

Is Honors Elitist?

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The short answer is, yes. The honors program is elitist. This answer comes with some caveat, however, as there are many attributes associated with elitism. Merriam-Webster provides three definitions for “elitist”:

1. Leadership or rule by an elite
2. The selectivity of the elite; especially: snobbery (elitism in choosing new members)
3. Consciousness of being or belonging to an elite.

By all three of these definitions, honors is elitist. All of its members must maintain high academic marks. In other words, the honors program is selectively composed of elite students with regard to academics. Since all of its members are elite, it goes without saying that the honors program is “ruled” by the elite. Being composed entirely of students with high academic achievement, it is quite obvious to any member of the honors program that they belong to an elite group. The honors program is selectively elite, ruled by the elite, and its members are conscious of being part of the elite. Therefore, the honors program fits all of Merriam-Webster’s definitions for elitist. There is more to this issue than simple definitions, however.

The term “elitist” carries many connotations in the academic world. In the second definition of “elitist” provided by Merriam-Webster, the term “snobbery” is used. Many people associate elitism with snobbery. They feel that elitists are snobs. One of the Merriam-Webster’s definitions for a “snob” is: “one who has an offensive air of superiority in matters of knowledge and taste.” By this definition, the honors program is not entirely elitist.

Not everyone in the honors program has an “offensive air of superiority.” In fact, there are many honors students who are very quiet in their success and remain unnoticed by most of the general population. Unfortunately, the students who do possess an “offensive air of superiority” undoubtedly receive more attention than those who do not. This leads many people to the generalization that all honors students are snobs which can negatively impact people’s attitude towards honors students.

The snobbish attitude of some honors students can anger others. Many people argue that “intelligence and taste” are not measured by academic success. A person can have both intelligence and taste without being a member of the honors program or having high academic achievement. They feel unjustly demeaned and are angry because being an honors student does not account for the “offensive air of superiority” put forth by snobbish members of the honors program. They are correct. But, that does not mean that the honors program is snobbish. Only those particular members of the program are snobbish. Do not let a sample speak for the whole. In that respect, the honors program is not elitist, as only certain members have the snobbish attitude many associate with elitism.

The honors program is by definition an “elitist” program, as long as it is not defined by the negative connotations associated with elitism. The Honors College is

made up of students who achieve high academic standards. Within the study of academics, they are the elite. Anyone can be an honors student if they work hard for their grades. The hard work and achievement of honors students earns them the right to be recognized as elite. They are not, however, *the* elite. They are in no way universally better than other students. They only receive high grades. That does not mean they are more intelligent. That does not mean they have better taste. They are simply better at getting A's.