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The Current Status, Perceptions, and Impact of Honors Program Review

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Abstract: While the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) supports routine, systematic program review, research suggests that only about half of honors programs engage in some form of assessment. This study examines the current state of honors program evaluation by gauging honors administrators' perceptions of program review and assessing the impact of the NCHC's review process on those programs that have employed it. A census of all NCHC honors directors was taken using questionnaires. Fifteen percent ($n = 121$) completed the census, with results suggesting substantial increases (87–91%) in program assessment from 2011 and a majority of respondents (87%) describing the review process as beneficial. Survey participants also indicated challenges in evaluation, with 60% of directors naming specific problems and concerns. Interviews ($n = 5$) with honors directors who have completed an NCHC program review further attested to the benefits of NCHC review, pointing to critical improvements and positive outcomes for honors programs.

Keywords: administration of educational programs; higher education; educational accreditation; National Collegiate Honors Council

BACKGROUND

The NCHC has long advocated for honors program review. Its predecessor, the Inter-University Committee on the Superior Student (ICSS), began promoting honors program evaluation shortly after its inception in 1957. Heist and Langland (1966) noted that these early evaluation efforts, though a step in the right direction, were primarily “subjective and non-scientific” (p. 257) and “rarely extended beyond assignment of grades for

performance” (p. 254). Heist and Langland (1966) maintained that more comprehensive, systematic, and reliable evaluation needed to occur and that honors programs had to assess certain components, such as honors participants, faculty, curriculum, course objectives, and the cost of achieving their stated goals. Decades passed, and in 1981 the NCHC published its first handbook on conducting periodic honors program evaluations. In 1997, during the first institute on honors education, the NCHC Evaluation Committee introduced the ideas of program self-study and external review, two hallmarks of objectives- and expertise-oriented evaluation. Following this institute, the NCHC continued to develop its evaluation measures. In 2005, the NCHC replaced its first handbook with a more comprehensive evaluation guide, entitled *Assessing and Evaluating Honors Programs and Honors Colleges: A Practical Handbook*. This handbook moved from simply encouraging periodic evaluation to promoting ongoing assessment and evaluation (Otero & Spurrier, 2005).

Otero and Spurrier define assessment and evaluation as separate yet complementary practices. Assessment is defined explicitly as “data-gathering strategies, analyses, and reporting processes that provide information that can be used to determine whether or not intended outcomes are being achieved” (Otero & Spurrier, 2005, p. 6). Evaluation is defined as “examining information about many components of the program or college being evaluated and making judgments about its worth and effectiveness” (p. 5). Otero and Spurrier (2005) explain that assessment data are used to support programmatic decision-making in the evaluation process. They note that, to be effective, assessment of an honors program must first identify the outcomes it seeks as expressed in its program objectives. Then, the program must gather evidence to determine whether it is meeting these outcomes. Finally, based on this evidence, the program must implement any needed changes.

Otero and Spurrier suggest that, together, the processes of “evaluation and assessment provide an opportunity for Honors Programs and Honors Colleges to demonstrate their strengths, address their weaknesses, generate institutional support, and gain outside validation of their accomplishments and goals” (Otero & Spurrier, 2005, p. 5). In 2011, the Assessment and Evaluation Committee issued a report to supplement the original handbook and its alignment with the NCHC’s seventeen recommended characteristics of a fully developed honors program. This supplement simply advocated more strongly for the collection and interpretation of measurable data (Otero et al., 2011).

In 2013, the NCHC posted a new systematic guide for conducting honors program evaluation and made a concerted effort to bring it “in-house,” so that data on program review could be formally collected and analyzed by the NCHC Research Committee. The review process outlined in this new guide begins with an honors program self-study, which is guided by a rubric that examines nine domains aligned with the NCHC’s seventeen characteristics of a fully developed honors program. These nine domains include Honors Mission, Strategic Plan, and Assessment; Enrollment Management and Scholarships; Administrative Structures; Curriculum; Infrastructure; Faculty Governance; Student Services and Co-Curricular Programs; Excellence and Innovation; and Honors College Specifics (National Collegiate Honors Council, 2013). Following this self-study is a site visit by external reviewers, who are trained by the NCHC’s Assessment and Evaluation Committee in best practices and nuances of honors administration. The review concludes with the external reviewers presenting a summative report and set of recommendations to the honors directors. Grounded in both objectives- and expertise-oriented evaluation approaches, the NCHC honors program review process provides honors administrators with a tool that can help them produce an honest assessment of their outcomes and support their calls for ongoing institutional support.

Though the NCHC supports routine, systematic honors program review, research by Driscoll (2011) indicates that only about half of honors programs engage in evaluation efforts. Without intentional review, Otero and Spurrier (2005) maintain that honors programs will be unable to assess their outcomes honestly and will increase their risk of losing institutional funding and support. Since the NCHC program review process was brought in-house fairly recently—with the first official reviews occurring in 2016—research regarding its degree of effectiveness is limited. Proponents of honors program review also face criticism from skeptics who allege that systematic program evaluation is too quantitative and is at odds with values central to honors, such as creativity and innovation (Digby, 2014; Snyder & Carnicom, 2011). Ultimately, if the NCHC is to inspire greater engagement in ongoing honors review, research into the current status, perceptions, impact, and value of honors assessment and evaluation needs to occur.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study sought to examine the current state of honors evaluation within the NCHC, to gauge honors administrators’ perceptions of program

review, and to assess the impact that the NCHC program review process has had on those programs that have employed it. The goal was to gain greater insight into the benefits and impediments of honors program evaluation and to make research-based recommendations for improving current practices.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions guided this study:

1. Are any elements, consistent with the NCHC honors program review rubric, being assessed regularly by honors programs?
2. How do honors administrators perceive the benefits and obstacles of the program review process, from the NCHC perspective or their own institutional assessment practices?
3. What impact did the NCHC program review process have on programs that completed a review?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach. To respond to the first and second research questions, I conducted a census of all NCHC honors programs/colleges via a questionnaire that I created and distributed electronically through the NCHC email listserv. This questionnaire, which is available in Appendix A, examines how frequently honors programs evaluate programmatic elements consistent with the NCHC evaluation rubric as well as honors directors' perceptions of evaluation. The NCHC Research Committee sent an email soliciting participants in the summer of 2018. The questionnaire remained open for one month. Following this period, I analyzed the responses and used descriptive statistics to summarize them.

