



Considering Public University Honors Colleges and Programs

Why Choose an Honors College or Program?

For qualifying students, honors colleges or programs can offer the best of several possible worlds, replicating many of the benefits of smaller liberal arts colleges at considerably lower cost, while providing access to opportunities only a larger institution is likely to have. Students at universities that might otherwise feel large and impersonal frequently enjoy not only smaller classes, but also more of a sense of community with both peers and professors.

Technically, there is a difference between Honors Programs and Honors Colleges although some of the longer established Programs have many of the same features as the Honors Colleges, so it's advisable to research them school-by-school to determine if they are offering the experience you seek. Honors Programs, typically led by a "director," tend to serve a smaller number of students and allocate fewer resources exclusively for these students' use. Honors Colleges, on the other hand, are generally led by a "dean" and have more extensive resources allocated just for them.

Besides small, seminar-style classes, resources to look for may include designated housing (more likely to be found at Honors Colleges), specialized honors advising to supplement the regular academic advising, and special career services, events and guest speakers that are available exclusively for honors students. Priority for course registration is common, and special service internships and study-abroad opportunities may be available too.

Honors Colleges have a four-year curriculum, but the number of course credits a student must take within them varies anywhere from 24 to 45, and at some schools students may earn a portion of these in regular university classes by doing additional work. Honors Colleges sometimes have a theme that shapes the thrust of their curriculum. Examples might be community service, great books, or social justice. Many Honors Colleges emphasize interdisciplinary approaches and offer innovative course topics. Finally, the requirement of a capstone research project is common.

Honors students frequently qualify for merit scholarships, which may cover the additional fee for participation in the Honors College if there is one.

Who Gets In?

Each school has its own selection criteria, which may include grade point average (sometimes recalculated), test scores, honors and awards, extra-curricular activities, and essays. Some schools simply choose the top students from each year's applicant pool. Elsewhere applicants may be invited to apply, or it may be up to the applicant to learn about the honors college or program requirements on their own, including when and how to apply. The application may or may not ask for additional essays and letters of recommendation beyond what is required to apply to the rest of the university. Sometimes there are hard cut-offs for GPA or test scores, but those who are not admitted as freshmen may have an opportunity to transfer in later.

The students who are selected typically demonstrate intellectual spark and creativity, interests across a range of disciplines, and the desire and ability to be classroom and campus leaders. They often express interest in engaging with big questions and pursuing academic research and/or post-graduate study.

Students interested in being considered for participation can reach out to the admissions officers in charge of selection and let them know because the attitude they express in their communication with these admissions officers can sometimes tip the balance in their favor.

If an essay is part of the application process, as it is at the University of Kentucky's Honors College where Hannah Le Gris is in charge of admissions, Le Gris advises students to "show their creative spark" and "let their voices come through to reveal their creative process and ability to think outside of the box."

Outcomes

It is necessary to maintain a minimum GPA in order to remain in honors colleges and programs, but in general the retention and graduation rates for students in them are significantly higher than the average rates at their universities. This is not surprising, surrounded as the honors students are by high-achieving peers, a culture of engagement, and support. They also go on to earn prestigious scholarships like the Rhodes, Fulbright, Marshall and Truman as well as admission to professional and graduate school and coveted employment at notably higher rates than their non-honors classmates at the same schools.

Important if you're thinking of applying to an honors college or program:

You must read the website carefully to determine not only the selection criteria, but also the timeline for application since their deadlines are almost always earlier than those for admission to the rest of the university.