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Balancing on the Edge of Honors: A Meditation

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In thinking about Larry Andrews' two recent offerings in *JNCHC*, his Forum piece featured in this issue and his "At Play on the Fields of Honor(s)" in the last issue, I am struck by a central motif connecting these essays. That motif is not particularly surprising as I reflect on my years of knowing Larry and working with him on the Publications Board. He is smart, witty, hardworking, and humane. His sense of language is sharp and graceful. That he runs the first-rate Honors College at Kent State University is well known throughout the honors universe. In many respects he himself embodies the balance and perspective that he advocates for honors administrators, their programs, and their students. When he advises us or reminds us in "At Play" not to neglect the fun and the joy in our working lives and to insure that students recognize as well the importance of intellectual and creative play in the academy and beyond, he is offering wisdom to value and to practice. Therein lies the rub. Saying one wants to be balanced and keep the travails of job and pleasures of life in balance is easy; achieving this balance is hard to do and even harder to sustain.

The most cursory reading of *JNCHC*'s Forum on Honors Administration reveals the incredible range of tasks facing the directors of honors programs and colleges (7.2). From students needing counseling about what courses to take or how to handle the painful cancer of a family member to the oft-heard call from Public Relations that they need a group of ten honors students for a video by 12:45pm tomorrow (the implicit subtext: bright, articulate, engaging, photogenic, and racially and culturally diverse), the hours, much less the day, of an honors administrator rarely proceeds uninterrupted. Trumping all, of course, is email, exponentially expanding a Director's open-door policy to the world and screaming its silent demand for either an immediate response or the guilt of delay, the latter entailing the stubborn persistence of the email amidst an ever-growing menu of missives.

Beyond such chores, the pressures and imperatives of numbers on honors are part and parcel of the sea change that Len Zane observes in the visibility and centrality of honors within the institutional landscape. Numbers

typically serve as the currency within such a landscape, which is increasingly populated by deans, councils, and vice presidents who must be concerned, and rightly so, with numbers: class size, recruits, retention figures, graduates, budgets, and more. In such a world, an honors administrator's voice may sound tinny and off-key while chanting that ubiquitous choral refrain of academic excellence, small classes, and challenges and opportunities for students and faculty.

At my own institution, which has five campuses, I am in the throes of constructing a case to the academic vice president for expanding the reassigned time of the campus coordinators for honors. I promised an argument that would include measurable goals and expectations in terms of the numbers of honors courses, students enrolled, and advisees on each campus but that would not just be about the numbers. The additional ingredients are, of course, the unanticipated problems and requests but, more importantly, intangibles of great education that defy ready quantification and that constitute what Andrews in this issue of *JNCHC* calls "the noble honors pedagogical and advising tradition of *investing in the individual student.*" This investment by the institution translates into an investment of attention, time, effort, and more attention by those in the trenches of honors education and advisement. The success of that investment in students and the longevity of honors may well hinge on maintaining a balanced perspective.

Apology in lieu of a conclusion: Perhaps this meditation on balance and perspective is little more than a self-reflexive (read self-indulgent?) interlude during a hectic spring, reminding me to enjoy Atlanta's resplendent dogwoods as they blossom. After all, four blocks of my thirty-mile commute (one way) wend beneath a canopy of giant dogwood trees completely covered in white blooms on the street Jessica Tandy walks as Miss Daisy before Hoke Coleburn, played by Morgan Freeman, convinces her to get in the car to drive to the Piggly-Wiggly in Alfred Uhry's *Driving Miss Daisy*. But even enjoying such spring reveries has its challenges: all views are siphoned through the haze of pollen with its particulate count of 5,208. (Any amount over 120 is considered extremely high.) The simplest pleasures, like the simplest adages, are often confounded, are often the most profound. If all this brief reflection offers is a convoluted journey to a simple finger extended toward Andrews' wit and wisdom in pointing to the middle way, to a middle path, so easy to articulate and so hard to follow, that may be enough for this moment. An old woman responds in a koan, writes Jerry Shinshin Wick, to every sojourning monk asking for directions to the monastery on the Great Mountain: "Straight ahead" (34). Perhaps we, too, are left with only going straight ahead while knowing that it is always a serpentine road that ascends the mountain.

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