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2016

### Demography of Honors: The National Landscape of Honors Education

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Scott, Richard Ira and Smith, Patricia J., "Demography of Honors: The National Landscape of Honors Education" (2016). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive*. 512.  
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# Demography of Honors: The National Landscape of Honors Education

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## INTRODUCTION

As the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) celebrates its fiftieth year, the organization has an excellent opportunity to reflect on how honors education has spread during its history. Tracking growth in the number of institutions delivering honors education outside of its membership has not been a priority for NCHC or for researchers in honors education. Most information has been anecdotal, and when researchers have mounted surveys, the results are frequently non-comprehensive, based on convenience sampling. We propose a demography of honors to fill the lacuna with systemic, reliable information.

Demographic studies describe the size, structure, and distribution of human populations, general or targeted. While the purposes of demography can be far-ranging, effective public policy requires sound data that come from demographic methodologies. Now, honors researchers would face a

monumental task if they were to identify, count, and describe the structure and distribution of all faculty members and students involved in honors education. That information would be useful, but too many honors administrators are stretched so thin that keeping tabs on the number of honors students at their own institutions is not taking place, owing in no small part to the fact that half of honors administrators have served less than three years in the position (Scott). Consequently, we are not likely to soon see a systemic demography of the people in honors education. Instead, our study focuses on the population of institutions. Specifically, we analyze the population of institutions delivering traditional undergraduate education in the United States to determine the size, structure, and distribution of honors education across institutional types.

## **GROWTH PHASES IN HONORS EDUCATION**

Data collected by NCHC's predecessor, the Inter-University Committee on the Superior Student (ICSS), shows that a growth spurt occurred between 1957 and 1962, when the number of institutions offering honors programs more than doubled from 90 to 241 (Chaszar). This growth resulted in large part from the ICSS's efforts to raise awareness of the benefits of such programs. The data also showed that more honors programs were at private than public institutions at that time. By 1965, when ICSS disbanded, 338 institutions had been identified (Asbury; Rinehart).

Few researchers studied the spread of honors programs through the 1970s–80s, most likely for two reasons. First, financial constraints led honors directors to focus on sustaining their operations, leaving little time to research issues in the broader honors community. Second, a re-emphasis in higher education on open enrollments posed challenges to academic programs with selective admission. NCHC during this period promulgated operational and financial strategies to help barely surviving programs maintain their existence. Review of publications from the 1970s shows a case being made to justify the existence of programs aimed at high-ability students in an era of egalitarian focus in higher education. In addition, Yarrison noted that most honors educators were researching their own fields of training and not honors education, stating that “too little reward [exists] within most institutions for academic work outside one's discipline to motivate even so enthusiastic a group of scholars as the NCHC membership” (5).

The only information available about growth in honors education on an annual basis comes from NCHC membership statistics, revealing a 150%

increase from 1980 to 1989 as the membership grew from 214 to 535 members (correspondence with NCHC office). The 1990s growth rate slowed to 38%, with membership growing from 490 to 677. From there, growth slowed even more, and over the next fourteen years, membership grew by only 31% to a total of 893 institutions with NCHC memberships in 2013.

Despite the slowing growth of NCHC institutional memberships in the past twenty years, we can see a different form of growth in the increased number of honors colleges. Madden identified 23 honors colleges in the early 1990s, and when Peter Sederberg surveyed honors colleges ten years later for NCHC, he had information on 68. Scott and Frana found 92 honors colleges in 2008, and NCHC's survey of institutional members in 2012 identified 140 honors colleges, representing a six-fold increase in just over two decades.

Characteristics of honors colleges differ markedly from those of honors programs according to the NCHC survey results published on the NCHC website:

Honors colleges compared to honors programs are more likely to have a full-time administrator with a twelve-month appointment who has served longer in the position; dedicated staff carrying out a variety of functions; dedicated faculty teaching honors courses, and more of those faculty; honors housing, living/learning programming and scholarships; a strategic plan, an annual report, an assessment plan, external reviews, and university-based financial audits; and academic space for honors on campus. Institutions are also more likely to expect colleges to conduct alumni affairs, raise funds, and form advisory councils for advancement. Comparing curriculum delivery, colleges are more likely to have departmental honors courses, a service requirement, internships for honors students, and honors courses with an online component. (Scott)

The NCHC survey also found differences between four-year and two-year programs: programs at four-year institutions are more likely to require a thesis while those at two-year institutions are more likely to require a service project. Additionally, interdisciplinary studies and an institution-wide delivery of honors education are more common in four-year institutions.

