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Honors as Skunkworks

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“This is the only way, we say; but there are as many ways as there can be drawn radii from one centre.”

—Walden

For the Fall/Winter 2005 issue of the *JNCHC*, Dail W. Mullins, Jr. was asked to address the question, “What is Honors?” He “began by researching several dozen honors program websites from around the country and came to the quick realization that their various program descriptions all seem to be ‘cut from the same cloth’ and might very well have been produced by an ‘Honors Program Description Generator.’” This sentence was the first nudge I needed, and Linda Frost’s essay was the second, to write something I’d long been thinking about but was reluctant to state publicly: I believe the “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program” does our organization a real disservice.

It’s not that “Basic Characteristics” is responsible for the fact that “various program descriptions all seem to be ‘cut from the same cloth.’” Surely not. “Basic Characteristics,” like the mission statements it encourages, is more honored in the breach than in the observance. But why would we, as honors educators, want such a document? Do we really believe one size (extra large) fits all? Despite the disclaimers at its head that “no one model of an honors program can be superimposed on all types of institutions” and “not all characteristics are necessary for an honors program to be considered a successful and/or fully developed honors program,” we as an organization have chosen to state, in rather large type, that “Basic Characteristics” do in fact exist, and we follow the disclaimer with a list of sixteen “Characteristics,” most of which literally use the word “should” to tell us what to do if we, too, wish to be fully developed. In this, as in other endeavors, size matters, and in my judgment “Basic Characteristics” seems to have as its model large universities – places more likely to have an “honors center with such facilities as an honors library, lounge, reading rooms,” for example. As the director of a small program at a small university I find that troubling. It seems to me that some of the most thoughtful and distinctive NCHC leaders, not to mention some of the most interesting honors innovations, have come from smaller programs, programs which are not “fully developed” according to our own organization’s criteria.

There is one “Characteristic” however, near the very end—thirteenth in a list of sixteen—that I have always been drawn to:

The honors program, in distinguishing itself from the rest of the institution, serves as a kind of laboratory within which faculty can try

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things they have always wanted to try but for which they could find no suitable outlet. When such efforts are demonstrated to be successful, they may well become institutionalized, thereby by raising the general level of education within the college or university...

This is compelling. If this were the first criterion, if this were the *only* criterion, the one we really believed in and the one we really lived by, then perhaps honors descriptions might not appear to be cut from the same cloth because honors programs would be distinguished not only from the rest of the institution but from one another. For me, at least, it points toward the single most powerful role honors programs can play – honors as skunkworks.

Here's one definition of skunkworks, a mixture of several to be found on the web: "A skunkworks is a group of people who, in order to achieve unusual results, work on a project in a way that is outside the usual rules, who research and develop a project for the sake of innovation. It is often a small team that assumes or is given responsibility for developing something in a short time with minimal management constraints. It often operates independent of a company's normal R&D operations, to spearhead a project design that thereafter will be developed according to the usual process. A skunkworks project may be secret."

We as an organization *could* foster a view of honors education, of honors programs themselves, as small independent groups on our campuses, working within a larger structure but outside the usual rules and with minimal management restraints, attempting to achieve unusual educational results. It goes without saying we would not want our skunkworks projects to be kept secret, and we would surely hope our successes would be widely disseminated.

Of course, were our focus on agile innovation, our organization wouldn't foreground a document with the turgid title "Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program," which suggests that programs not having these characteristics *because they may in fact be unique* are somehow, what? immature? underdeveloped? wanting in "basics" because they don't report to the administrative officer they "should," or because the percentage of their students' coursework in honors isn't up to snuff? We would laugh if we were told someone had given Woolf or Faulkner or Nabokov something called "Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Novel." So why do we do this to one another, to ourselves?

In her introduction to the issue in which Dail Mullins' piece appeared, Ada Long wrote:

My own view is that increasingly what distinguishes honors and makes it the standard-bearer, fortress, and refuge of excellent undergraduate education is flexibility. As the national trend toward standardization and accountability grinds forward, more and more colleges and universities limit faculty autonomy, curricular experimentation, and student choices.

Powerful words with which I'm sure we'd all agree. It's hard to imagine any of the many honors directors I've known advocating for the "quality enhancement plans" or

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“scorecards” Linda Frost describes in “Saving Honors in the Age of Standardization.” So why would we, the NCHC, which has long discussed how our organization might have a more visible, cutting-edge role in American higher education, want to be on the side of “standardization and accountability” by creating a long list of “shoulds”? Instead of following the mindless models forced on us by state legislators and reaccreditation visits, instead of spending our energy worrying about mission statements, reporting structures and the like, why not encourage each NCHC program to find its unique way. As Thoreau would have it, “In the long run men hit only what they aim at. Therefore, though they should fail immediately, they had better aim at something high.” Were hundreds of honors programs working toward this end, each on its own campus, following its own light, the result might just be radical innovation and substantive change that would give the honors movement a leadership role (not to mention recognition) many within the organization have long desired.

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