To respond to question three, I created one open-ended item on the questionnaire that addresses the impact of the NCHC program review process. I analyzed the responses to this question and established overarching themes. In addition, I conducted in-depth interviews with honors directors who have gone through the NCHC program review process. To recruit interview participants, the NCHC sent an email to all programs that have undergone an NCHC program review. Since the formal implementation of the NCHC review process in 2016, nineteen programs have undergone an evaluation. Of those honors directors who expressed interest in participating in the study, I selected five interviewees from institutions that constitute a wide range of

demographic characteristics to enhance the transferability of the data collected (Lichtman, 2013). Table 1 presents a summary of the demographic characteristics of the interviewees.

A list of interview questions, which focus on the impact of the NCHC review process and align with the nine domains of the NCHC program review rubric, can be found in Appendix B. I used a guided interview methodology, which I selected because it ensures that the same topics are covered in each interview while also permitting a certain degree of flexibility. This flexibility helps to facilitate a positive interviewer-interviewee rapport and enables the interviews to reach a greater degree of depth (Lichtman, 2013). The interviews took place in the summer and fall of 2018. After I completed the interviews, I transcribed and coded them for themes using Thomas's (2006) general inductive approach for analyzing qualitative data. I employed member checking to enhance the credibility of my analysis of the interview data (Creswell, 2013; Krefting, 1991; Guba, 1981).

RESULTS

As mentioned, the NCHC Research Committee sent an email with a link to the questionnaire to all 813 NCHC honors program directors in the summer of 2018. Of those emailed, 222 directors viewed the questionnaire. Of these, 121 directors fully completed the questions, thus producing a response rate of 15%. One hundred forty-nine directors partially completed the questionnaire, thus yielding a completion rate of approximately 81% (121/149). While a 15% response rate might seem low, both published probability tables (Israel, 2012) and mathematical formulas (Yamane, 1967) indicate that with a population size of 800, the survey sample needs to include approximately 127 participants in order to produce a 95% confidence level (with an 8% margin of error) that the sample's responses reflect that of the entire population; this is very close to the current study's response rate.

Research Question One

The first research question (RQ1) asked, "Are any elements, consistent with the NCHC honors program review rubric, being assessed regularly by honors programs?" Questionnaire items 16, 23, 24, and 25 sought to gather data in response to this question. Table 2 summarizes the participants' responses to these items.

TABLE 1. DEMOGRAPHIC DESCRIPTORS OF INTERVIEWEES

Interviewee	Position	Title	Gender	Institution Type	Carnegie Classification	Years in Higher Education	Years as Honors Director
1	Administrative Faculty	Associate Professor	Male	Public	M	14	5
2	Staff	Deputy Director	Female	Private	D	8	3
3	Faculty	Full Professor	Male	Private	M	16	5
4	Administrative Faculty	Associate Professor	Female	Public	D	10	2
5	Faculty	Associate Professor	Female	Public	A	20	4

Note: D = Doctoral Institution; M = Master's Institution; B = Baccalaureate Institution; A = Associate's College

Table 2 indicates that 35 of the 149 respondents (24%) have, to some extent, employed the NCHC review process. While only 19 honors programs have undergone an NCHC review since it was officially brought in-house in 2016, the NCHC has long offered resources for honors program evaluation and recommended external site reviewers. This statistic, therefore, includes any programs that have informally employed the NCHC program review resources. Table 2 further shows that a large majority of the respondents regularly engage in assessing (either annually or as part of an institutional or program review cycle) elements related to honors mission, strategic goals,

TABLE 2. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR EACH CLOSED-ENDED QUESTIONNAIRE ITEM RELEVANT TO RQ1

Questionnaire Item	Frequency of Response	Percent of Response
16. Which of the following peer review processes does your institution engage in? Select all that apply.		
Regional accreditation	60	50%
NCHC	35	24%
Internal institutional review	74	61%
None of the above	16	13%
23. How often are elements such as honors mission, honors strategic goals, and honors enrollment practices and policies evaluated?		
Annually	35	28%
As part of a regular institutional or program review cycle	54	44%
Have had one review in the last ten years	24	19%
Not at all	11	9%
24. How often are the honors program objectives, curriculum, co-curricular programs, and outcomes assessments evaluated?		
Annually	45	37%
As part of a regular institutional or program review cycle	45	37%
Have had one review in the last ten years	19	16%
Not at all	13	11%
25. How often are elements such as honors budget, resources, and personnel evaluated?		
Annually	77	62%
As part of a regular institutional or program review cycle	23	19%
Have had one review in the last ten years	8	7%
Not at all	16	13%

and enrollment practices and policies (72%); honors program objectives, curriculum, co-curricular programs, and outcomes assessments (74%); and honors budget, resources, and personnel (81%). Among this study's sample, honors directors most frequently evaluated elements related to honors budget, resources, and personnel.

Research Question Two

The second research question (RQ2) asked, "How do honors administrators perceive the benefits and obstacles of the program review process, from the NCHC perspective or their own institutional assessment practices?" Questionnaire items 26–29 collected data relevant to this question. Table 3 summarizes the responses to these items.

Table 3 reveals that a large majority of honors directors (87%) believe that routine and systematic honors program evaluation produces benefits. Table 3 also indicates that the respondents' replies were almost equally divided among the benefits listed, with the identification of needed curricular changes and/or pedagogical improvements chosen most often. Concerning evaluation challenges, 60% of the directors in this sample reported encountering obstacles and challenges. The most frequently encountered challenge was time constraints (68%) while the least was little to no institutional support (27%).

Research Question Three

The third research question asked, "What impact did the NCHC program review process have on programs that completed a review?" An open-ended item on the questionnaire and one-on-one interviews with five honors directors who have participated in an NCHC honors program review served to respond to this question.

