

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Journal of the National Collegiate Honors  
Council –Online Archive

National Collegiate Honors Council

---

Fall 2017


## Institutional Variability in Honors Admissions Standards, Program Support Structures, and Student Characteristics, Persistence, and Program Completion

Andrew J. Cognard-Black  
*St. Mary's College of Maryland*, [ajcognardblack@smcm.edu](mailto:ajcognardblack@smcm.edu)

Patricia J. Smith  
*University of Central Arkansas*

April L. Dove  
*Greenville Technical College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nhcjournal>

 Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), [Higher Education Administration Commons](#), and the [Liberal Studies Commons](#)

---

Cognard-Black, Andrew J.; Smith, Patricia J.; and Dove, April L., "Institutional Variability in Honors Admissions Standards, Program Support Structures, and Student Characteristics, Persistence, and Program Completion" (2017). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council –Online Archive*. 598. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nhcjournal/598>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the National Collegiate Honors Council at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council –Online Archive by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

# Institutional Variability in Honors Admissions Standards, Program Support Structures, and Student Characteristics, Persistence, and Program Completion

ANDREW J. COGNARD-BLACK

St. Mary's College of Maryland

PATRICIA J. SMITH

University of Central Arkansas

APRIL L. DOVE

Greenville Technical College

## INTRODUCTION

In the autumn of 2014, the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) launched the *Admissions, Retention, and Completion Survey* (ARC) in an attempt to collect for the first time honors program benchmarking data on important admissions, persistence, and completion metrics, data that are already widely used throughout higher education generally. The ARC survey

is part of NCHC's ongoing effort to collect such data, which began in 2012 with the first iteration of what has come to be known as the NCHC *Census*, an omnibus survey asking a wide range of questions about honors administrative practices, curricular offerings, basic staffing, and the characteristics of honors directors and deans. While these surveys do not examine honors relative to the larger institutional contexts within which honors programs are located, the data emerging from the surveys allow us to begin identifying the extent of variation among key features of honors programs. The survey results have special value to the honors administrators who serve the approximately 350,000 honors students enrolled at NCHC member institutions. Results from the 2012–13 survey revealed differences especially between honors colleges and honors programs in terms of faculty and administrative resources and in the delivery of their programs (Scott), but they also revealed a substantial degree of similarity across honors programs and colleges in the provision of specific elements of curricular programming such as undergraduate research and senior-level capstone experiences (Cognard-Black and Savage).

Data resulting from the 2012–13 NCHC survey allowed us to paint a more complete picture of honors nationally, but the final version of that survey did not include any items tapping into honors admissions practices or the measures of persistence and completion that have come to dominate discussions of higher education in the last decade. While limitations and risks are associated with restricting our discussions to measures like four- and six-year graduation rates (Humphreys) or with the very process of deciding what and how to measure and incentivize (Guzy; Portnoy), we have had little data in honors to even start such discussions. The NCHC ARC survey is one of the first large-scale attempts to begin to fill that gap.

Prior research on college admission, retention, and completion has focused on the role that individual differences in socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and gender play in student success as well as student relationships with faculty and peers (Kuh et al.). In addition, student test scores along with high school GPA and class rank are among the factors that researchers most commonly examine to identify reliable predictors of college success. Studies within honors have looked at some of these same factors on an institutional level, and several have attempted to measure the impact of honors participation on student outcomes. For example, Seifert et al. used a longitudinal approach to assess the impact of honors program participation at eighteen institutions and found positive effects on development and critical thinking as well as retention.

Other research examines student persistence beyond the first year to honors program completion and graduation. Savage, Raehsler, and Fiedor completed an empirical study using logit and probit models to examine factors that affect honors completion rates. They found that high school GPA was a better predictor of honors completion than standardized test scores, and their results indicated that a student's major may also influence the likelihood that a student will complete honors requirements (Savage et al.). These results are in line with Smith and Zagurski's findings that high school GPA had the strongest correlation with college GPA, thereby increasing the student's likelihood of continuing to meet program requirements.

These same factors, however, could contribute to overall degree completion and therefore do not provide an understanding of differences between those who complete their honors programs and those who do not. Cosgrove examined the impact of honors program participation on individual student retention and graduation by comparing the honors population to matched high-ability non-honors students and those who started in honors but did not finish. He found that students who completed their honors requirements had higher cumulative college GPAs and a shorter time to degree than their non-honors peers or students who began in honors and did not complete their honors requirements (Cosgrove). Similarly, Keller and Lacy (2013) used a matched-pairs approach comparing honors students with similarly prepared non-honors students, and they found that participation in the honors program increased both the proportion of students who persisted into the sophomore year and the proportion who graduated within six years of matriculation.

