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Leadership in Honors: What is the Right Stuff?

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It may come as disappointing news, but as far as honors administrators go the “right stuff” in many ways resembles sound medical practice: there are seldom cases of heroic intervention; good protocols and practices are better formulas for success than sheer talent or the bold stroke; and so good preparation counts for more than genius. A comprehensive essay on an honors administrator’s role in academic leadership, curriculum design, administrative organization and reportage, and other honors desiderata would make a hefty book, and so these brief remarks will address specific but important aspects of administration, faculty recruitment, and student advising.

Above all, being well prepared in administrative terms means having a clear, consistent, well developed message describing in detail honors’ importance to the institution, its benefits to colleges, departments, and programs, its role in improving academic standards, the competitive advantages it provides in recruiting the most able students, and its place in fundraising for itself and the institution. The message must be concise, and it must highlight honors as the single most important element in improving overall academic quality and in maintaining academic standards in an era when they are increasingly challenged.

The ability to meet opportunities when they are presented, whether as a result of the expected or the completely fortuitous, is another prerequisite to success. A director with full, accurate information ready to hand—including relevant statistics on everything from feeder high schools to acceptances into graduate and professional schools—is likely better prepared to take advantage of opportunities that come honors’ way than the one who must consult with records or ask others for answers.

An honors administrator therefore must always be prepared to deal with other administrators, both superiors and equals, and to seize the initiative. It is essential to fight for honors’ place at the administrative table and to be prepared to absorb verbal punishment that may come with that fight. It is sometimes difficult to make honors’ case with a peer or superior who is willfully and persistently ignorant—e.g., “since honors is chiefly a first-year program

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. . .” or “because you serve only a few students and are not part of the institutional mission . . .”—and who must constantly be reminded of the nature and importance of the program. One must find a strategy that meets distortion, misinformation, disinformation, and sheer sloth with an accurate and up-to-date picture of the program front and center in the reporting structure.

An honors dean or director inevitably competes with other deans and directors for scarce funds, and the contests can be heated and personal. Others have legitimate claims to resources, so they will, and should, protect their turf fiercely and seek to increase it. No dean worth the name will yield lightly to a rival for money, and honors is and always will be seen as another mouth at the funding trough, one that will deprive deans and directors of resources they believe are legitimately theirs by right, tradition, and necessity. Honors’ claim is equal to theirs: smile and stay the course.

It is always necessary to be on the lookout to recruit faculty to teach in the program, and often the skills of a near magician are necessary in this area. Staffing and recruiting arrangements are many, and they sometimes vary from one year to the next. The task may be fairly straightforward. With a generous budget, the administrator may simply buy faculty time and provide funds for replacements in contributing departments. Of course, that situation is exceptional, and in most programs the budget is much less lavish while in still others honors must depend on the generosity of departments to staff courses.

Honors must make certain that it puts the best faculty it can find in front of its classes—the most vibrant, active members. Of course, these are the instructors a department or college will be most reluctant to release. Almost always these faculty also will have research and scholarly agendas that complicate the equation: not available that term, not teaching on Thursdays, and so on. Good working relationships with department chairs and deans, as well as with the faculty members themselves, are essential if such faculty are to be made available for honors. It is important to stress the advantages of honors teaching to individual faculty, departments, and colleges. An instructor will be working with a group of highly motivated, well-prepared students, almost always with a high tolerance for intellectual frustration with disciplines and concepts unfamiliar to them. Faculty, departments, and colleges should understand that honors classes are often their best recruiting grounds for majors, exactly the kinds of students they want in their departments, and the likelihood of landing such students if outstanding faculty are teaching honors classes only increases. Vital, talented faculty are ultimately as much the life blood of honors as are students, and every effort is necessary to bring the best of them into the honors fold. It follows that an honors administrator must always be on the lookout for new faculty who are good candidates to teach in

honors. A director must be as flexible as possible to secure the best classroom instruction.

Faculty recruitment is no easy task; the battle is never finished, but waging it is easier if one is accommodating, maintains a sense of humor, provides a consistent message, and operates in good faith.

Honors is ultimately about students and being prepared to work with them in whatever ways necessary. While dealing with them can be hectic and sometimes stressful, this area also provides significant personal rewards. Advising is a crucial part of the job, and usually only the dean or director will have the necessary time and expertise to take care of it. Advising is time consuming, but it is also a learning experience that can become a pleasure. Each institution will have its own unique mix of majors, and an administrator must be prepared to work in that specific milieu. More honors students in my program, about 40%, major in natural science than in any other fields, and the students cover the gamut from environmental science, a particularly strong area at this institution, to pre-medicine and physics; virtually every academic major area is represented in honors. I am a humanist (European intellectual history and the history of religion). It was therefore necessary to learn a great deal about prerequisites for science classes and requirements for science majors. For instance, at this university chemistry is a prerequisite for biology, and a first-year pre-medical student, eager to begin the biology major, is sometimes unsettled when told to start with the chemistry sequence. A good grasp of the biology major requirements, as well as an idea of the importance of chemistry relative to biology as it is taught in the major-level biology classes, is absolutely necessary if one is to command the confidence of such students. One must know as well the suite of courses students planning to major in environmental science or business must complete before applying to these programs, both of which are highly selective, upper-division colleges in my university, and both of which have quite specific entrance requirements.

On a campus with more than 12,600 students and more than 200 major programs, broad and detailed advising expertise is a necessary arrow in the quiver, and the points must always be sharp. One also must be aware of changes in majors and of campus resources, e.g., program advisors and printed information, to stay on top of this area. Of course, advising does not stop with the academic major, and everything from discussions of life in general to applications to professional or graduate schools falls in an administrator's lap at one time or another. It is necessary to be prepared to the fullest extent possible and to understand that there are times when it is best to send a student to someone else with better and more up-to-date information. Finally, remember that honors students will be engaged in their education to a very high degree, and advising them is more akin to working with graduate students than with the average undergraduate.

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Readiness is no guarantee, but it is a necessary if not sufficient condition for success. Tolstoy's observation that luck is the residue of design is nowhere truer than in honors.

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