Themes from the Questionnaire

As indicated, 19 honors programs have undergone an NCHC program review since the process was formally brought in-house in 2016. Before then, the NCHC Assessment and Evaluation Committee did provide resources and a list of trained external reviewers for program review. Consequently, programs that have employed NCHC program review resources to any extent could have responded to the open-ended questionnaire item (30), which asked, "If you have participated in an NCHC program review, please briefly

TABLE 3. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS RELEVANT TO RQ2

Questionnaire Item	Frequency of Response	Percent of Response
26. Do you believe benefits are derived from routine and systematic honors program evaluation?		
Yes	108	87%
No	16	13%
27. If you responded yes to the previous questions, please select all of the benefits that apply.		
Identification of needed curricular changes and/or pedagogical improvements	100	93%
Identification of needed personnel and/or resource improvements	88	82%
Identification of needed co-curricular and/or extracurricular activity improvements	91	84%
Identification of recruitment and/or enrollment issues	94	87%
Identification of retention and/or completion issues	88	82%
Identification of budgetary concerns	87	81%
Identification of program strengths and accomplishments to support calls for continued institutional support	97	90%
Other	3	3%
28. Have you faced challenges or obstacles when conducting an evaluation of your honors program?		
Yes	74	60%
No	49	40%
29. If you responded yes to the previous question, what obstacles or challenges have you faced when conducting a review of your honors program?		
Time constraints	50	68%
Little to no financial compensation	41	55%
Little to no institutional support	20	27%
Little to no training in program evaluation	32	43%
Lack of program evaluation resources	32	43%
Lack of staff support	40	54%
Lack of quality data and/or poor data management systems	41	55%
Lack of access to alumni	39	53%
Other	9	12%

describe any programmatic improvements that have resulted.” Fifteen of the 121 questionnaire completers chose to respond to this question. I coded their replies for keywords and phrases and established overarching themes. From these responses, three themes emerged: program support, curricular changes, and procedural changes. Table 4 presents these themes, their supporting codes and quotations, and the percentage of respondents whose replies corresponded to each code. While most respondents spoke about the positive impacts of the NCHC program review, some did identify drawbacks. A positive (+) and negative (–) sign denote the distinction between the two.

As Table 4 displays, one of the themes that emerged from the open-ended questionnaire item was program support. The majority of respondents indicated the positive impact that the NCHC program review had on their program resources, personnel, budget, and scholarships. One respondent noted that the NCHC review led to decreased support because the data collected was used to undermine the honors program; this perception, however, was the only negative comment offered in the area of institutional support. A second theme that emerged was procedural changes. The majority indicated that the NCHC program review led to positive procedural changes, mainly in the areas of recruitment and administration. The last theme to emerge concerned curriculum changes. As with the other themes, the majority expressed that the review had a positive impact. These influences were primarily related to student learning outcomes (SLOs), assessments, and student research. One respondent indicated that the review produced recommendations that would have negatively impacted the curriculum although, again, this was the only negative comment provided in this area.

Themes from the Interviews

During the one-on-one interviews with honors directors who have undergone an NCHC program review since it was officially brought in-house in 2016, I asked three questions (see Appendix B), each dealing with the following topics: the impact of the NCHC review, resulting programmatic improvements, and recommendations for improving the NCHC program review process.

INTERVIEW QUESTION ONE—THE IMPACT OF THE NCHC REVIEW

The first interview question asked the interviewees about the impact of the NCHC review on several programmatic components. The following seven themes arose from the responses to this question: Strategic Planning; Enrollment Management and Scholarships; Curriculum; Administrative

Structure and Infrastructure; Faculty Governance; Student Services; and Initiatives in Excellence.

All five interviewees mentioned that the NCHC program review provided affirmation of needed changes in strategic planning. The interviewees also reported that the review yielded beneficial suggestions in the area of enrollment practices by producing needed formalization of procedures. Regarding scholarships, all five interviewees commented that no changes had yet resulted although some noted initiating conversations about how to leverage honors to disperse more substantial, academically competitive scholarships (see Table 5).

Concerning the honors curriculum, the interviewees revealed that the NCHC program review brought positive changes in the areas of outcomes assessment and overall conceptual framework. The interviewee from a two-year college indicated that the reviewers' proposed changes were not a good fit for her honors program. Of all the elements discussed, the areas of administrative structure and infrastructure comprised the most substantial changes as the program review led to major personnel and resource additions (see Table 6).

In the area of faculty governance, the interviewees indicated that positive recommendations or changes resulted from the NCHC program review. These recommendations and changes are captured in Table 7 and involve a call for additional support and establishment of formalized procedures. Student services were also significantly affected, with the interviewees noting enhanced advising procedures and greater student involvement in decision-making. The interviewee from a two-year college again noted that the recommendations were not suitable for her program. The first interview question concluded by asking the interviewees if the NCHC review affected program innovation and excellence. Some interviewees replied that new research initiatives were taking place as a result of the review and that the review brought a valuable sense of recognition to the program.

INTERVIEW QUESTION TWO—PROGRAMMATIC IMPROVEMENTS

The second interview question focused on the improvements that resulted from the NCHC program review. Because the interviewees described in detail many program enhancements in response to interview question one, they all seemed to focus on *critical* improvements. What is particularly notable is that all five interviewees credited the review with orchestrating some type of significant improvement. As Table 8 demonstrates, the two themes

TABLE 4. QUESTIONNAIRE CODES AND EXAMPLE QUOTES PERTAINING TO THE THEMES OF PROGRAM SUPPORT, PROCEDURAL CHANGES, AND CURRICULAR CHANGES

Theme	Code	%	+ / -	Sample Quotation
Program Support	Increased Resources	60%	+	<p>“We went from a one campus program (in a 30,000 student community college system) to a district-wide program with a program on each campus. In addition, the program review helped</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. to increase the programmatic budget by more than 500%; 2. to get an administrative assistant; 3. to increase scholarships for honors students from \$5,000 to \$90,000; 4. to get a full-time director for the district and a campus coordinator (two class reassignments) for each campus.”
	Support Undermined	7%	-	<p>“Many of the NCHC program reviewer recommendations led to the implementation of useful and appropriate changes, but soon after the review, external ‘program prioritization’ consultants took over all administrative functions and governance of the college because of financial crisis, and unfortunately, many of the positive steps forward after the review have been eliminated. Assessment, outcomes, achievements, program review, opportunities, needs, improvements—all now empty exercises displaced by prejudicial, flawed data, and bottom-line decisions. Good intentions of proper assessment and program review can be manipulated, corrupted, and disregarded.”</p>
Procedural Changes	Recruitment Modifications	27%	+	<p>“We did a review when I first became director. Many changes came about afterward related to our recruitment strategies (added an application), staffing (minimally increased), reporting line (now to Provost), and student opportunities (added Honors study abroad).”</p>
	Governing Structure Modifications	33%	+	<p>“Our most recent program revision/improvement was based upon recommendations from NCHC reviewers, including substantive changes to our curriculum, governing structure, and faculty participation. We have also been able to advocate for better support (administratively and financially) because of this review.”</p>