Taken together, these studies highlight the ways that student retention, honors program completion, and college graduation figure into questions about programmatic success for honors units, and they also paint a picture of the relationships among honors program participation, student success as measured by retention and completion rates, and the very admission practices that determine which students end up in honors programs to begin with. What is less well known, however, is what is typical among honors programs in rates of persistence and completion, in admission practices, and in features that might improve student success. Even less is known about the extent to which these factors vary depending on the type of institution in which an honors program is housed.

By examining data from the ARC survey for variation across different types of institutional settings, we should be able to identify common practices in honors admissions as well as the national trends in standard measures

of student persistence like second-year retention, honors program completion, and graduation rates. We do not attempt to evaluate which, if any, support structures have the greater impact on student success or to examine relationships among admissions standards, support structures, and retention; rather, we report summary statistics on the similarities and differences identified among institutional types and between honors programs and colleges. An additional purpose of our research is to examine the assumption that too much variability in honors from school to school prevents us from identifying generally accepted practices and standards (Cognard-Black and Savage). Access to the summary statistics from our data will not provide information on how each honors program is situated within its institution or how the program offerings compare to what is available on campus, but it will allow honors leaders to see how their own programs compare to what is typical, as revealed by national averages of individual survey items. In addition to admissions practices, data from this survey provide us a closer look at the students whom institutions are admitting, including gender composition and other student demographics, which we hope will allow honors deans and directors to gauge the extent to which their programs differ, if at all, from what is typical in a national sample of honors programs.

## METHODS

### Data

The NCHC *Admissions, Retention, and Completion Survey* (ARC) is the second of the three core trend surveys initiated by the National Collegiate Honors Council. The ARC was launched immediately following the 2014 NCHC annual meetings in Denver. The initial invitation to participate went out to the primary contact person at approximately 860 degree-granting NCHC institutional members on November 11, 2014. Seven follow-up reminders were sent over a four-month period between November and March, and the survey was closed at the beginning of April. In January, to encourage greater participation NCHC announced an incentive: vouchers for annual membership dues for two randomly chosen respondents. Approximately 26 percent of member institutions responded to some portion of the survey, and 22 percent followed the survey all the way to the end. While the summary statistics are based on only those institutions responding to the survey, many of the benchmark statistics exist within fairly narrow margins of error (NCHC), and they would seem to be fairly representative, especially within that subset of institutions that is most engaged in NCHC.

While a respectable 22 percent (almost 200) of member institutions responded to ARC and made it to the end of the survey, not all survey participants responded to all questions. For instance, student racial-ethnic composition statistics are based on the responses of only the 52 institutions that provided comprehensive responses to the questions for each of the categories of race-ethnicity recognized by the U.S. Department of Education in its data-gathering efforts. A likely explanation for the level of nonresponse to some items is that not all member honors programs actively and regularly collect the data in question, and some programs were unable to answer even more basic questions about the number of students in their program. Part of the problem with taking a census of program participants stems from the unusual ways some programs operate; some, for instance, do not formally admit students but count as honors students anyone who may have enrolled in a course designated as honors, making it hard to enumerate and track students. This problem can be particularly challenging at two-year institutions, where student populations are sometimes more itinerant than at four-year institutions.

Results from the ARC survey seem to suggest, however, that the problem of identifying honors students arises only in a minority of four-year programs. More common reasons for nonresponse are not keeping student data and not having access to institution-wide sources of data typically located in offices of institutional research and reporting. Finally, nonresponse may in part result from the survey's demands on time and resources.

Response rates are a perennial problem for all survey researchers, including surveys of professionals. The well-established American College President Study, conducted by the Center for Policy Research and Strategy at the American Council on Education, gets responses from only approximately half of college presidents at not-for-profit institutions (ACE CPRS 2–3), a group of people who would seem to be well-positioned within institutions to marshal resources and respond to a major survey from a prominent national organization. While the ARC survey responses are considerably lower than half, 50 percent represents an upper limit that one might reasonably expect outside of those required of colleges and universities by the U.S. Department of Education. In that context, a 22–26 percent response rate represents a fairly strong showing for honors professionals.

## **Analytic Approach**

In order to examine differences in key measures of honors admissions and persistence across organizational structures, we present averages across

two key dimensions: Carnegie classification (Indiana University Center on Postsecondary Research), which is widely used and recognized in higher education, and the distinction between honors programs and honors colleges. Respondents self-identified both broad Carnegie classification and program or college organizational structure in early items on the ARC Survey. Measurement details for Carnegie classification, honors organizational structure, and other study variables are presented in the appendix. In the analyses examining differences across Carnegie classification, we used analysis of variance (ANOVA) to identify instances where significant differences among categories existed, and for those items where a significant  $F$  test suggested that a difference or differences existed, we also conducted post-hoc tests, i.e., Tukey honest significant difference (HSD) tests, to isolate the group comparisons that contributed to a significant  $F$  test. For simplicity, we have not presented the results of post hoc tests in tables, but we use them to inform discussions about where differences are likely to occur between categories of institution. For analyses examining differences across honors organizational form, we use  $t$ -tests to identify when there may be differences between honors programs and honors colleges.