Empirical results from the NCHC survey seem to counter one of the most frequently occurring narratives in the honors community, that "honors is unique to each institution." One might suspect that each instance of honors education differs from every other, but data from the institution-level, at least

within the NCHC membership, instead reveal categorical patterns. Consider, for example, how honors education is organized. Regardless of location, honors programs display similar characteristics and practices, but they differ from honors colleges, which in turn share their own characteristics and practices. Also, consider institutional types. The NCHC membership survey made plain that honors education at two-year institutions, regardless of location, had similar features and that honors education at four-year institutions, no matter where they were, had similar features; however, these features differed systematically between two- and four-year institutions.

The value of a demography of honors lies in identifying inter-institutional relationships that help us understand systemic variation in honors education. As macro-organizational data sets become populated with more variables, especially descriptors of administrative and budgetary structures, curriculum delivery, and methods of operation, the empirical results could provide reliable benchmarks that help honors directors and deans gauge, and perhaps justify to their central administrations, the kinds of characteristics and operations they want and need for their local settings. Moreover, these systemic differences can and should inform professional development as well as training for honors program reviewers. Such data could supplement and provide broader context to the lived experience of longtime honors educators and the case studies they cite that have been the primary sources of information used to mentor newly appointed honors directors or train prospective program reviewers.

## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

As NCHC has begun to focus on researching the characteristics, resources, and practices of its member programs and colleges, we need to understand to what extent NCHC membership represents the entirety of honors education within the United States. The 2012 NCHC membership survey demonstrated differences in the delivery of honors education based on two-year and four-year institutional classifications, but there is no current knowledge of the extent to which honors education is being delivered at four-year versus two-year institutions nationwide in the United States, nor do we know, for four-year institutions, what differences might exist among baccalaureate, masters, and doctoral colleges and universities. During the spread of honors education in the early 1960s under the leadership of ICSS, many more honors programs were at private rather than public institutions, but we do not know whether this trend has persisted over the past half-century.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

To establish the size, structure, and distribution of honors education, we must investigate to what extent honors education is available in U.S. institutions of higher education, what types of institutions are more likely to be delivering honors education, and the degree to which NCHC membership represents the total offerings of honors education. Following are the research questions to be answered by this study:

1. How many institutions of higher education in the United States make honors education available in a centrally administered, institution-wide operation?
2. To what extent is honors education being offered at each institutional classification, including the variation between two-year and four-year institutions?
3. To what extent are public and private institutions offering honors education?
4. What types of institutions are more likely to offer honors colleges than honors programs?
5. How does honors education vary between NCHC members and non-members?

## METHODOLOGY

To answer these questions, we examined the current list of 4,664 institutions in the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) (Carnegie, 2016). Our goal was to specifically focus on not-for-profit institutions delivering a traditional undergraduate education. Consequently, we eliminated from consideration the following categories of institutions: for-profit ( $n=1,290$ ), graduate-only institutions ( $n=261$ ), institutions classified as offering special-focus curricula ( $n=479$ ), tribal institutions ( $n=35$ ), and all institutions located outside of the 50 states of the United States ( $n=49$ ), leaving 2,550 institutions. From the IPEDS classifications, we used (1) the 2015 Carnegie Basic Classification variable that categorizes institutions as associates colleges (two-year institutions) and—among four-year institutions—baccalaureate colleges, masters universities and doctoral universities; and (2) the Control of Institution variable that categorizes institutions as

private or public. IPEDS includes branch campuses of multi-campus systems only when the branch campus has its own governance unit.

To determine whether an institution offers honors education, we followed the methodology of Richard England, who proposed a nominalist approach that “defined an honors program as any program so-named online and providing information to off-campus website visitors” (73). He was only interested in honors programs that offered an experience to many different majors rather than what could be termed departmental honors programs, and we adopted the same practice in our study.