Curricular Changes	SLO and Assessment Modifications	33%	+	“The review encouraged us to update our SLOs and assessment goals. It also led us to switch from a part-time faculty director to full-time executive director, which enabled us to complete a full overhaul of our first- and second-year curriculum.”
	Research Enhanced	20%	+	“As a result of the review, more resources are available for a variety of student experiential activities, such as research.”
	Rigor Reduced	7%	-	“The reviews done by NCHC recommended a less rigorous Honors curriculum, minimal Honors requirements, and removal of the required thesis in favor of increasing the number of students in the Honors Program.”

Note: A “+” sign indicates a positive outcome and a “-” sign indicates a drawback or shortcoming

TABLE 5. INTERVIEW CODES AND EXAMPLE QUOTES PERTAINING TO THE THEMES OF STRATEGIC PLANNING AND ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT AND SCHOLARSHIPS

Theme	Code	%	+ / -	Sample Quotation
Strategic Planning	Affirmation of Priority Needs	100%	+	“I have shared the external review with our development partners as well as central administration. We’ve had conversations about how the review came back supporting our thoughts for priority need areas. Not only that, but the review materials came back in such a way that it was very strongly worded, which helps us tremendously. They said, “You don’t need to enhance these areas to do more. You need to do that in order to maintain at the current level.”
	Enhanced Support	80%	+	“There were items in the strategic plan that certainly rose in prominence with the people we collaborate with. The majority of our population is off-campus, and we had never created an Honors commuter lounge. This was a major point in my strategic plan. We had to be able to support commuters. The external reviewers’ conversation with our auxiliary services people, the people who control the housing and the buildings really helped them understand that. I can say it a hundred times, right, but when an outsider came and said, ‘You can’t have majority commuters without any support for the commuters,’ it happened.”
Enrollment Management and Scholarships	Formalized Procedures	80%	+	“We used to do all the enrollment management ourselves. The reviewers came at a time when we were beginning the collaboration process with Admissions. As a result, we were able to move that conversation forward while still retaining control in ways that are helpful. Again, it was the reviewers saying, ‘The final decision has to stay with Honors, but the marketing can go to you.’ This was very helpful in our agenda of increased collaboration.”
	Central Scholarship Hub	40%	+	“They talked about suggestions for more aggressively being a central hub for some of the main university scholarships that are high-level scholarships—perhaps we should consider making those honors scholarships. They also provided suggestions for leveraging honors as the point to pair highly qualified students with some of the national and international scholarship opportunities that are available. Those are recommendations that we are still considering.”

Note: A “+” sign indicates a positive outcome and a “-” sign indicates a drawback or shortcoming

TABLE 6. INTERVIEW CODES AND EXAMPLE QUOTES PERTAINING TO THE THEMES OF CURRICULUM AND ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Theme	Code	%	+ / -	Sample Quotation
Curriculum	Assessment Plan	40%	+	"We are currently in the process of launching a curriculum assessment plan. [The reviewers] provided a lot of support, saying that 'It is necessary. We're glad to see that you're doing that.' It was encouraging that they were able to look at what we have put together for a five-year assessment plan and really affirm that we're heading in the right direction. That will obviously inform our curriculum and ensure that we're delivering the quality that we promise."
	Conceptual Shift	40%	+	"We have started implementing a conceptual shift, which was one of the recommendations. Specifically, we were asked to identify a central theme that the different elements of the program would support and build upon. That's something we weren't doing. We have identified a theme, and that will likely lead to some curriculum changes."
Administrative Structure and Infrastructure	Unrealistic Suggestions	10%	-	"Yes, it did, but some of those are unrealistic because our reviewers were from four-year schools. The reviewer from our primary feeder did understand community colleges to an extent, but my other reviewer did not. We were discussing the career programs, and the other reviewer was rather clueless because at the four-year schools, they don't have career programs. That, to me, was my biggest frustration, because some of the curriculum recommendations that he made will not work at a community college."
	Increased Resources	80%	+	"The change in this area was radical. I went from being on a four-four load to being on a one-one load, so the investment I can put into honors drastically increased."
	Enhanced Personnel Support	40%	+	"In addition to the commuter lounge, which was huge, we did have a modest increase in budget. We had had a temporary carryforward budget, but the review made it all official and permanently solidified the budget."
				"As a result of the review, it was recommended that we bring our part-time staff member, who assisted with honors administrative work, to full-time capacity. I was able to take this recommendation to the administration, who approved it, which was huge."

Note: A "+" sign indicates a positive outcome and a "-" sign indicates a drawback or shortcoming

TABLE 7. INTERVIEW CODES AND EXAMPLE QUOTES PERTAINING TO THE THEMES OF FACULTY GOVERNANCE, STUDENT SERVICES, AND INITIATIVES IN EXCELLENCE

Theme	Code	%	+ / -	Sample Quotation
Faculty Governance	Formalized Procedures	60%	+	“We’ve been much more conscientious about formalization since the review. We wrote a mission statement for the faculty council and subdivided responsibilities into different committees. That was a direct result of the review. We also now have an honors admissions committee and a completion committee.”
	Advocated for More Support	20%	+	“What they said to us is that our faculty committees are being effectively utilized. But, given that our faculty are homed in other departments and colleges, they are not positioned to take on additional responsibilities. And, since our faculty are homed elsewhere, how does that impact our relationships and our ability to assess honors? They then turned that back to the need for additional staffing.”
Student Services	Enhanced Advising	60%	+	“One of the things that they pointed out concerned advising. Our academic advising breaks students into sets by last name, and our honor students were just in that mix and not specifically identified as honors. It’s difficult to educate all of the academic advisers about honors. [The reviewers] recommended that one of the academic advisers be assigned to all the honors students. Our academic advising has been really cooperative, and we have fully made that change.”
	More Student Involvement	20%	+	“We hadn’t involved our student board that much in decisionmaking or planning of events. We did shift to trying to engage our student board. We’ve grown the group, and we bring them into staff and faculty meetings for decisions concerning the program. They’ve taken on a lot of leadership as a result.”
	Inadequate Suggestions	20%	-	“The reviewers felt like the honors student association should be doing more academic projects, while their mission right now is to support the Honors program through social events. That’s actually a recommendation I’m not going to follow, quite honestly. With being a 100% commuter campus, I think that the social focus is huge. If that’s all that group does, I’m good with it.”