## RESULTS

In the tables that follow, we present a comparison of means for selected key measures from the ARC. Tables 1–3 present means for selected variables across four broad categories of Carnegie classification: research/doctoral universities (widely referred to as “national universities”), master’s universities (or “regional universities”), baccalaureate (or “liberal arts”) colleges, and associate’s colleges (community, technical, and other primarily two-year degree-granting institutions).

The far-right column presents results of the  $F$  tests from the analysis of variance. Results indicate a number of statistically meaningful differences within comparisons of a variety of admissions and persistence metrics. However, Tukey HSD post hoc tests revealed that most of those ANOVA results signal differences between two-year colleges and the larger category of four-year institutions. In admissions criteria, associate’s colleges are less likely to have a separate honors application essay, are likely to have lower reported ACT and GPA cutoffs for acceptance into honors, and generally have lower average ACT scores in the first-year student cohort. Associate’s colleges are less likely than four-year schools to have several honors-specific support structures—including honors housing, honors-specific advising,

honors internships, honors study abroad programs, and priority registration for honors students—and tend to have lower retention rates: a mean of 68% second-year retention compared to roughly 85% for four-year institutions.

In the three classifications of four-year institutions, however, we witness quite a bit of statistical and substantive similarity in the averages, indicating that while there may be considerable variation from institution to institution, differences in institutional mission, which Carnegie classification is designed to capture, do not appear to explain very much of that variation.

The exceptions to this general pattern of similarity among four-year institutions are the following: (1) research/doctoral universities have more honors students, an average of 972, by a factor of three or more, depending on the institution type (Table 1); (2) first-year honors students at research/doctoral universities have higher average test scores than those at baccalaureate colleges (compare mean ACT and SAT scores of 29.7 and 1,322 at research/doctorate institutions to those at master's and baccalaureate schools) (Table 1); (3) master's universities are less likely—by a factor of two or more—than research/doctoral universities to have series of invited lecturers, artists, musicians, and/or poets (Table 2); (4) research/doctoral and master's universities are much more likely to have honors-specific housing options than baccalaureate colleges (87% and 76% compared to 55%) (Table 2); (5) baccalaureate colleges have a lower percentage of men in honors than we see at research/doctoral universities, by about 8 percentage points (Table 1); and (6) baccalaureate colleges have higher overall four-year graduation rates than research/doctoral universities although research/doctoral universities seem to make up lost ground by the sixth year after matriculation (Table 3). While four-year rates of graduation having completed honors requirements also appear to be lower by about 10 percentage points for doctoral universities, that difference is not statistically significant.

Tables 4–6 present analyses for the same set of ARC measures for honors programs and honors colleges. Whereas there were a number of statistically significant findings across Carnegie classification, relatively few items are significantly different in this analysis.

On average, honors colleges are much larger than honors programs, with 2.5 times as many students (852.2) as the typical honors program (342.5) (Table 4). Other than this difference and the finding that colleges are more likely to have a separate required essay as part of the application process, there are no statistically distinguishable differences for any of the measures of admissions practices, admissions criteria, and honors student profiles. Many



**TABLE 1. COMPARISON OF MEANS FOR HONORS STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS, HONORS ADMISSIONS CRITERIA, AND HONORS STUDENT ADMISSIONS PROFILE, BY BROAD CARNEGIE CLASSIFICATION**

Item	Carnegie Classification				ANOVA	
	Associate's	Baccalaureate	Master's/ Comprehensive	Research/ Doctoral		All
<b>Demographics</b>						
Size of Honors (number of students)	332.2 (45)	150.5 (40)	318.3 (84)	972.1 (55)	451.7 (224)	$p \leq .01$
Honors Percent Men (students)	38.0 (24)	31.5 (31)	35.9 (68)	39.5 (40)	36.2 (163)	$p \leq .05$
<b>Honors Admissions Practices &amp; Criteria</b>						
Have Separate Required Application Essay (%)	40.0 (40)	71.0 (35)	67.0 (70)	65.0 (46)	62.0 (191)	$p \leq .05$
Have Required Application Writing Sample (%)	8.0 (40)	17.0 (35)	21.0 (71)	11.0 (46)	15.0 (192)	NS
Have Required Application Interview (%)	20.0 (41)	25.0 (36)	15.0 (71)	17.0 (46)	19.0 (194)	NS
Minimum ACT for First-Year Student Admission	24.0 (21)	26.8 (23)	26.3 (40)	27.2 (23)	26.1 (107)	$p \leq .01$
Minimum SAT for First-Year Student Admission	1,146.4 (14)	1,210.0 (10)	1,196.0 (27)	1,235.7 (14)	1,196.0 (65)	NS