We used the Google search engine to locate website information on honors education at each of the 2,550 institutions in our population. Once we entered an institution’s website, we used its internal search functions to see whether each institution offered honors education. In the few cases where its internal search engine was poorly configured, we relied on Google to identify if the institution delivered honors education. For institutions with honors education, we next took note of whether it was called an honors program or an honors college. Finally, we read each description of the method of delivery of honors education to make sure that it was an institution-wide and centrally administered honors program or honors college, sometimes downloading pdfs or other internal documents as England did. We defined “institution-wide” as honors education being made available to all majors, eliminating institutions that restrict honors to specific departments. We defined “centrally administered” as having leadership of honors education located at the institution’s campus. As a result, we did not include eight not-for-profit institutions that affiliate with the for-profit honors education company American Honors; these eight institutions are among the total of 2,550 examined but not counted as having honors education. Finally, we consulted the 2013–14 NCHC list of institutional members, excluding for-profit companies; nonresidential colleges such as organizations that provide study abroad or internships; honors societies; and individual members. We expect to explore institutions offering honors education not covered in this article in a follow-up study.

## RESULTS

Honors education is offered at 1,503 institutions (59%) in an institution-wide, centrally administered manner, leaving 1,047 institutions that do not. Of those with honors, 182 are colleges and 1,321 are programs (12% compared to 88%). Table 1 displays information for all 2,550 institutions studied, depicting whether an institution has an honors program (column 1)

or college (column 2) or either (column 3) or neither (column 4). Among the 919 two-year institutions, 389 have either an honors program or college (42%). For the 1,631 four-year colleges and universities, 1,114 (68%) offer honors education.

Next we examined how honors programs and colleges are distributed across institutional classifications, as categorized by Carnegie classification profiles (see Table 2 and Figure 1). Of the associate (two-year) institutions with honors education, nearly all have honors programs rather than honors colleges: 378 of 389 (97%). Of the 669 baccalaureate institutions, 348 offer honors education (52%), nearly always through programs ( $n=329$ , 95%) rather than colleges ( $n=19$ , 5%). Of the 654 masters universities, more than three-quarters ( $n=506$ , 77%) have an honors program or college, with 440 (87%) having honors programs and 66 (13%) having honors colleges. Among the 308 doctoral universities, honors education is widespread, with over 84% offering honors institution-wide ( $n=260$ ). The highest percentage of honors colleges can be found at doctoral universities, where honors colleges make up a third of all honors offerings ( $n=86$ , 33%).

To identify the differences between public and private institutions offering honors education, we examined institutional control (Table 3). We learned that honors education is available in nearly 60% of institutions, regardless of institutional control. Honors *programs* are slightly more prevalent at private ( $563/1009=56\%$ ) than public colleges and universities ( $758/1541=49\%$ ); however, the majority of honors programs are present at public institutions overall ( $758/1321=57\%$ ). This finding is a contrast to five decades ago, when more honors programs were located in private institutions than in public ones. Honors *colleges* are more likely to be at public than private institutions ( $151/1541=10\%$  to  $31/1009=3\%$ ), with 83% ( $151/182$ ) of all honors colleges found at public institutions.

To determine what types of institutions are more likely to have honors colleges than honors programs, we looked at both institutional control and institutional classification of places offering honors education. Figure 2 illustrates how the 1,321 honors programs are distributed across institutional classification. The highest proportion is in masters institutions (33%), followed by associates (29%), baccalaureate (25%) and doctoral institutions (13%). Figure 3 displays a pie chart of the 182 honors colleges by institutional classification. Institutions with honors colleges are far more likely to be at doctoral universities (47%), followed by masters universities (36%), then baccalaureate (11%), and associates colleges (6%).



**TABLE 1. HONORS PRESENCE AND TYPE BY COLLAPSED INSTITUTIONAL CLASSIFICATION**

Institutional Classification	(1) Honors Program	(2) Honors College	(3) Total Honors Program or College (1+2)	(4) No Honors Program or College	Total Institutions (n=2550)
Two-year	378	11	389	530	919
Four-year	943	171	1114	517	1631
Total Presence	1321	182	1503	1047	2550

Note: Two-year institutions are all institutions whose Carnegie classification is labeled as Associates College. Four-year institutions are the total of all institutions whose Carnegie classification is labeled as Baccalaureate College, Masters University, or Doctoral University.

