Definition of Honors Education
NCHC Board of Directors (November 6, 2013)

A. Definition of Honors Education

The National Collegiate Honors Council recognizes an honors college, program, institute, or equivalent descriptor, as the academic unit on a collegiate campus responsible for devising and delivering in-class and extracurricular academic experiences that provide a distinctive learning environment for selected students. The honors college or program provides opportunities for measurably broader, deeper, and more complex learning-centered and learner-directed experiences for its students than are available elsewhere in the institution; these opportunities are appropriately tailored to fit the institution's culture and mission and frequently occur within a close community of students and faculty. In most cases, the honors community is composed of carefully selected teachers and students who form a cross- or multi-disciplinary cohort dedicated to achieving exceptional learning and personal standards. The National Collegiate Honors Council recognizes "departmental honors" as educational experiences that are similar but restricted to cohorts of students pursuing the same field of academic study.

B. Modes of Honors Learning

The following descriptions of honors learning are intended to complement and supplement the "Definition of Honors Education." The definition is deliberately general in order to encompass a wide range of successful honors programs and colleges without trying to establish one model of honors as more valid than another; it is, in short, an overarching concept of the varieties of honors experience.

The "Modes of Learning" section makes no attempt to catalog the way that honors is constructed at various institutions or to say that any particular element of a program or set of characteristics is fundamental, nor does it attempt to encompass all valuable components of an honors program or college.

The modes suggested here are neither ranked nor mutually exclusive; it would be unusual to find a model that included only one of them. Associated with the modes are definable skill sets that are regarded as especially valuable in honors learning. Honors courses foster student development or transformation in some or all of the following measurable outcomes: problem-solving, often with creative approaches; critical reading; clear, persuasive writing; oral presentation; critical thinking; forming judgments based on evidence; artistic literacy; articulated metacognition; and spiritual growth.

The modes of learning described below include various special approaches. Not all approaches are included; in some programs, for example, accelerated forms of learning are closely associated with honors, usually entailing either advanced placement in tiered or stepped curricula or intensive work to cover more of the curriculum faster. Also, some of the categories overlap: undergraduate research, for instance, is the focus of "Research and Creative Scholarship" and "Breadth / Enduring Questions."

Research and Creative Scholarship ("learning in depth")
- Curricula are characterized by highly focused, often discipline-oriented learning experiences: an emphasis on research writing in the humanities and social sciences, including data analysis in the social sciences, and on experimentation, measurement, data analysis, and interpretation in the natural sciences.
- Programs are often departmentally driven, based, or focused; "departmental honors" is a term that often appears. Courses tend to be created within existing departments, with honors components supplementing regular work. The goal is specialized, in-depth learning in addition to self-reflective, analytical, and creative activity.
- The products are often documented scholarship that leads to new integrations, new knowledge, or new understandings of creative products; students pursue a track into post-graduate study, technical careers, or professional careers outside academe, such as telecommunications or theatre.

Breadth and Enduring Questions ("multi- or interdisciplinary learning")
- Curricula are characterized largely by core-curriculum honors courses, often with seminars that provide greater depth (not necessarily disciplinary depth).
- Programs confront students with alternative modes of inquiry, exploration, discovery, tolerance of ambiguity, and enduring questions. Coursework often requires integrative learning: both local and global learning with connections across time, genre, and disciplines, not always in classroom situations.
- The products often involve creative integrations of evidence from several disciplines with an aggressive emphasis on interdisciplinarity. Assessment of the products emphasizes process rather than product, focusing on metacognitive questions such as "how do you know?" Students are encouraged to dig deep without a prescribed result.

Service Learning and Leadership
- The major emphasis is community engagement: often a single project or a series of collaborative projects that address real-world problems and through which students acquire practical experience and skills that lead to engaged citizenship. Some opportunities are offered for credit, some not.
- Curricula are frequently decentralized or selected from a menu of departmental honors courses. Students may also earn credit for philanthropic or humanitarian service off-campus. This structure may operate at some smaller institutions that emphasize the humanities and social sciences.

Experiential Learning
- Curricula typically emphasize exploration and/or discovery rather than acquisition of specific knowledge sets; a focus on hands-on, usually supervised, practical engagement with usable outcomes can also occur.
- Programs focus on student-driven learning projects facilitated by faculty who provide no necessary, single conclusion to be drawn by all or many students. Programs often include international experience and active learning.

- The process often involves continuous reflective writing and oral presentation as the students articulate their discoveries and document their personal growth; this process may apply to all other modes described here.

Learning Communities
- Curricula emphasize an identified cohort of students living and/or working in close quarters and heavily engaged in campus and/or residence-centered activity with a strong integration of academic, social, and/or service activities.
- Programs foster a culture of thinking, growing, and inquiring within the living environment.
- Outcomes include connecting members to one another for the pursuit of common goals through interdependence and mutual obligation; respectful inclusiveness of economic, religious, cultural, ethnic, social, and other differences; and common inquiry in which members collaborate on solutions to common problems.

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