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At Play on the Fields of Honor(s)

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At Play on the Fields of Honor(s)

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Who could argue with Skip Godow's list of roles and qualities desirable in an ideal honors leader? With appropriate caveats concerning the wide variation in programs and institutional contexts, he envisions well the comprehensive demands of modern-day honors administration, demands that match my experience of over fourteen years as dean of an honors college of 1300 students as I strive imperfectly to embody the qualities he idealizes.

Of course, one might emphasize one of Skip's points more or less. If an honors administrator is required to perform a number of non-honors university duties, the roles are even more complex. One might also stress more the importance of clear and persuasive writing and inspiring and eloquent speech. And despite Skip's healthy dose of realism in emphasizing "management" skills foreign to faculty culture, one might point out that leadership in honors retains perhaps the greatest affinity for faculty culture among administrative positions.

What I would like to discuss here, however, is a quality that can thread its way through all the roles Skip describes so thoughtfully. This quality is a sense of *play*. Only once does Skip mention "fun"—in the final section on "The Student Activities Coordinator." In addition to the "pragmatic benefits" accruing from leadership activities in student life, he tosses in a bonus: "these things can add a great deal of vitality and fun to honors program life." I take this as a cue to expand on why being an honors administrator in all roles can be fun in the highest sense.

One obvious way to express a sense of play is not to take yourself too seriously. Yes, take learning seriously as a lofty mission, take students and faculty seriously, take your multiple duties and responsibilities seriously, but resist smugness about your own role in the successes of your students, faculty, and staff. It wasn't you who wrote that cutting-edge thesis. It wasn't you who changed a student's life during study abroad in Ghana. It wasn't you who taught that freshman how to read Dante or geography or experimental results in a new way. Heading a prestigious program with many points of pride can easily lead to hubris in an honors administrator, just as academic brilliance can lead to intellectual elitism in an honors student. Fortunately, there will

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usually be enough people around to help you by puncturing your balloons! Pomposity and sententiousness are at best unattractive. Sincere self-deprecation has its charm, and it can smooth collaborations with others.

Another form of play is relaxation from stress. You'll be a better leader for making time for the free play of thought and activity. Showing that you know how to play as well as how to work makes you a good model for the balance between work and play that honors students, with their frequent unforgiving perfectionism and overachieving activity level, have difficulty learning. What do you do for fun? Let students, staff, and faculty around you know that you have other lives besides the administrator role. Do they know about your family, perhaps see your children at the office or your partner at events? Do they suspect that you collect trilobites, coach junior-high softball, play string bass, vacation in Newfoundland, or re-enact Civil War battles? If so, you'll be more reassuringly human to them and you'll be giving them permission to be more fully human themselves.

Third, your playfulness can be expressed by an off-beat sense of humor. Intelligent people have a more sophisticated sense of humor that rejects the easy guffaw and evokes instead a chuckle and a shake of the head. Do you have cool stuff in your office? Is your program's writing prize \$187.62 instead of a boring \$200? Do your formal events look like everyone else's in the institution, or do they bear a peculiar stamp? One of our former deans invented a funny oath seniors continue to swear to, amid much laughter, at each brunch ceremony for graduates. Going against the grain in good fun gives students a solidarity with other like-minded souls. Such kinship complements their academic collaborations in creating high-level learning in their honors classes

Finally, let's recognize that play is associated with some of the loftiest human energies. Artists and writers have been described as engaging in "sacred play" because the free play of imagination on which they thrive seems to connect them to a mysterious spiritual force. Many innovative minds have attested to the value of free and relaxed play of the mind following intense labor on a problem; that's when the new idea often arrives. (See Brewster Ghiselin's little anthology *The Creative Process* or Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's *Creativity*.) Creative play offers fruitful explorations of unknown territories of ideas and feelings, of new fields of discovery. This is a critically important message you can exemplify as well as address explicitly with honors students. Show them that taking risks can be exhilarating, and engage them in "what-if?" thinking. Play of this most serious sort will fuel their senior thesis work and guide them in their lives beyond academia—in work, in philosophical questioning, in love.

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Let's face it, honors administration, like most jobs, is not worth doing if we can't have fun with it.

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