Initiatives in Excellence	Inspired New Plans	40%	+	<p>“As we are trying to work around this new theme of inquiry, which came out of the review, we are rethinking the honors experience to scaffold and/or build research skills earlier in the students’ honors experience in a more systematic way and even into some co-curricular experiences.”</p>
	Increased Recognition	20%	+	<p>“Because of the review, we were suddenly noticed. There are people in Academic Senate who didn’t know there was a national honors organization with standards. The review let it be known that we are an academic unit with criteria, expectations, and a national organization, vouching for our excellence.”</p>

Note: A “+” sign indicates a positive outcome and a “-” sign indicates a drawback or shortcoming

that emerged from the interviewees' responses concerned program validation and curricular and assessment modifications. The majority noted that the review brought a sense of validation and recognition either to the program itself or to the honors director's plans for the future. One interviewee elaborated at length about how the NCHC program review improved curriculum and assessment practices.

INTERVIEW QUESTION THREE—ENHANCING THE NCHC PROGRAM REVIEW PROCESS

The last interview question concerned whether the interviewees would recommend the NCHC program review process and if they would suggest any changes. Since this question was the combination of two separate questions, each portion was analyzed separately. Regarding the question, "Would you recommend the NCHC program review process to other NCHC honors programs?" the overwhelming majority said "yes," and a theme of program strengthening emerged from their responses. One interviewee stated "no," and a theme of minimal impact arose from her response. Those interviewees who replied affirmatively were emphatic in their support. Their reasons for recommending the process, which are featured in Table 9, corresponded to two explanations: needed programmatic reflection and greater institutional recognition. The interviewee from a two-year college responded "no," but she was not firmly entrenched in her opposition and noted that her opinion would likely have been different if the external reviewers had better understood her campus culture and program needs.

The second portion of the final interview question focused on enhancing the NCHC review process. Every interviewee provided a recommendation for improvement. The recommended changes ranged from having a broader base of qualified external reviewers to fine-tuning the review process itself. The recommended changes were coded and categorized under the theme of procedural modifications, which Table 10 captures, along with the percentage of responses corresponding to each code.

DISCUSSION

Research Question One

Research question one investigated whether any elements consistent with the NCHC honors program review rubric are assessed regularly by honors programs. The rubric examines nine domains aligned with the NCHC's seventeen characteristics of a fully developed honors program. The questionnaire

TABLE 8. INTERVIEW CODES AND EXAMPLE QUOTES PERTAINING TO THE THEME OF VALIDATION AND CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT

Theme	Code	%	+ / -	Sample Quotation
Validation	Program Legitimacy	20%	+	<p>“It gave us legitimacy. The concrete outcome of getting a commuter lounge is huge. It’s accessible. We’ve never had an accessible space before. This happened because people acknowledged that we’re real. We’re not just a club. We’re an academic unit. At a technical school, the outsiders are really important. The recognition that we now have from outsiders was huge.”</p> <p>“I think that the program review shined a spotlight on us. It’s interesting to me, and I hear this from other directors. Universities spend a lot of time, energy, and money on students at the lower end of the spectrum. And it’s needed because if you’re going to bring them to campus, you have to have the resources to help them be successful. However, sometimes that focus is so intense, there is a neglect of students at the top. It’s like people think, ‘Well, they’re doing well, they’re learning, they’re fine.’ The review revealed that ‘Hey, these are your honors students, and this is what you’re doing for them, which is not much. You can and should do more.’”</p>
	Reinforced Director’s Goals	80%	+	<p>“The review really validated much of what we were already planning, and I think the official report is really helping. We’ve already had meetings where I see a great deal of promise. Our stakeholders, even those external to the university, are finding this to be a quality report. They’re bringing up the points. They’ve identified eight areas from the report that they want to focus on. It’s making an impact.”</p>
Curriculum and Assessment	Curricular Improvements	20%	+	<p>“I think the main progress we’ve made directly from the report recommendations has been to identify our central theme and start to rethink curricular and other co-curricular pieces of the program to support that. Again, we’re in the beginning stages, but we’re committed to doing it and engaging the students more directly in our policymaking and programming.”</p>
	Annual Reports Instituted	20%	+	<p>“I guess a major improvement would be instituting our annual report. As a result, we’ll have an easier time with assessment in the future.”</p>

Note: A “+” sign indicates a positive outcome and a “-” sign indicates a drawback or shortcoming

TABLE 9. INTERVIEW CODES AND EXAMPLE QUOTES PERTAINING TO THE THEMES OF PROGRAM STRENGTHENED AND MINIMAL IMPACT

Themes	Code	%	+ / -	Sample Quotation
Program Strengthened	Needed Reflection	60%	+	<p>"I would highly recommend [the NCHC review]. We will continue to do this. We already have plans. We need to continue to be very reflective in what we're doing so that we can offer the very best to our students and to our faculty."</p> <p>"It's great. I think everybody should do it because it helps you organize your thoughts. It gives you a resource to show your administration and people at the university where you are at in comparison to other programs. In addition to pointing out areas of improvement, they showed where we were doing good things and what the students were happy with. A lot of their recommendations were about, 'Hey, this is something that's going well. Think of the potential if you nurture it.'"</p>
	Institutional Recognition	60%	+	<p>"One thing that I appreciated about how they treated their tasks was that as part of their site visit, they were meeting with many people across campus: the provost, the chancellor, and department chairs. They viewed it not only as a moment to ask questions and learn about our role on campus but to advocate for the Honors Program while they were here. I think the value of the review was really twofold. You get this moment when people look at your self-study. They are paying attention to your program. They're thinking about it in a different way—through a different lens. In addition, the reviewers are tremendous advocates for honors education across the campus."</p>
Minimal Impact	Unsuitable Suggestions	20%	-	<p>"I would say, if you are a community college, then I would not recommend [the review] unless you have a community college reviewer. One of our four-year partner reviewers, as I said before, he totally did not get what a community college is. That, I thought, was very frustrating."</p>

