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JIM FORD

Creating an Honors Culture

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Charlie Slavin's excellent essay on "Defining Honors Culture" raises a host of compelling questions. As the director of an honors program just taking its first steps, I found myself returning again and again to the limits of my own role in shaping a nascent honors culture. Can honors administrators create an "honors culture"? Probably not, even in the case of a newly created honors program. The larger institutional culture and the particular characteristics of the first honors students make the creation *ex nihilo* of an honors culture difficult, if not impossible. But the stated goals of a particular honors program and the attitudes of honors administrators certainly play a crucial role in the development of the honors culture. When those goals and attitudes are enshrined in the admissions process, curricular requirements, and co-curricular activities of an honors program, honors administrators may enjoy a decisive role in the evolution of an institution's particular honors culture.

Given the diversity of honors programs and institutions today, the institutional context is certainly relevant. Rogers State University became a four-year university in 2000, after thirty years as a community college. RSU is an open-access public institution serving the northeast Oklahoma area. In the fall of 2004 the administration decided to institute an honors program to provide talented students with a more challenging and rewarding academic environment. A task force was formed, a director was hired, and mission statements were drafted; the first class of eighteen students was admitted in the fall of 2005. The honors program is now just three years old, and so, presumably, is the honors culture.

From the outset, honors at our institution has had several clearly stated goals: producing graduates who are "lifelong learners," "critical and creative thinkers," and "academically and socially responsible" citizens. Similar goals exist in a wide variety of honors programs. I suggest that the significance of such goals depends on the extent to which they are practically enacted. For instance, are admissions decisions made primarily on the numbers? In our case, all applicants who meet the minimum requirements for our honors program—the trinity of GPA, ACT, and class rank—are interviewed by a panel of faculty and current honors students, with the questions tailored as narrowly as possible to the program goals and we consider a broad range of criteria: Does the applicant have the kind of intellectual curiosity that

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motivates lifelong learning? Is there evidence of the openness to new ideas necessary (but not sufficient) for critical thinking? Do answers to standard questions indicate creativity and insight, or are they lifeless and rote? Our program is extremely small, accepting only twenty students each year. Goals alone cannot create or determine an honors culture, but using the admissions process to emphasize a program's goals and to identify students who are good candidates for attaining them enables honors administrators to pull the honors culture in the right direction.

Of course, the reason that our program is limited to twenty incoming students each year is important: honors students receive a full four-year scholarship. As long as they continue in the honor program, school is free, and this is a thorny issue, one that Charlie Slavin raises in his essay. If their scholarships are tied to honors, will students have the right motivation? Will they be pursuing "honors for honors' sake," and so be the kind of intellectual risk-takers we honors administrators want and love? I take Slavin's comments on scholarships in honors as a challenge since the nascent honors program at my college owes its continued existence to such scholarships. Few of my students would have joined the honors program if not for the scholarship, particularly the program's inaugural class. But those who have persevered are, in large part, those who enjoy the challenge and are willing to take risks. What could be riskier than joining an honors program with no history, only a little planning, and a number of vague requirements? The truth is there are many ways to pay for an education, and even in our program's short history there have been several students who have decided that working for a living or borrowing money was much easier than taking honors courses. Even when the scholarship is the initial attraction, an honors program with the right goals and practices can have a culture of intellectual risk-taking and academic excellence.

Charlie Slavin considers motivation as a primary factor in honors culture but puts it aside in favor of intellectual risk-taking as one of the four cornerstones, leaving it to others to identify the remaining three. I think he has actually identified two of the cornerstones—which in our fledgling program seem more like tent-poles, but the metaphor remains useful. Perhaps motivation alone is not the dominant trait of honors students, but a certain kind of motivation—a genuine joy in learning—is as vital to honors culture as intellectual risk-taking. It's not just a willingness to take risks that leads to great interdisciplinary work, say, although that is certainly necessary; honors students *want* to learn about subjects outside their major; they have a *passion* for knowledge and for wisdom. That passion for learning is an indispensable component of honors culture and, like intellectual risk-taking, is characteristic of both honors faculty and honors students.

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The distinction that David Brooks cites from Brainerd Alden Thresher—between students with a “poetic” frame of mind and those with a “prudential” one—is particularly apt. At our institution, and I suspect at many others, the honors culture emphasizes the poetic frame of mind. We try to find students who already have that poetic mindset, or at least those who seem open and willing to develop it (I do not say “able” because I think any student is capable of that frame of mind, which is a subject for another essay). Students play a key role within an honors culture, and having the right students makes all the difference. By emphasizing the program’s goals and general honors attitudes throughout the admission process, curriculum, and co-curricular activities, honors administrators and faculty play a decisive role in shaping both the honors students and the larger honors culture.

REFERENCE

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