Minimum HS GPA for First-Year Student Admission	3.36 (27)	3.54 (27)	3.46 (46)	3.52 (22)	3.47 (122)	$p \leq .01$
<b>Honors First-Year Cohort Characteristics</b>						
First-Year Cohort Mean ACT Composite	23.9 (7)	28.4 (25)	28.5 (38)	29.7 (37)	28.6 (107)	$p \leq .01$
First-Year Cohort Mean SAT Reading + Math	1,183.3 (3)	1,234.9 (9)	1,270.9 (26)	1,322.3 (24)	1,281.3 (62)	$p \leq .01$
First-Year Cohort Mean High School GPA	3.55 (9)	3.82 (26)	3.82 (41)	3.91 (33)	3.83 (109)	$p \leq .01$
First-Year Cohort Percent in Top 10% of HS Class	57.2 (5)	73.1 (11)	81.8 (20)	76.1 (19)	75.8 (55)	NS
First-Year Cohort Percent in Top 25% of HS Class	85 (4)	95.4 (11)	95.8 (21)	94.6 (17)	94.5 (53)	NS

Source: NCHC 2014–2015 Admissions, Retention, and Completion Survey

Note: Numbers in parentheses are the numbers of cases with valid data on which a given statistic is based.

**TABLE 2. COMPARISON OF MEANS FOR HONORS REQUIREMENTS AND SUPPORT STRUCTURES, BY BROAD CARNEGIE CLASSIFICATION**

Item	Carnegie Classification				ANOVA
	Associate's	Baccalaureate	Master's/ Comprehensive	Research/ Doctoral	
Have a First-Year Student Mentor Program (%)	16.0 (25)	70.0 (27)	67.0 (66)	65.0 (48)	59.0 (166) $p \leq .01$
Have an Honors Resident Assistant Program (%)	0.0 (25)	19.0 (27)	35.0 (66)	38.0 (48)	28.0 (166) $p \leq .01$
Have Honors Tutors (%)	16.0 (25)	15.0 (27)	29.0 (66)	21.0 (48)	22.0 (166) NS
Have Honors Ambassadors (%)	24.0 (25)	33.0 (27)	36.0 (66)	50.0 (48)	38.0 (166) NS
Have a Student Lecture/Performance Series (%)	36.0 (25)	30.0 (27)	21.0 (66)	23.0 (48)	25.0 (166) NS
Have a Faculty Lecture/Performance Series (%)	48.0 (25)	41.0 (27)	38.0 (66)	56.0 (48)	45.0 (166) NS
Have an Invited Lecturer/Performer Series (%)	52.0 (25)	41.0 (27)	30.0 (66)	60.0 (48)	44.0 (166) $p \leq .05$
Have an Art/Music/Poetry Series (%)	28.0 (25)	26.0 (27)	11.0 (66)	48.0 (48)	27.0 (166) $p \leq .01$

Have a Study Abroad Program (%)	20.0 (25)	63.0 (27)	59.0 (66)	65.0 (48)	55.0 (166)	$p \leq .01$
Have an Internship Program (%)	8.0 (25)	41.0 (27)	21.0 (66)	35.0 (48)	27.0 (166)	$p \leq .05$
Have Honors Housing (%)	3.0 (37)	55.0 (33)	76.0 (71)	87.0 (46)	60.0 (187)	$p \leq .01$
Have an Honors Service Requirement (%)	32.0 (38)	47.0 (34)	37.0 (71)	31.0 (48)	36.0 (191)	NS
Have Honors-Specific Advising (%)	74.0 (38)	82.0 (33)	94.0 (71)	88.0 (48)	86.0 (190)	$p \leq .05$
Have Priority Registration for Honors (%)	43.0 (37)	59.0 (34)	76.0 (71)	79.0 (48)	67.0 (190)	$p \leq .01$

Source: NCHC 2014–2015 Admissions, Retention, and Completion Survey

Note: Numbers in parentheses are the numbers of cases with valid data on which a given statistic is based.

**TABLE 3. COMPARISON OF MEANS FOR HONORS RETENTION, PROGRAM COMPLETION, AND GRADUATION RATES, BY BROAD CARNEGIE CLASSIFICATION**

Item	Carnegie Classification				ANOVA	
	Associate's <sup>a</sup>	Baccalaureate	Master's/ Comprehensive	Research/ Doctoral		All
Second-Year Retention Rate (%)	68.7 (10)	82.7 (24)	87.6 (53)	85.5 (29)	84.4 (116)	$p \leq .01$
GPA Required to Remain in Honors	3.22 (33)	3.31 (30)	3.31 (69)	3.28 (44)	3.29 (176)	NS
Four-Year Honors Graduation Rate (%)	—	49.4 (15)	52.3 (30)	40.6 (22)	47.8 (67)	NS
Six-Year Honors Graduation Rate (%)	—	50.0 (15)	58.3 (25)	50.7 (21)	53.6 (61)	NS
Four-Year Graduation Rate (%)	—	82.1 (13)	73.5 (24)	63.3 (19)	72.0 (56)	$p \leq .05$
Six-Year Graduation Rate (%)	—	87.0 (10)	85.1 (19)	83.7 (19)	85.0 (48)	NS

Source: NCHC 2014–2015 Admissions, Retention, and Completion Survey

Note: Numbers in parentheses are the numbers of cases with valid data on which a given statistic is based. Four- and six-year graduation rates include both those who completed honors requirements and graduated and those who started in honors but graduated without completing honors requirements.

