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# Chaucer, Mountain Hiking, and Honors Program Leadership

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SAM SCHUMAN

# Chaucer, Mountain Hiking, and Honors Program Leadership

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The narrator of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* laments that he is no lover himself but only the "servant of love's servants." I'm in an analogous position in respect to honors program administration: for the past quarter-century, I've been in administrative positions as chief academic officer and as chancellor where I've worked with honors directors but not really had daily responsibility for a program myself. In a way this disqualifies me from writing on the topic of honors leadership with (to quote Chaucer again) the authority of experience, at least contemporary experience. On the other hand, it may be useful to look briefly at honors administration, and at Skip Godow's classic essay on "Honors Program Leadership: The Right Stuff," from an affectionately tangential but outside perspective.

I have always been most impressed by Dr. Godow's clear sense that the leader of an honors program must be a respected academic. College and university presidents, provosts, and perhaps even deans can be effective if their primary skills are managerial. Indeed, at the level of major research universities, chief executives are going to find their skills as teachers and scholars atrophying. They are going to be judged for their ability to seek and manage funds, to influence the political process, to interact persuasively and winningly with alumni, friends and members of the community, and similar tasks. Leading an intense classroom discussion, writing helpful comments on an essay, or crafting a piece of original scholarship won't happen much, or if it does, it won't matter much, alas. The same might be said of registrars, library directors, business managers, facilities overseers, etc. But not honors directors. If an honors director does not possess, maintain, and regularly demonstrate the talents of a really good faculty member, the honors program that individual leads will lose the admiration of the students and faculty she should be leading.

One somewhat quirky way of saying this is that the honors administrator should not be perceived as an administrator, at least not primarily. Skip's essay reminds us that the leader of an honors program should be regarded by colleagues and students as an academic, not a manager.

And yet, honors programs need to be managed! I would like to suggest that the work of the honors leader as scholar/teacher needs to be bracketed by attention to concerns both larger and smaller than instruction and research. My favorite analogy for this model of academic administration is hiking in the mountains. To get the most out of a mountain trek, the hiker needs to keep shifting his or her glance between the broadest vista of the peaks ahead, and the minute beauty of the alpine wildflowers below. To miss contemplating either is to impoverish the hiking experience. Similarly, the fine honors administrator must attend to both the peaks and the wildflowers of the academic world.

It is, perhaps, possible to be a good college teacher just by paying very careful attention to the classes one instructs. But the good academic administrator needs to keep in mind, always, more overarching concerns, the peaks: What is the most effective shape for an undergraduate education for these particular undergraduates, at this particular time and place? What kinds of growth and change do we hope the sequence of the honors program will stimulate in our students? Which pedagogical styles, in what order and at what time, will most effectively interact with the developmental stages of these learners? What subject matters will be most fruitful, within the context of the complete educational program of a particular institution, for contemporary liberal learning? A fine honors director must be an educational philosopher, as well as a faculty colleague.

She or he must also be a bean counter! Except, perhaps, in the largest and most lavishly staffed honors programs, the director (or dean) is going to be responsible for a significant load of “administrivia.” Rooms need to be scheduled. Effective student recruitment letters need to be written and sent to the right people at the right time. Meetings need to be called, presided over, recorded. Budgets need to be created, funded, and kept accurately. For too many who come from the world of academe, these daily managerial tasks seem trivial and petty, but together they make an enormous difference in the learning and the collegiate experience of honors students and the professional lives of honors faculty. The honors administrator who is an original scholar and an effective teacher but who runs out of money halfway through spring semester is going to find the collegial affection of her or his peers overwhelmed by ire. And rightly. I argue that the details of running an honors program are, collectively, important. If they are seen as insignificant details, the program will go astray. Daily managerial tasks need to be done thoroughly, carefully, thoughtfully, and even, I would curiously argue, lovingly. If one really cares about a program, its people and what it is doing, its smallest pieces need to be kept as shiny as its major components. The beauty of the wildflowers needs the same attention as the grandeur of the peaks.

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Perhaps an equally engaging, albeit less athletic, analogy might see the honors administrator as a fine chef. Even as the meal is cooking, such a chef must be paying attention to the combination of flavors and colors and textures of the complete enterprise, and the tiny subtleties of spice that bring out the best in the food.

I am grateful for Skip Godow's thoughts on honors leadership, and suggest that his vision is "Olympian." It should be. Academic leadership, and particularly honors administration, is challenging and valuable work. In honors, we can play a major role in shaping the learning and the lives of some of the brightest and most promising young women and men in our nation. The world needs those men and women, and it needs them at their very best. Seen that way, "the right stuff" in honors program administration is about as important and demanding a task and a topic as we can imagine. Seen that way, we might say of the work of honors program leaders, as Dryden said of Chaucer, "here is God's plenty!"

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