Note: A "+" sign indicates a positive outcome and a "-" sign indicates a drawback or shortcoming

TABLE 10. INTERVIEW CODES AND EXAMPLE QUOTES PERTAINING TO THE THEME OF PROCEDURAL MODIFICATIONS

Code	%	Sample Quotation
Self-Study Guidelines	40%	<p>“I think some guidelines in terms of what’s being expected would be helpful because I was surprised to hear just how wide the range was. What I learned was that we weren’t supposed to turn in five or six hundred pages of report, which I had been accustomed to with previous self-studies. So I asked about a range, and I think I was told that it could be anywhere from eight pages to a few dozen. Like I said earlier because there weren’t stringent guidelines, we were afforded a great deal of creative leeway in diving in as we explored what we’ve accomplished, which is true to Honors, right? But a little more clarification would definitely be helpful.”</p>
Timelines Provided	20%	<p>“Some timelines would be great. Specifying how long before the external review should you provide that self-study and how long after the external review takes place could you expect your final report? Those types of timelines would be helpful.”</p>
Follow-up	20%	<p>“I guess a little more follow-up coaching by the site visitors could be built into the process, like ‘So you did a program review, now what?’ Maybe a three- or six-month follow-up or even a year follow-up with those same site visitors, as this would be helpful in assisting directors to implement the recommendations and advocate for things like budgetary or administrative change.”</p>
Larger External Reviewer Base	20%	<p>“I guess my biggest suggestion is that there needs to be a bigger base of qualified reviewers to draw upon so that we’re not struggling to assign qualified reviewers. Perhaps to even put into place a specified backup for each person. If something happens, then somebody’s ready to jump in.”</p>

results in Table 3 show that 87%–91% of NCHC honors program directors evaluate specific elements annually, as part of a regular program review cycle, or at least once in the past ten years. In comparison to Driscoll's (2011) earlier study, which reported that 61% of NCHC honors program directors conducted some form of assessment, this study's data demonstrate that honors programs at large have responded to the national call for greater assessment and evaluation in order to gauge their effectiveness and to identify areas needing improvement (Achterberg, 2006; Driscoll, 2011; Fitzpatrick et al., 2011).

Regarding elements evaluated most frequently, 81% of NCHC honors directors in this study reported assessing program budget, resources, and personnel annually or as part of a regular review cycle. This result corresponds with program evaluation research regarding the importance of monetary needs (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011; Schuman, 2011). Since all programs require financial resources to operate effectively, it logically follows that honors directors would assess elements related to budget, resources, and staffing more frequently than they do other programmatic components.

Research Question Two

The second research question examined how honors administrators perceive the benefits and obstacles of the program review process, whether conducted internally or by NCHC representatives. The questionnaire results revealed that 87% of those surveyed believed that routine and systematic honors evaluation produces benefits. The respondents further indicated, at a fairly even rate, that the benefits were both formative in identifying areas needing improvement and summative in showcasing the program's strengths and overall worth. These results align with the general purposes of program evaluation (Chen, 2014; Fitzpatrick et al., 2011; Newcomer et al., 2015).

The large percentage of honors directors who believed that benefits result from systematic and routine program review was somewhat surprising since a decade earlier there was a "marked division" between those in honors education who were for and those who were against program evaluation. In 2008, Lanier noted that the "againsts" far outnumbered the "fors"; that issue of *JNCHC* published six essays opposing honors program evaluation in comparison to three essays supporting it. The common theme of those opposing assessment centered on "the unique and qualitative nature of the stated outcomes of honors programs," which some believed "[made] assessment difficult or unhelpful" (Lanier, 2008, p. 81). The seeming shift in attitude may be due to the increased number of honors directors participating in honors

assessment. If more directors are indeed conducting some form of program review, then they likely realize that assessment produces beneficial data analyses that identify “how to get better” (Achterburg, 2006).

The second portion of research question two concerned the obstacles that honors directors encounter when conducting program evaluation. Sixty percent of the directors in this sample reported encountering obstacles, and when asked what these challenges were, they most frequently identified time constraints followed by lack of data and/or poor data management systems as well as little to no financial compensation. These challenges are similar to the ones highlighted by Newcomer et al. (2015), who recognized that both program evaluator and data management training are crucial to successful program evaluation.

Newcomer et al. (2015) recommend that program evaluation training be focused, comprehensive, and not merely “on-the-job” in order to increase the quality of data analysis and reduce stress for the evaluator. Without solid training, evaluators can encounter pitfalls that make the evaluation process all the more laborious. Many honors directors reported that they receive little to no financial compensation for their evaluative efforts, which could add to their frustrations. Perhaps providing honors directors with a stipend to undergo program evaluation training, either through the NCHC or elsewhere, would help them to become more adept at evaluating their programs, thus relieving stress and producing more meaningful data analysis.

Research Question Three

The third research question examined the impact of the NCHC program review process. Both the questionnaire and interview results revealed that this process produced numerous positive outcomes for participating programs. Tables 4–9 identify 25 codes corresponding to positive influences and only five codes corresponding to negative influences. In the area of curriculum, positive influences include the creation of new SLOs, a curriculum assessment plan, and a curricular conceptual framework, the last of which bring a needed sense of continuity to honors coursework. The creation of SLOs and aligned assessments is a practice that is required by regional accrediting bodies and specialized professional associations as a means of demonstrating student learning gains in critical domains (Otero et al., 2011). Honors should not be exempt from such accountability measures. As Otero et al. (2011) state, “Honors administrators and faculty too must become proactive and collectively develop the best practices for assessing honors programs

with specific student learning outcomes” (p. 67). In the areas of enrollment management, student services, and faculty governance, the questionnaire respondents and interviewees identified enhanced structure and formalized procedures as a positive outcome of the NCHC review. For the interviewees, these formalized procedures resulted in increased collaboration and more efficient practices, both in the advising of honors students and honors faculty decision-making.