**TABLE 2. HONORS PRESENCE AND TYPE BY INSTITUTIONAL CLASSIFICATION**

Institutional Classification	(1) Honors Program	(2) Honors College	(3) Total Honors Program or College (1+2)	(4) No Honors Program or College	Total Institutions (n=2550)
Associates	378	11	389	530	919
Baccalaureate	329	19	348	321	669
Masters	440	66	506	148	654
Doctoral	174	86	260	48	308
Total Presence	1321	182	1503	1047	2550

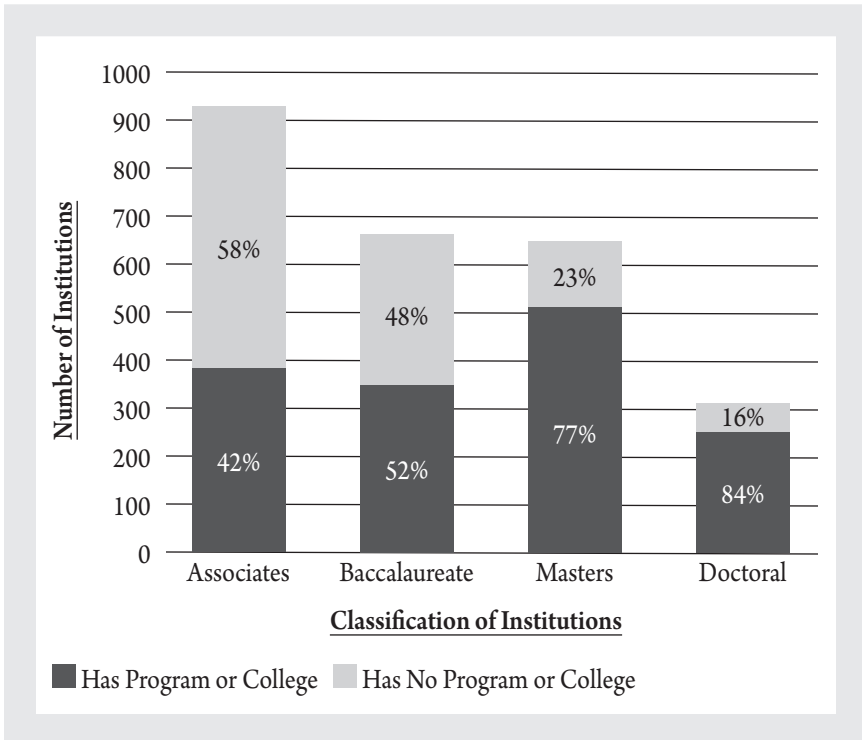
**TABLE 3. HONORS PRESENCE AND TYPE BY INSTITUTIONAL CONTROL**

Institutional Control	(1) Honors Program	(2) Honors College	(3) Honors Program or College (1+2)	(4) No Honors Program or College	Total Institutions (n=2550)
Private	563	31	594 (59%)	415 (41%)	1009
Public	758	151	909 (59%)	632 (41%)	1541
Total Presence	1321	182	1503 (59%)	1048 (41%)	2550

Figure 4 displays honors programs and colleges by categories of institutional control for all 1,503 institutions with honors education. Half are public institutions with honors programs, and nearly four in ten are private institutions with honors programs. One in ten is a public institution with an honors college, and just 2% are private institutions with honors colleges.

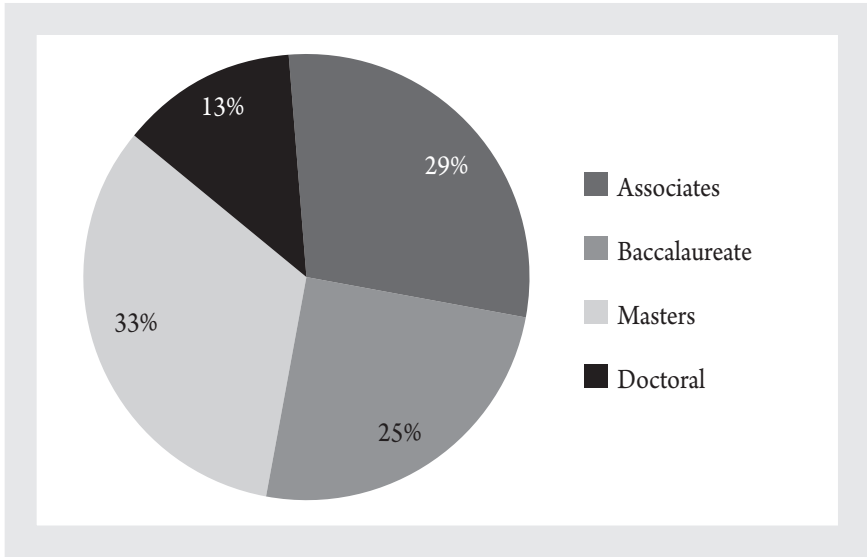
To determine differences between NCHC members and non-members, we looked at Carnegie classification and institutional control compared to type of honors delivery at the 1,503 institutions with campus-wide, centrally administered honors education in the study, and we compared these variables with their NCHC membership status. The findings, displayed in Table 4, demonstrate that NCHC members make up nearly six in ten (57%) of U.S. colleges and universities with institution-wide honors education (860 of 1,503). Four-year institutions are more likely than two-year institutions to have a membership in NCHC (61% to 46%). Among four-year colleges and universities, the highest rates of NCHC membership occur at institutions with honors colleges compared to those with honors programs (76% to 55%). The highest

