those typically found on a college campus might need more time and support during this transition.

Such an observation suggests that honors programs and colleges might want to lower overly ambitious GPA triggers and even ask whether there is really a problem with having students continue in honors while making Bs or Cs if the student still sees value in the learning experience. What value is there in removing a student from honors who wants to continue and could benefit from the enhanced and enriched opportunities offered by the program or college? Probationary floors are often punitive, and many honors programs and colleges set them at 3.3 or 3.5 GPA without consideration

of a student's individual circumstance. Does establishing a minimum GPA actually advance the mission of the program or college, or is it simply meant to provide a sense of academic prestige by excluding some students from reaching an arbitrary milestone?

## CONCLUSION

The authors of this report recognize the limitations of focusing on admissions and retention policies and that this report does not encompass all that needs to be done to advance the work of inclusive excellence on our campuses. Diversity, equity, access, and inclusion work demands much more. We hope that this paper will lay the groundwork for similar pieces that address hiring, staffing, and administrative structures at our programs and colleges that can contribute to greater diversity and inclusion work. If we hope for the student populations of honors programs and colleges to better reflect the diversity of this nation and beyond, then we must address systematic structures that have prevented our honors faculty and staffs to also reflect that diversity. We hope that this initial report on student enrollment practices will lead to further work and research on diversity efforts among the faculty and staffs of honors programs and colleges nationwide.

Change won't be easy. It must happen across the spectrum of all that we do in honors. If we are to be successful, then we need to be intentional. Honors programs and colleges can start with intentional diversity strategic plans that are based on university climate surveys. We should include professional development training for faculty and staff to adopt inclusive approaches to teaching and learning. We must include an examination of hiring and staffing practices in honors that seek to enhance diversity and foster more inclusive communities, as mentioned above. And, most importantly, we must be held accountable, so that we ensure that these efforts become embedded in our cultures, not just momentary initiatives.

The challenge before us is that while honors administrators and educators have acknowledged the imperatives of diversity and inclusion, it is less clear whether the practices that we employ has kept pace. We hope that this report can move some of us in the right direction regarding one aspect of our day-to-day operations.

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### CALL TO ACTION: Submit Examples of Enrollment Practices

As the National Collegiate Honors Council seeks to promote more ways for honors programs and colleges to adopt inclusive enrollment management practices, we seek your help. NCHC is developing a series of resource pages where we will share best practices from across the honors world. We hope to extend the scope of this report to include a resource page that includes specific examples of how admission, retention, and other enrollment management practices at your own honors programs or colleges are contributing to broader

diversity and inclusive excellence work, or perhaps are leading your institutions in that direction. Our goal is to collect examples and share them with the membership of NCHC, so that member institutions might consider enacting some of these approaches or reaching out to fellow colleagues for help in implementing these practices.

[Click Here to Submit Your Examples](#)

### CALL TO ACTION: A Basic Characteristic, Reconsidered

One additional goal of this report is to connect conversations about honors admission and retention policies to broader national discussions related to diversity, inclusion, equity, and access. To do so, we might also rethink the utility of NCHC's Basic Characteristics for Honors Programs and Colleges. Rather than view such characteristics as measuring rods for programmatic success or failure, could we imagine them as categories around which the organization provides tools and examples that reflect the variety of honors experiences and approaches across the country and throughout the world? The very first Basic Characteristic for a Fully Developed Honors Program includes this language:

A clearly articulated set of admission criteria (e.g., GPA, SAT score, a written essay, satisfactory progress, etc.) identifies the targeted student population served by the honors program. The program clearly specifies the requirements needed for retention and satisfactory completion.

This characteristic focuses on admission and retention criteria as exclusionary practices. In other words, the characteristic suggests that honors programs and colleges need measurable factors for either excluding or removing students from its community. But what if we turn the characteristic on its head and imagine it as starting points for conversation rather than a benchmark or "basic characteristic"? What range and variation of enrollment management practices foster different types of communities? How are each of these varied approaches valuable? What examples exist that might lead to different results, depending on the mission of a particular honors program or college? How do honors admission

and retention practices reflect enrollment management best practices in and out of honors? How does the very language of the Basic Characteristics reflect the organization's own published scholarship in this area?

For example, despite publishing nearly a decade of scholarship that questions the efficacy of test scores, NCHC has either explicitly or implicitly maintained that test scores matter. After all, SAT Score is mentioned specifically in the first Basic Characteristic. In addition, the Admissions, Retention, and Completion (ARC) survey administered to honors programs and colleges every three years, asks the following questions under the section on admissions (in fact, they are the first two questions): 1) "What was the average ACT composite score for first-year honors students in fall 2016?" and 2) "What was the average SAT composite score for first-year honors students in fall 2016?" These questions presume that programs and colleges collect that data and privilege it in their admission processes. No questions on the survey allow respondents to indicate test optional or test blind admission practices, or explore what those might mean. Furthermore, in the published summary table from the 2014-2015 ARC survey, more than half of the admissions and cohort population data is connected to standardized test scores. Whether implicit or explicit, the NCHC survey suggests that the collection of testing data is fundamental to honors admission practices, yet only 65% of the honors programs and colleges that submitted the 2014-2015 survey indicated that they had a minimum ACT or SAT for admission to their program. While the Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program do not state that test scores

are a requirement for admission, the mention of test scores within the first characteristic, alongside years of membership surveys that emphasize the reporting of test scores, suggests that the scores themselves are considered basic characteristics for honors admission.

Part of the problem is historical. The Basic Characteristics of Honors Programs and Colleges emerged from surveys that attempted to capture summary information about the practices of programs and colleges who were members of NCHC. As such, they depict a snapshot of what programs and colleges looked like at some fixed point in time: in other

words, they reflect who we were, not who we might become. They also leave little room for innovation or radical change. If we want to move honors education forward, we must be less prescriptive with our definition of the basics and imagine how our programs and colleges might better serve a changing landscape of higher education and the shifting demographics of college students. In that spirit, this report also suggests that NCHC should seriously consider the efficacy of the Basic Characteristics in light of national discussion about diversity and inclusion, as well as imagine other methods and tools for assessing the vast diversity of honors programs and colleges around the globe