Of all the immediate results of reviews, one continually emerged in the questionnaire responses and interviews: increased institutional support and needed program resources. According to the interviewees, having highly qualified external reviewers present the institution’s administration with a report identifying program strengths and suggesting recommendations for improvement enabled the honors directors to advocate for their programs in ways they were previously unable to do. The external review also led to recommendations that the directors were pleased to have in writing in order to assist them in advocating for needed resources in the future.

The benefits derived from the NCHC program review process mirror those gained from accreditation. According to the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), the process of accreditation not only identifies areas needing improvement but also assures students, future employers, and the general public that the program is reaching minimum threshold standards. With an assurance that benchmarks are met, accredited programs and their students can qualify for certain federal funds (Eaton, 2015; Hegji, 2017). Similarly, the NCHC program review provides stakeholders with assurance that a program is operating effectively and has established a solid strategic plan for future improvement. Just as accreditation opens the door to federal funding, the NCHC program review can increase institutional support and resources by providing a sense of quality assurance to administration and stakeholders, as it did for the programs in this study.

The large majority of interviewees said that they would highly recommend the NCHC review to other honors directors because it inspired needed programmatic reflection. Not one of the interviewees mentioned that the program review was too quantitatively focused or at odds with such central honors values as creativity and research. On the contrary, the interviewees indicated that the review provided high-quality feedback that generated more substantial support for excellence and ongoing innovation, contradicting the fears issued earlier by Digby (2014) and Snyder & Carnicom (2011).

Only one of the interviewees had reservations about recommending the NCHC review. Her reservations primarily concerned the external reviewers because she was assigned reviewers familiar with four-year honors programs although her program was situated at a community college. This interviewee felt that several of the reviewers' recommendations were not a good fit for her program. When accrediting bodies appoint external reviewers, they select individuals with experience at institutions similar to those they will be evaluating, thus ensuring that the reviewers understand the unique nature, needs, and challenges of the institutions under review (Frawley, 2014). As an improvement to the NCHC review process, this interviewee suggested having a more substantial base of external reviewers.

The interviewees also suggested providing more self-study guidelines. Under the current program review format, honors directors are asked to consider ten questions while preparing their self-study. These questions address elements such as honors mission, goals, and objectives; honors courses, curricula, and activities; human, physical, and fiscal resources; program history; institutional organizational structure; data related to program recruitment, admission, retention, and completion; and program strengths and weaknesses (Otero et al., 2011). The honors directors are asked to address all of these elements in their self-study, but they have wide latitude in how they choose to construct their report. The honors directors in this study believed that they would have benefited from more concrete guidelines regarding report length and structure. Many specialized professional associations and accrediting bodies provide comprehensive instructions as well as report templates to institutions preparing a program self-study. These templates and guidelines bestow needed clarity and direction to faculty and staff as they collect and analyze data (Mayne, 2008).

In addition to enhancing the self-study guidelines, some interviewees suggested providing mentoring after the program review. This suggestion aligns with best practices for building and supporting an evaluative culture within an organization. Through participative leadership, organizations can instill accountability and help to shape a culture where evaluation results can be successfully implemented, managed, and assessed through evidence-based practices (Fullan, 2008; Mayne, 2008.) Given the importance of ongoing assessment and evaluation to assure continual improvement (Otero et al., 2011), it would be wise for the NCHC to revisit its honors program review process and consider refining it in response to the recommendations set forth by the participants of this study.

LIMITATIONS

One limitation of this study was participant choice. While all 813 NCHC member institutions were invited to complete the questionnaire, only 15% of the population participated. Though this number may seem small, a response rate of 15% is considered reliable by certain standards. Hill (1998), Israel (2012), and Yamane (1967) suggest that for descriptive studies, the sample should consist of 10% of the population to ensure reliable survey data, and the questionnaire response rate in this study was well above this benchmark. Another limitation relates to the accuracy of the participants' questionnaire responses: since survey research is self-reported, a lack of time and attention can affect the participants' replies. Also, extraneous factors, such as a weak relationship between an honors director and the school administration can bias the respondents' answers (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009).

Like the questionnaires, the interviews were limited by participant choice. Since the NCHC program review process was brought in-house in 2016, nineteen programs have undergone a review, and only a fraction of these programs expressed interest in participating in an interview. I decided to secure interviews with five of these interested directors, intending to select interviewees who represented a wide range of demographic/programmatic characteristics to enhance the transferability of the data gathered (see Table 1).

CONCLUSION

The NCHC has advocated the power and importance of ongoing, systematic honors program evaluation. Characteristic 14 of its Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program states: "The program engages in continuous assessment and evaluation and is open to the need for change in order to maintain its distinctive position of offering exceptional and enhanced educational opportunities to honors students" (Otero et al., 2011, p. 22). With so many programs in higher education implementing accountability measures, the NCHC encourages a culture of assessment in which feedback, improvement, and continuous, critical review are integrated into the program's overall strategic plan and everyday practices (Otero et al., 2011).

This current study has shown that since Driscoll's (2011) earlier research, many more honors programs are engaging in some form of program review and finding it to be beneficial. At the same time, a large majority admit that they face challenges while trying to assess their own programs. This study

suggests that the NCHC program review process itself can help to alleviate and even remove some of these evaluation challenges. Having reputable external reviewers presents higher administrations with an objective report of program performance and enables programs to acquire the resources they need to make ongoing evaluation more feasible.

While my intent in this paper is not to ignite a debate on honors accreditation (a topic that has already been disputed in the NCHC), I would argue that certain accreditation practices, such as program self-study and external review, promote valuable, needed reflection and generate essential stakeholder support; these are the very benefits derived from engaging in an NCHC program review. Though it is by no means a perfect process, an NCHC review yields positive outcomes that further its goal of providing the best possible honors experience for both students and faculty, as one of the interviewees in this study indicated when asked if she would recommend the NCHC review process to others: “I would highly recommend it. We will continue to do this. We already have plans. We need to continue to be very reflective in what we’re doing so that we can offer the very best to our students and to our faculty” (Table 9).