**FIGURE 1. PERCENTAGE OF HONORS PROGRAMS AND COLLEGES BY INSTITUTIONAL CLASSIFICATION (N=2550)**

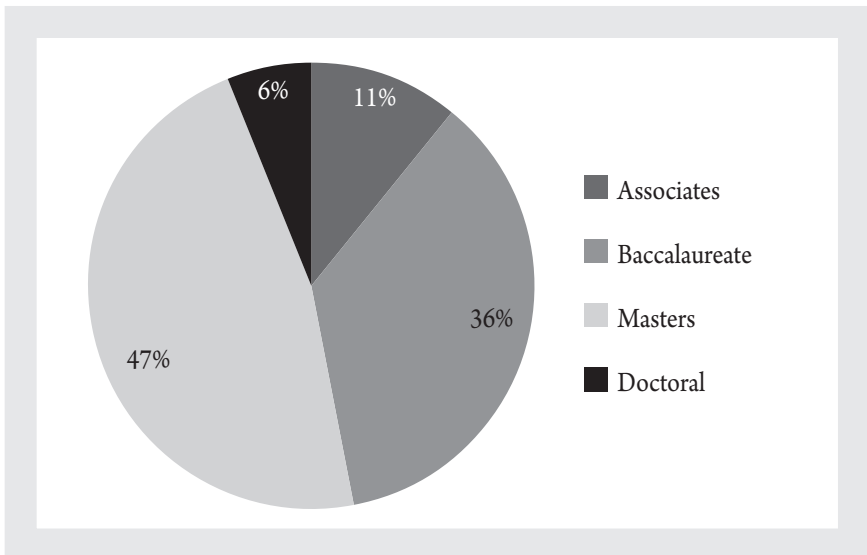


percentages of NCHC membership among institutions with either a program or college are at doctoral institutions (81%), followed by masters institutions (65%), and then by baccalaureate institutions (43%). Within each of the

**FIGURE 2. HONORS PROGRAMS BY INSTITUTIONAL CLASSIFICATION (N=1321)**



**FIGURE 3. HONORS COLLEGE BY INSTITUTIONAL CLASSIFICATION (N=182)**

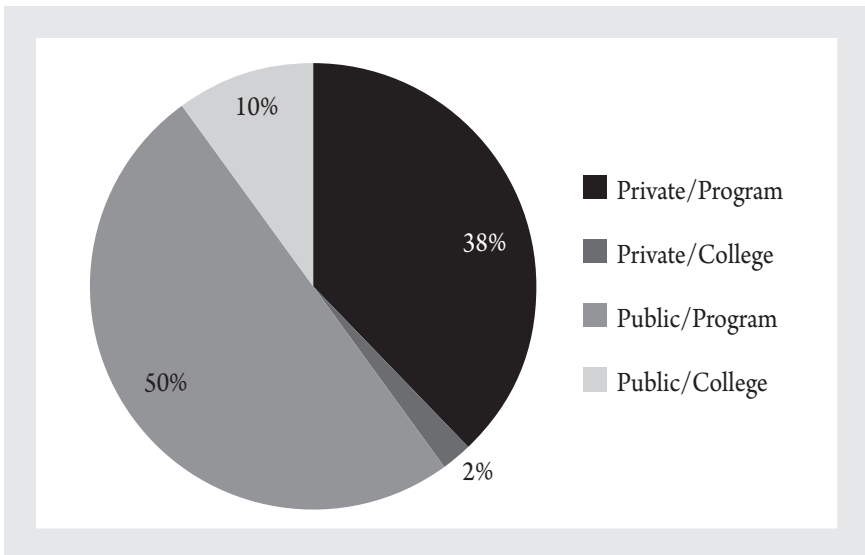


institutional classification categories of baccalaureate, masters, and doctoral, institutions with honors colleges have higher rates of NCHC membership than those with honors programs; more than three-quarters of institutions with honors colleges are affiliated with NCHC (138 of 182, 76%) compared to just over half of those with honors programs (722 of 1,321, 55%).