<sup>a</sup> In general, four- and six-year graduation rates are used to describe institutions offering baccalaureate degrees, so such rates are not strictly comparable for associate's degree institutions. In addition, associate's degree institutions provided very few data on two- and four-year completion/graduation numbers, and so completion and graduation rates cannot be calculated for those institutions.

of the averages for programs and colleges are nearly identical: the typical percentage of males is within 1.5 percentage points for programs and colleges; minimum test scores and other admissions criteria are essentially identical; and first-year average SAT scores are within a fairly trivial 18.5 points of one another.

Table 5 presents a comparison of means for honors requirements and support structures. The evidence indicates that honors colleges are much more likely to have a number of support structures, with double-digit advantages over programs in honors tutors (38% vs. 18%), honors ambassadors (59% vs. 32%), honors-specific study abroad offerings (70% vs. 51%), honors housing options (77% vs. 56%), honors-specific advising (97% vs. 83%), and priority course registration for honors students (85% vs. 63%).

However, Table 6 shows that despite their greater likelihood of additional support structures, honors colleges do not appear to have significantly better rates of second-year retention, completion and graduation, or overall graduation. Second-year retention is about 7.1 percentage points higher at colleges, and the rates of graduation with completion of honors requirements within six years are higher by about 10 percentage points. If response rates had been better and sample sizes bigger, these differences might have shown up as significant, but, even with these two possible differences, there seems to be more similarity than difference across programs and colleges in the common measures of admissions, retention, and completion.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of the present study show that associate's colleges have less stringent admission standards, are less likely to have honors-specific support structures, and have lower persistence rates. These findings are consistent with national trends in admissions practices and persistence rates at two-year institutions generally and signal the unique challenges that affect the operation of honors at associate's colleges. The tendency for associate's colleges to operate as open-door institutions, for instance, is reflected in the comparison between test scores at associate's colleges. Applicants are encouraged to submit high school transcripts, AP scores, and/or SAT and ACT scores during the application process because they help place the student into higher-level courses, but such tests and similar credentials are not required for admission to most community, technical, and other two-year degree institutions. Students with no external placement scores are generally required to take internal placement tests to assess what courses they qualify to take, and many

**TABLE 4. COMPARISON OF MEANS FOR HONORS STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS, HONORS ADMISSIONS CRITERIA, AND HONORS STUDENT ADMISSIONS PROFILE, BY HONORS ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE**

Item	Honors Structure			f-test
	Program/Institute	College	All	
<b>Demographics</b>				
Size of Honors (number of students)	342.5 (176)	852.2 (48)	451.7 (224)	$p \leq .01$
Honors Percent Men (students)	35.9 (127)	37.4 (36)	36.2 (163)	NS
<b>Honors Admissions Practices &amp; Criteria</b>				
Have Separate Required Application Essay (%)	58.0 (151)	75.0 (40)	62.0 (191)	$p \leq .05$
Have Required Application Writing Sample (%)	14.0 (152)	20.0 (40)	15.0 (192)	NS
Have Required Application Interview (%)	18.0 (154)	20.0 (40)	19.0 (194)	NS
Minimum ACT for First-Year Student Admission	26.1 (87)	26.2 (20)	26.1 (107)	NS
Minimum SAT for First-Year Student Admission	1,196.1 (56)	1,195.6 (9)	1,196.0 (65)	NS

Minimum HS GPA for First-Year Student Admission	3.46 (99)	3.49 (23)	3.47 (122)	NS
<b>Honors First-Year Cohort Characteristics</b>				
First-Year Cohort Mean ACT Composite	28.4 (74)	29.0 (33)	28.6 (107)	NS
First-Year Cohort Mean SAT Reading + Math	1,275.4 (42)	1,293.9 (20)	1,281.3 (62)	NS
First-Year Cohort Mean High School GPA	3.81 (78)	3.85 (31)	3.83 (109)	NS
First-Year Cohort Percent in Top 10% of HS Class	77.2 (37)	73.1 (18)	75.8 (55)	NS
First-Year Cohort Percent in Top 25% of HS Class	94.7 (35)	94.2 (18)	94.5 (53)	NS

Source: NCHC 2014–2015 Admissions, Retention, and Completion Survey

Note: Numbers in parentheses are the numbers of cases with valid data on which a given statistic is based.