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APPENDIX A

Questionnaire

1. How would you describe your employment at your institution?
 - Part-time
 - Full-time
2. How would you describe your position at your institution?
 - Faculty
 - Staff
 - Administrative Faculty
3. If you are a faculty member, how would you describe your rank?
 - Adjunct or Part-time Instructor
 - Full-time Instructor
 - Assistant Professor
 - Associate Professor
 - Professor
 - Other
4. How many years have you been employed at your institution?
 - Less than one year
 - One to four years
 - Five or more years
5. What is your gender?
 - Female
 - Male
 - Non-binary
6. How would you classify your institution?
 - Doctoral University
 - Masters College or University
 - Baccalaureate College or University
 - Associates/Community College
7. How would you describe your institution's affiliation?
 - Public
 - Private-Nonprofit
 - Private-For-profit

8. Which of the following best describes your institution's campus?
- Residential
 - Commuter
 - Mixed
9. How long have you been the honors director?
- Less than one year
 - One to four years
 - Five or more years
10. How many students are in your honors program?
- Less than 100 students
 - 100–250 students
 - 251–399 students
 - More than 400 students
11. What percent of your student body participates in the honors program?
- Less than 5%
 - 5%–10%
 - 11%–15%
 - More than 15%
12. How familiar are you with the NCHC Program Review Process?
- Very Familiar
 - Somewhat Familiar
 - Not Familiar At All
13. How is your honors program officially classified, as a program or a college?
- Honors Program
 - Honors College

For the remaining questions, the phrase “honors program” pertains to both honors programs AND honors colleges.

14. If your campus is residential or mixed, does your honors program provide designated honors housing?
- Yes
 - No
15. What incentives does your honors program offer to honors students?
Select all that apply.
- Smaller class sizes
 - Priority registration

- Honors scholarships
 - Specialized curricula
 - Research opportunities
 - Study abroad opportunities
 - Living-learning communities
 - Service-learning projects and/or internships
 - Participation in regional and/or national conferences
 - Voice in the governance of the honors program
 - Designated space for honors student activities
 - Special honors recognition at graduation and on transcript/diploma
 - Other
16. Which of the following peer review processes does your institution engage in? Select all that apply.
- Regional accreditation
 - NCHC
 - Internal institutional review
 - None of the above
17. Assessment of your honors program is driven by:
- Faculty
 - The honors program director
 - Institutional administration
 - Accreditation
 - Other
 - Does not apply
18. Does your institution have articulation agreements with other two- and four-year honors programs to promote the successful transfer of honors students from other institutions?
- Yes
 - No
 - Don't Know
19. Which of the following best describes the honors program's place within the administrative structure of your institution?
- The honors program is situated in a university-wide administrative node and is consulted regularly during policy and funding decisions
 - The honors program is situated in a university-wide administrative node but is only occasionally consulted during policy and funding decisions

- The honors program is situated in a university-wide administrative node, but is rarely or never consulted during policy and funding decisions
 - The honors program reports to a single college or department or is located completely outside of the institution's academic structure
 - None of the above
20. Which of the following most closely matches the reporting line of your honors program?
- The honors director reports directly to the chief academic officer of the institution
 - The honors director reports to a college dean at the institution
 - The honors director reports to a department chair or an officer not located within the academic structure of the institution
 - None of the above
21. Which of the following best describes the governance of your honors program?
- The honors director governs the program with input from a standing committee of honors faculty, who make sure to involve honors students in their work and/or decisions
 - The honors director governs the program with input from a standing committee of honors faculty
 - The honors director governs the program with little to no input from honors faculty or students
22. How are honors faculty evaluated?
- According to the same standards used for the rest of the institution's faculty
 - According to honors-specific standards only (i.e., innovative pedagogical practices, mentorship of honors students, and leadership excellence in honors)
 - According to both institutional AND honors-specific standards (i.e., innovative pedagogical practices, mentorship of honors students, and leadership excellence in honors)
 - Don't know
23. How often are elements such as honors mission, honors strategic goals, and honors enrollment practices and policies evaluated?
- Annually
 - As part of a regular institutional or program review cycle

- Have had one review in the last ten years
 - Not at all
24. How often are the honors program objectives, curriculum, co-curricular programs, and outcome assessments evaluated?
- Annually
 - As part of a regular institutional or program review cycle
 - Have had one review in the last ten years
 - Not at all
25. How often are elements such as honors budget, resources, and personnel evaluated?
- Annually
 - As part of a regular institutional or program review cycle
 - Have had one review in the last ten years
 - Not at all
26. Do you believe benefits are derived from routine and systematic honors program evaluation?
- Yes
 - No
27. If you responded yes to the previous questions, please select all of the benefits that apply.
- Identification of needed curricular changes and/or pedagogical improvements
 - Identification of needed personnel and/or resource improvements
 - Identification of needed co-curricular and/or extracurricular activity improvements
 - Identification of recruitment and/or enrollment issues
 - Identification of retention and/or completion issues
 - Identification of budgetary concerns
 - Identification of program strengths and accomplishments to support calls for continued institutional support
 - Other
28. Have you faced challenges or obstacles when conducting an evaluation of your honors program?
- Yes
 - No

29. If you responded yes to the previous question, what obstacles or challenges have you faced when conducting a review of your honors program?
- Time constraints
 - Little to no financial compensation
 - Little to no institutional support
 - Little to no training in program evaluation
 - Lack of program evaluation resources
 - Lack of staff support
 - Lack of quality data and/or poor data management system
 - Lack of access to alumni
 - Other
30. If you have participated in an NCHC program review, please briefly describe any programmatic improvements that have resulted.

APPENDIX B

Interview Prompts

1. Can you speak to the impact that the NCHC process had on the following components of your honors program:
 - Honors Mission, Strategic Plan, Assessment Measures, and Structure
 - Enrollment Management and Scholarships
 - Curriculum
 - Administrative Structure and Infrastructure (i.e., Budget, Personnel, and Resources)
 - Faculty Governance
 - Student Services and Honors Co-curricular Activities
 - Initiatives in Excellence and Innovation
2. Did the NCHC review process lead to any programmatic improvements?
3. Would you recommend the NCHC program review process to other NCHC honors programs? Why or why not? Are there any changes you would make to the process?