The interrelation of honors delivery type, Carnegie classification, and institutional control is depicted in Table 5. Among baccalaureate institutions, a higher percentage offer honors education at public than at private colleges and universities (63% to 48%), and honors education is also more readily available at public-masters than private-masters institutions but by a smaller differential (84% to 73%). Honors colleges are far more likely to be found at public-masters than private-masters institutions (19% to 4%), with the extent of honors program availability being roughly the same (69% for privates to 65% for publics). Over 62% of doctoral institutions are public, and they are much more likely to offer honors education than private-doctoral universities (95% to 67%). Honors colleges are far more likely to be in public than private doctoral institutions (41% to 6%) while the reverse is true to a lesser extent for honors programs (61% at privates versus 54% at publics).

To further demonstrate differences between NCHC members and non-members, Table 6 shows how institutional control affects distribution of honors programs and colleges by institutional classification. Overall, judging

**FIGURE 4. HONORS PROGRAMS/COLLEGES BY INSTITUTIONAL CONTROL (N=1503)**



from the total private and public sub-totals, member institutions with honors programs are evenly divided between private and public control while those with honors colleges are more likely to be public. Among non-members with honors programs, a higher percentage are at private than public institutions (45% to 36%); there is no difference by institutional control for non-members with honors colleges, each type having 3%.

## CONCLUSION

This demography of honors has described the population of institutions delivering traditional undergraduate education in the United States.

**TABLE 4. HONORS MEMBERSHIP BY HONORS TYPE AND INSTITUTIONAL CLASSIFICATION**

Institutions with Honors Presence	NCHC Members	Non-Members	Total (n=1503)
Honors Programs			
Associates	171	207	378
Four-Year Subtotal	551	392	943
Baccalaureate	138	191	329
Masters	279	161	440
Doctoral	134	40	174
Honors Program Total	722	599	1321
Honors Colleges			
Associates	6	5	11
Four-Year Subtotal	132	39	171
Baccalaureate	13	6	19
Masters	49	17	66
Doctoral	70	16	86
Honors College Total	138	44	182
Honors Programs/Colleges			
Associates	177	212	389
Four-Year Subtotal	683	431	1114
Baccalaureate	151	197	348
Masters	328	178	506
Doctoral	204	56	260
Total Honors Presence	860	643	1503

**TABLE 5. HONORS PRESENCE AND TYPE BY INSTITUTIONAL CLASSIFICATION AND CONTROL**

Institutional Classification & Control	(1) Honors Program	(2) Honors College	(3) Honors Program or College (1+2)	(4) No Honors Program or College	Total (n=2550)
<i>Associates/Two-Year Subtotal</i>	378	11	389	530	919
Private	5	0	5	23	28
Public	373	11	384	507	891
<i>Baccalaureate Subtotal</i>	329	19	348	321	669
Private	219	9	228	249	477
Public	110	10	120	72	192
<i>Masters Subtotal</i>	440	66	506	148	654
Private	268	15	283	105	388
Public	172	51	223	43	266
<i>Doctoral Subtotal</i>	174	86	260	48	308
Private	71	7	78	38	116
Public	103	79	182	10	192
<i>Four-Year Subtotal</i>	943	171	1114	517	1631
Private	558	31	589	392	981
Public	385	140	525	125	650
<b>Total</b>	<b>1321</b>	<b>182</b>	<b>1503</b>	<b>1047</b>	<b>2550</b>
Total Private	563	31	594	415	1009
Total Public	758	151	909	632	1541

TABLE 6. HONORS MEMBERSHIP BY INSTITUTIONAL CLASSIFICATION AND CONTROL

Institutions with Honors Presence	NCHC Members		Non-Members		Total (n=1503)
	Honors Programs	Honors Colleges	Honors Programs	Honors Colleges	
<i>Associates/Two-Year Subtotal</i>	171	6	207	5	389
Private	0	0	5	0	5
Public	171	6	202	5	384
<i>Baccalaureate Subtotal</i>	138	13	191	6	348
Private	94	5	125	4	228
Public	44	8	66	2	120
<i>Masters Subtotal</i>	279	49	161	17	506
Private	154	9	114	6	283
Public	125	40	47	11	223
<i>Doctoral Subtotal</i>	134	70	40	16	260
Private	44	3	27	4	78
Public	90	67	13	12	182
<i>Four-Year Subtotal</i>	551	132	392	39	1114
Private	292	17	266	14	589
Public	259	115	126	25	525
<b>Total</b>	<b>722</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>599</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>1503</b>
Total Private	292	17	271	14	599
Total Public	430	121	328	30	904