**TABLE 5. COMPARISON OF MEANS FOR HONORS REQUIREMENTS AND SUPPORT STRUCTURES, BY HONORS ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE**

Item	Honors Structure			t-test
	Program/ Institute	College	All	
Have a First-Year Student Mentor Program (%)	57.0 (129)	65.0 (37)	59.0 (166)	NS
Have an Honors Resident Assistant Program (%)	26.0 (129)	32.0 (37)	28.0 (166)	NS
Have Honors Tutors (%)	18.0 (129)	38.0 (37)	22.0 (166)	$p \leq .05$
Have Honors Ambassadors (%)	32.0 (129)	59.0 (37)	38.0 (166)	$p \leq .01$
Have a Student Lecture/Performance Series (%)	26.0 (129)	22.0 (37)	25.0 (166)	NS
Have a Faculty Lecture/Performance Series (%)	46.0 (129)	43.0 (37)	45.0 (166)	NS
Have an Invited Lecturer/Performer Series (%)	40.0 (129)	57.0 (37)	44.0 (166)	$p = .076$
Have an Art/Music/Poetry Series (%)	23.0 (129)	38.0 (37)	27.0 (166)	NS

Have a Study Abroad Program (%)	51.0 (129)	70.0 (37)	55.0 (166)	$p \leq .05$
Have an Internship Program (%)	23.0 (129)	38.0 (37)	27.0 (166)	$p = .107$
Have Honors Housing (%)	56.0 (148)	77.0 (39)	60.0 (187)	$p \leq .05$
Have an Honors Service Requirement (%)	36.0 (151)	35.0 (40)	36.0 (191)	NS
Have Honors-Specific Advising (%)	83.0 (151)	97.0 (39)	86.0 (190)	$p \leq .01$
Have Priority Registration for Honors (%)	63.0 (150)	85.0 (40)	67.0 (190)	$p \leq .01$

Source: NCHC 2014–2015 Admissions, Retention, and Completion Survey

Note: Numbers in parentheses are the numbers of cases with valid data on which a given statistic is based.

**TABLE 6. COMPARISON OF MEANS FOR HONORS RETENTION, PROGRAM COMPLETION, AND GRADUATION RATES, BY HONORS ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE**

Item	Honors Structure		f-test
	Program/Institute	College	
Second-Year Retention Rate (%)	82.6 (86)	89.7 (30)	84.4 (116) NS
GPA Required to Remain in Honors	3.29 (139)	3.28 (37)	3.29 (176) NS
Four-Year Honors Graduation Rate (%)	47.4 (47)	48.9 (20)	47.8 (67) NS
Six-Year Honors Graduation Rate (%)	50.4 (42)	60.8 (19)	53.6 (61) NS
Four-Year Graduation Rate (%)	73.0 (41)	69.3 (15)	72.0 (56) NS
Six-Year Graduation Rate (%)	83.6 (33)	88.0 (15)	85.0 (48) NS

Source: NCHC 2014–2015 Admissions, Retention, and Completion Survey

Note: Numbers in parentheses are the numbers of cases with valid data on which a given statistic is based. Four- and six-year graduation rates include both those who completed honors requirements and graduated and those who started in honors but graduated without completing honors requirements.

are required to take developmental courses before continuing to courses required for degree programs.

Two-year colleges tend to serve students with a variety of socioeconomic challenges who come to college less prepared out of high school or who are returning to college to learn new vocational skills after many years out of school. These socioeconomic factors produce differences in honors admissions practices, making them less likely than four-year institutions to require an honors-specific application, additional application essays, and minimum test scores. Honors programs at associate's colleges typically operate with more relaxed admissions standards in order to best serve the needs of their student body and the economic needs of their local community while at the same time identifying students with the highest academic potential from among the population being served and providing them with enhanced educational experiences that help fulfill that potential.

Additional challenges that associate's colleges face include the lack of honors-related support structures and low persistence rates. Associate's colleges are less likely than four-year colleges to offer priority registration, designated campus housing, study abroad programs, or internship opportunities. On-campus housing is rare at two-year institutions since most students commute. Since honors programs at two-year institutions typically receive little if any institutional funding, offering honors-specific study abroad programs and internship opportunities is often infeasible.

The lower persistence rates of honors students at associate's colleges compared to four-year institutions may result in part from the fact that many of their students attend not to complete an associate's degree but to earn credits before transferring to a four-year institution; this has a large impact on measures of persistence, especially among students enrolled in honors programs. While such students may well be persisting in their pursuit of a degree, the two-year schools that facilitate such students suffer from artificially lowered persistence rates as they struggle with appropriate ways to track students who transfer to a university. Also, the many socioeconomic challenges that students face, including greater work and home responsibilities than four-year college students usually have, make them more likely to attend intermittently, enrolling one semester and not the next. Future research could help clarify whether honors programs at associate's colleges have higher persistence rates than the colleges in which they are housed.

