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Implementing Honors Faculty Status: An Adventure in Academic Politics

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I joined the faculty at the University of North Carolina Pembroke in 1999. At that time there were about 3200 students, and we were mostly a commuter campus. Currently we have just over 6000 students, and the campus has shifted to a much more residential student body. The physical plant has expanded and improved, and the faculty has almost doubled. We have added several new degree programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. The focus of this essay is the expansion of the honors college, particularly the implementation of a system granting official honors faculty status. This system has helped us establish a stronger community and identity on campus, and it has been a key step in improving the programs within the college.

When I took over as dean in 2005, I had several ideas for change within the college, one of the most important being the implementation of a formal honors designation for the faculty who teach in the college. I had taught in the honors college myself prior to my appointment, so I had already experienced the system, or lack of a system, first hand. I had also served as chair of the UNCP faculty senate, a duty that gave me valuable knowledge about how things worked at many levels of the university.

The way honors faculty were selected before 2005 probably sounds familiar, especially to those from small or mid-sized colleges and universities. The college had no formal process of scheduling faculty for honors teaching; as some colleagues have commented, it was a “beg, borrow, or steal” operation. When the call for the next semester’s schedule came from the registrar, I would email and call department chairs and request that certain general education courses be offered as honors sections and ask for faculty to cover those. We also needed faculty to teach the interdisciplinary seminars that serve as our core curriculum. Even though I knew most of the chairs fairly well through my senate duties, the process was not always smooth. Some said they could not spare anyone; some wanted to assign faculty they did not want to deal with themselves; some wanted adjuncts to teach the courses; some wanted to teach themselves; and some wanted to talk about opening the classes up to non-honors students. Also, for a high percentage of chairs, honors teaching was a luxury or a reward to be handed out to faculty based on criteria that they had in their own minds.

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Try as I might, I often found those criteria difficult to discover or understand. Though I was technically in charge of the program, I had little or no authority to request specific faculty for honors courses. Every faculty assignment was a complex negotiation, one that did not always work to the program's advantage.

Myriad and obvious problems arose with doing things this way. First of all, getting the faculty I wanted came down to my negotiation skills. The establishment of the honors program as a college, my appointment as dean, and my subsequent requests for more honors sections and specific faculty to teach them (both senior and junior) often served to cloud the waters. It seemed logical that a more formal system with specific criteria would be a benefit to the college, especially if it meant always working with faculty interested in becoming part of honors education.

The chairs often did not recognize or acknowledge that an honors curriculum has its own goals and objectives that can be distinct from departmental goals and objectives. Few, if any, recognized the teaching of honors courses as valuable or noteworthy (or even different), especially during merit evaluation or promotion and tenure consideration; they saw honors teaching mostly as service and at best as a reward they could hand out, a reward grounded in the fact that the professor would have a smaller class and get to teach the "good" students. The UNCP Honors College lacked an identity that administrators and faculty recognized and embraced, an identity that they would want to help construct and maintain.

The invisibility of the honors college was in sharp contrast to graduate teaching at UNCP. The rhetoric surrounding graduate faculty status is a proud one. Faculty and chairs alike see teaching graduate courses as a major accomplishment, one that demands "extra" time and more experience, thus earning a course release for the professor. So I decided that the best way for the honors college to start to grow and develop, to explore innovative ways to serve honors students and the university in general, was to show faculty that their involvement would be meaningful and rewarding on many levels. The administrative structure of the college wherein the dean was a glorified secretary was also a recipe for stagnation. If the honors college was to be a success, I was going to have to change the way the university saw it by changing the way it worked at the level of classroom teaching and faculty selection.

One of the strongest assets to this process was the University Honors Council. Shortly after taking over as dean, I reconstituted the council, which had existed in name only for a while. Some members told me that they had not met in over a year. Their advice and guidance in the process of setting up guidelines for honors faculty status was invaluable. Of course, one key is putting the right people together from the right divisions of the university. For example, the chair of this council has been involved in honors programs at UNCP for thirty years and is also a department chair. The council includes representatives from Academic Affairs and most departments involved in teaching the core honors courses. The backing of a group of faculty and administrators helping to develop and expand the honors program was important in convincing colleagues

that a system of honors faculty status would be beneficial. As I was having conversations with the council and starting to draft the policies and procedures for granting honors faculty status, I also had conversations with the provost about these very issues. Fortunately, he was quite receptive to the plan.

