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Searching for Tatiyana

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SRIRAM KHÉ

Searching for Tatiyana

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A female student rushed into my office with a backpack swinging from her shoulder as I was enjoying freshly brewed coffee and a brownie from the batch I had made for my class. No introductions, but an abrupt “Dr. Khé, you don’t know me, but I heard that you have applied for the Director position, and I totally support your application.”

This was how my interaction with honors students started a couple of years ago after I had barely submitted my application for the Director position. I had no idea what to say other than “thanks, but who are you?” She sat down and introduced herself—Tatiyana was her name (no real names used in this essay). I offered her brownies, Tatiyana took one, and we started chatting. She was a senior majoring in history and planned to go to law school.

The “law school” got my attention because for a couple of weeks I had been closely following the Michael Newdow case: Newdow, an atheist and father of a third-grade student, sued the government, claiming that it was unconstitutional to force his daughter to listen to “under God” in the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance in public schools. So, naturally, I asked Tatiyana what she thought about the case that had made its way to the Supreme Court. Her quick-fire responses clearly showed her familiarity with the details of the case. Tatiyana was confident that the court would toss the case out on the grounds that Newdow had no standing, which was exactly what the court did months later. And, by the way, Tatiyana did go on to a prestigious law school on the east coast.

In a way, that student, who charged into my office and disrupted my ruminations over coffee, also defined for me what I thought an honors student ought to be like. After being appointed Director, I suppose I have been searching for Tatiyanas among the high-school seniors applying for admission to the Honors Program: students who are confident about their understanding of the world and simultaneously eager to know more; students who serve as sparring partners for faculty, sometimes even knocking the faculty down, metaphorically speaking, of course; students aware of their intellectual limitations so that their confidence does not cross over to arrogance.

I am sure that all faculty members have their own Tatiyana stories. I am glad that I have run into quite a few Tatiyanas, and we do have many of them

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even now in the Honors Program. But there was always one feeling that nagged me: what if many such Tatiyanas existed among the 900-plus freshman students who join our university every year but did not apply for admission to the Honors Program because they did not know about it?

So, I no longer merely wait for students to apply to join the Honors Program. In order to recruit potential Tatiyanas who, for various reasons, end up not applying to the Honors Program, we have now instituted a direct admission process, in addition to the traditional application format. I scan for students' academic credentials—SAT/ACT scores and high school GPAs—in the university's database of admitted students and then send a few of them letters offering them direct admissions to Honors—without applications and recommendations. If they like the sound of it, they then send us the signed contract indicating their intention to join our learning community. About a third of the current freshman and sophomore classes are such direct admits to Honors, and the rest are through the traditional application route.

In this context, I truly appreciate Larry Andrews' observation that it all comes down to the populations that our respective institutions serve, our honors traditions, and our institutional cultures. Yes, for the direct admissions to Honors we rely on the holy academic trinity—SAT, ACT, and GPA. However, we do not want that to be the only route for admitting students to Honors because, if we had based admissions strictly on those numbers, we might have lost out on students like Olga, whose combination of SAT scores and high school GPA might not have led me to offer her admission to Honors. As a regional public university, our institution's mission is to provide learning opportunities to students even if their past academic records might fall short of our expectations. Olga was admitted through the traditional route of application, essay, and letters of recommendation. We know we have a winner in Olga; according to students in her cohort, Olga is the ideal honors student because she places academics first even through the hours she spends at her part-time job. I can easily imagine her dedication from what she wrote to the Honors Committee as a sophomore, after a year in Honors:

The prospect of going to college frightened me at first, but when I was accepted into Honors Program I began to anticipate the arrival of the first day of college more than I ever had before. During the summer registration and the new student week I was nervous. As I walked towards my first class on that first Monday, I was terrified, but by the end of the first week the fears were gone. My attitude now has changed many times. It began as fear, and then turned to interest. Now, nearly five quarters through, I can sum up my experience in one word: exciting.

As I was reflecting on our dual admission process and whether direct admits might value Honors differently from those who applied for admission,

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one student confirmed that we do indeed have Tatiyanas. This student, a direct admit herself, asked me whether I was concerned that students might find out who was directly admitted and who was not and, therefore, whether tensions might develop as a result. My immediate response was that this was exactly how we expect honors students to think through issues, even those that are not directly related to the curriculum.

Yes, I sidestepped her question and still do not know how to answer it. As of now, there is no evidence that this split admission process has created tensions among students. Perhaps we simply lucked out with a great group of students who do not care about the process that brought them together. Or perhaps students who value the idea of honors pay no attention at all to these admission channels; they are just happy to be here. At least, I find it easier to think thus than otherwise.

A couple of years into my responsibilities in the Honors Program, I know I have barely understood the admissions process and high-school seniors. Then there is retention, thesis work, and the success of our students post-graduation—all a huge challenge that, based on my experience with admissions, is beyond simple quantification.

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