Results for four-year institutions show much less variation in institutional characteristics than one might expect. We did find that honors programs at

research/doctoral universities are larger, and while institutional sizes were not collected in this survey, they are probably also larger, resulting in the higher number of honors students. We also found that honors programs at research/doctoral universities have higher standardized test scores at the time of admission, which again might be consistent with what we know of admission standards at these institutions overall.

Given the economies of scale, research/doctoral universities and associate's colleges are most likely to sponsor invited lecturers, artists, musicians, and poets. More than half of the honors programs at all four-year institutional types offer student mentor programs, study abroad programs, honors housing, and priority registration. The most common type of support across institutional type, including associate's colleges, is honors-specific advising.

Few differences between honors programs and colleges appeared among admissions requirements. While honors colleges tended to have larger enrollments and were more likely to have a separate required essay as part of the application process, there were no statistically distinguishable differences for any of the other measures of admissions practices and criteria. The differences in services and opportunities provided to students were more substantial: honors colleges were more likely than programs to have honors tutors, honors ambassadors, honors-specific study abroad opportunities, honors housing options, honors-specific advising, and priority course registration. Despite their greater likelihood of additional support structures, however, honors colleges did not appear to have significantly better second-year retention rates, honors completion and graduation rates, or overall graduation rates. An important area for future research would be a national study of the extent to which retention and completion rates in honors improves on overall institutional rates of retention and completion. By matching NCHC data for honors with institution-level data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System of the U.S. Department of Education, we may gain a better understanding of whether, and how much, honors experience helps to keep students on campus and encourages them toward degree completion. Such information would help paint a clearer picture of the impact that honors programs have on overall student persistence.

## REFERENCES

ACE Center for Policy Research and Strategy. 2017. *American College President Study: 2017*. Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education.

- Cognard-Black, Andrew J., and Hallie Savage. 2016. "Variability and Similarity in Honors Curricula across Institution Size and Type." *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* 17(1): 93–113.
- Cosgrove, John R. 2004. "The Impact of Honors Programs on Undergraduate Academic Performance, Retention, and Graduation." *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* 5(2): 45–53.
- Guzy, Annmarie. 2013. "The Confidence Game in Honors Admissions and Retention." *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* 14(2): 41–45.
- Humphreys, Debra. 2012. "What's Wrong with the Completion Agenda." *Liberal Education* 98(1): 8–17. Accessed 1 Sept. 2017. <<http://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/whats-wrong-completion-agenda%E2%80%94and-what-we-can-do-about-it>>.
- Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research. ND. "The Carnegie Classification of Institutions." <<http://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/index.php>>.
- Keller, Robert R., and Michael G. Lacy. 2013. "Propensity Score Analysis of an Honors Program's Contribution to Students' Retention and Graduation Outcomes." *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* 14(2): 73–84.
- Kuh, George, John Schuh, and Elizabeth Whitt. 1991. *Involving Colleges: Successful Approaches to Fostering Student Learning and Development Outside the Classroom*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- National Collegiate Honors Council. ND. "Descriptive Statistics for Selected Variables from the 2014–2015 NCHC Admissions, Retention, and Completion Survey of Member Institutions." <[https://c.ymcdn.com/sites/nchc.site-ym.com/resource/resmgr/research/ARC\\_Summary\\_Table\\_of\\_Selecte.pdf](https://c.ymcdn.com/sites/nchc.site-ym.com/resource/resmgr/research/ARC_Summary_Table_of_Selecte.pdf)>.
- Portnoy, Jeffrey A. 2013. "An Honors Koan: Selling Water by the River." *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* 14(2): 47–51.
- Savage, Hallie, Rod D. Raehsler, and Joseph Fiedor. 2014. "An Empirical Analysis of Factors Affecting Honors Program Completion Rates." *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* 15(1): 115–28.

- Scott, Richard. 2013. "President's Column." National Collegiate Honors Council Newsletter Special Edition. Accessed 1 Sept. 2017. <<http://cymcdn.com/sites/nchc.site-ym.com/resource/resmgr/research/Scott-2013-Newsletter.pdf>>.
- Seifert, Tricia A., Ernest T. Pascarella, Nicholas Colangelo, and Susan G. Assouline. 2007. "The Effects of Honors Program Participation on Experiences of Good Practices and Learning Outcomes." *Journal of College Student Development* 48(1): 57–74.
- Smith, Patricia Joanne, and John Thomas Vitus Zagurski. 2013. "Improving Retention and Fit by Honing an Honors Admissions Model." *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* 14(2): 55–71.
- Tukey, John W. 1949. "Comparing Individual Means in the Analysis of Variance." *Biometrics* 5(2): 99–114.

---

The authors may be contacted at  
[ajcognardblack@smcm.edu](mailto:ajcognardblack@smcm.edu).