To determine the size, structure, and distribution of honors education, we examined the location of honors programs and colleges across institutional classification and control categories. Central findings are that 2,550 institutions providing traditional undergraduate education operate in the 50 states of the U.S., and of these 1,503 (59%) offer honors education. For those with honors, 1,321 (88%) have programs, and 182 (12%) have colleges. Honors education has become widely available as it approaches its hundredth year of existence, and the recent growth trend in honors colleges continues. Tracking change over time in an ongoing manner will help honors administrators as well as regional and national honors councils remain aware of important trends in honors education.

We learned that the extent of honors availability varies by type of educational institution. Far more four-year institutions have honors than two-year institutions, and among four-year colleges and universities honors is most available at doctoral institutions, then masters, and then baccalaureate. While no difference exists in honors presence between private and public institutions overall, within institutional classifications a greater proportion of public-baccalaureate and public-masters institutions offer honors education than their private counterparts. Honors colleges can be found in higher concentrations at public-masters than private-masters institutions while honors programs are evenly distributed. A far higher percentage of public-doctoral institutions offer honors education than private-doctoral institutions, with honors colleges almost universally available in public-doctoral institutions.

These results point to success in efforts begun by ICSS in the late 1950s to expand honors education from its initial home in private colleges to the public sector of higher education. Administrations of state-funded colleges and universities have been eager to attract a larger share of high-ability students, and a key draw has been the benefit of a liberal arts experience, akin to that of private institutions, which is made available through an honors program at a lower cost than attendance at a private institution.

Continuing research would help identify differences in honors practices and characteristics among institutional classifications and between private and public institutions. One presumes that institutions in each category have important operational knowledge to share within their classification grouping, pointing to a need for future research to infuse data sets like the one used in this study with greater detail about the workings of honors education at every institution.

NCHC is in a position to carry out ongoing efforts to map the landscape of honors education, surveying not only its members but also those not affiliated. Differences have clearly emerged between the two groups. While a majority of institutions with honors are NCHC members, membership is not representative of the distribution of honors education across institutional types. For example, the membership proportion is higher for four-year than two-year institutions. The highest percentages of membership can be seen in doctoral institutions, followed by masters institutions and finally by baccalaureate institutions, regardless of honors program type. Institutions offering honors colleges are more likely than those offering honors programs to hold memberships in NCHC, regardless of institutional classification, but those with honors colleges at public institutions are more likely to be NCHC members than those at private institutions. This same variation was not present for institutions with honors programs. In fact, there is very little variation in NCHC membership rates for institutions offering honors programs, regardless of whether they are private or public.

If NCHC is to grow its presence in the national honors landscape, it will need to learn why four in ten of honors-offering institutions are unaffiliated. Given that two-year colleges are the most underrepresented, we could ask whether annual membership dues are a deterrent. We might also attempt to determine whether non-affiliates have a clear understanding of the benefits of membership. If marketing research of this sort is to take place, we will need data sets like the one in this analysis to identify the non-affiliates.

The web-crawl technique used in this research can have limitations. Like Richard England, we assumed that an institution did not deliver honors education when we could not detect any reference to it on the website or through an internal or external search engine. Such assumptions can produce false negatives that could only be detected by a physical visit to a campus or by telephoning representatives of academic affairs to confirm the absence of honors education. However, since institutions use honors education to attract high-ability students, they are unlikely to omit or exclude the existence of honors from their website. Thus, limitations of this methodology are almost certainly negligible.

The demography of honors represents the first effort to document size, structure, and distribution of the entirety of honors education within the United States since the inception of NCHC fifty years ago. We next need operational information for all these institutions in order to deepen our structural

understanding of honors education and allow us to be a better advocate for its advancement. As a first step, our study sets a path for future explorations that can transform the context in which honors practitioners view their work, giving them a vantage point of the national landscape of honors education.

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