**APPENDIX**  
**Description of Study Variables**

Item	Level of Measurement	Description/Response Options
<b>Institutional Characteristics</b>		
Type of Institution	Nominal	(1) Research/Doctoral University; (2) Master's University; (3) Baccalaureate College; (4) Associate's College
Honors Organization Type	Nominal	(1) Honors College; (2) Honors Program
<b>Demographics</b>		
Size of Honors	Ratio	Response to a question asking, "How many students were in your honors unit in fall 2013?"
Honors Percent Men	Ratio	The percentage of honors students who are men, calculated from separate items asking the number of honors students who are men, women, or transgender
<b>Honors Admissions Practices &amp; Criteria</b>		
Have Separate Required Application Essay	Nominal	Yes/No response to a question asking, "Is there an honors-specific application essay required as part of the admissions procedure?"
Have Required Application Writing Sample	Nominal	Yes/No response to a question asking, "Is there a writing sample other than an application essay required as part of the admissions procedure?"
Have Required Application Interview	Nominal	Yes/No response to a question asking, "Is there an interview required as part of the admissions procedure?"



Item	Level of Measurement	Description/Response Options
Minimum ACT for First-Year Student Admission	Ratio	Response to a question asking, "Please indicate the minimum score for each of the tests that you have established as a criterion for admission to honors" and specifying the ACT composite test score
Minimum SAT for First-Year Student Admission	Ratio	Response to a question asking, "Please indicate the minimum score for each of the tests that you have established as a criterion for admission to honors" and specifying the combined SAT test score
Minimum HS GPA for First-Year Student Admission	Ratio	Response to a question asking, "Please indicate the minimum high school GPA for admission to honors (4.0 scale)."
<b>Honors First-Year Cohort Characteristics</b>		
First-Year Cohort Mean ACT Composite	Ratio	Response to a question asking, "What was the average ACT composite score for first-year honors students in fall 2013?"
First-Year Cohort Mean SAT Reading + Math	Ratio	Response to a question asking, "What was the average SAT composite score for first-year honors students in fall 2013?"
First-Year Cohort Mean High School GPA	Ratio	Response to a question asking, "What was the average high school GPA for first-year honors students in fall 2013?"
First-Year Cohort Percent in Top 10% of HS Class	Ratio	Response to a question asking, "Of the incoming first-year honors students, what percent were in the top tenth (10 percent) of their high school graduating class?"
First-Year Cohort Percent in Top 25% of HS Class	Ratio	Response to a question asking, "Of the incoming first-year honors students, what percent were in the top quarter (25 percent) of their high school graduating class?"

<b>Honors Requirements and Support Structures</b>		
Have a First-Year Student Mentor Program?	Nominal	Yes/No
Have an Honors Resident Assistant Program?	Nominal	Yes/No
Have Honors Tutors?	Nominal	Yes/No
Have Honors Ambassadors?	Nominal	Yes/No
Have a Student Lecture/Performance Series?	Nominal	Yes/No
Have a Faculty Lecture/Performance Series?	Nominal	Yes/No
Have an Invited Lecturer/Performer Series?	Nominal	Yes/No
Have an Art/Music/Poetry Series?	Nominal	Yes/No
Have a Study Abroad Program?	Nominal	Yes/No
Have an Internship Program?	Nominal	Yes/No
Have Honors Housing?	Nominal	Yes/No
Have an Honors Service Requirement?	Nominal	Yes/No
Have Honors-Specific Advising?	Nominal	Yes/No
Have Priority Registration for Honors?	Nominal	Yes/No
<b>Honors Retention, Program Completion, and Graduation Rates</b>		
Second-Year Retention Rate	Ratio	Percentage of degree-seeking matriculants entering the institution in fall term as honors students and still enrolled and persisting as honors students in the following fall term
GPA Required to Remain in Honors	Ratio	Response to question asking, "What, if any, is the minimum GPA students must maintain to remain in honors?"

Item	Level of Measurement	Description/Response Options
Four-Year Honors Graduation Rate	Ratio	Percentage of matriculants entering institution as degree-seeking honors first-year students and graduating within four years having completed honors requirements (four-year colleges and universities only)
Six-Year Honors Graduation Rate	Ratio	Percentage of matriculants entering institution as degree-seeking honors first-year students and graduating within six years having completed honors requirements (four-year colleges and universities only)
Four-Year Graduation Rate	Ratio	Percentage of matriculants entering institution as degree-seeking honors first-year students and graduating within four years without necessarily having completed honors requirements (four-year colleges and universities only)
Six-Year Graduation Rate	Ratio	Percentage of matriculants entering institution as degree-seeking honors first-year students and graduating within six years without necessarily having completed honors requirements (four-year colleges and universities only)

Note: Items come from the NCHC 2014–2015 Admissions, Retention, and Completion Survey.