I modeled what would later become the honors faculty policy on the existing policies for graduate faculty status, the logic of which often applies to honors faculty status, and many of the selection criteria made their way into the final proposal. In the criteria we developed, the main focus is on teaching, but we acknowledge the inherent links between scholarship and teaching. We ask for two years of teaching experience at UNCP, positive student evaluations of teaching, and a record of experience and scholarship in the field. Applicants include a current *vita* and a personal statement of how their teaching philosophy will enhance the mission of the honors college. Part of the point is to recruit the faculty who have a strong interest in honors education and to ensure that they have the credentials to implement their ideas.

We are look for faculty committed to their academic fields, to honors education, to the university, and to student learning. Another factor that adds an exponential energy to a program is recruiting faculty who have considered the connections between their own careers and honors education. The application also asks for signatures of the department chair, the dean of the appropriate college or school, the dean of the honors college, and the provost. The final approval rests with the honors council, but all signatures must be on the form before the council reviews the application. The benefit of this process is that these signatures indicate the support of the chair, the dean, and academic affairs for the faculty member's involvement in honors teaching. This official support is key when resources are scarce or start to become so; these faculty have the official endorsement of the university as those who will teach in the honors college.

Once the criteria and application were developed and approved by Academic Affairs and the University Honors Council, I decided to take them through the senate governance structure for faculty approval. I knew this was risky. Not everyone is a fan of honors programs, and some faculty see honors programs as elitist and do not see any benefits to separating these students into honors courses. But I knew that in the long run, senate support and faculty handbook documents would be invaluable to the ability of the honors college to define its own curriculum and select its own faculty. If both the senate and the administration endorsed the new system, chairs and faculty would probably start seeing the program in a new and better way.

I hoped that the faculty would accept the plan easily, but I had to convince the faculty committee members at each stage of governance—Curriculum Committee, Academic Affairs Committee, and Faculty Senate—that the new system was worthwhile. Questions of elitism, confidentiality, and selection criteria came up. One concern arose about the confidentiality of the documents requested from applicants seeking honors faculty status. Since we asked for a

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vita and copies of the last three sets of student evaluations, faculty expressed some discomfort about members of the council seeing these documents. I pointed out that we supply similar documents when we go up for tenure or promotion or apply for teaching and/or research awards. Furthermore, applying for honors faculty status is entirely up to each individual. I assured faculty that they could trust the members of the council to keep all information confidential, and I expressed my opinion that people who would like to teach honors courses were most likely willing to share their accomplishments and credentials with their peers.

After a lengthy debate in the senate, the policy and procedure of establishing an honors faculty and granting honors status to faculty members who met the criteria narrowly passed. Now, with the support of both the faculty and the administration, the honors college is in a much better position to define its vision and goals. Any academic department wants to have the ability to make hires, develop and modify curriculum, evaluate faculty in the department, and give input on promotion and tenure decisions. An honors college or program should be no different. Even though we do not grant degrees or hire faculty to teach only honors courses, we do certify that students have completed a set program of study. Now, with the newly formed honors faculty, we are starting to have meaningful conversations about what we want to do in honors courses and what the honors curriculum should accomplish. The faculty know that they will be involved with the program for a long period of time, and they are starting to see direct impacts from their efforts.

But nothing is perfect, and some tensions have resulted from the fact that suddenly honors teaching has become officially recognized, rewarded, and to some degree competitive. One issue for us is the small size of the college. Though we have expanded the offerings within the college as we have grown, we have over 300 full-time faculty members at UNCP, and we only offer 10–15 honors classes each semester. Right now, the 28 approved honors faculty members often have to wait several semesters before teaching an honors course. Since we intend to keep the honors college small at UNCP, the numbers of honors offerings will probably never increase significantly. Therefore, if even more faculty suddenly sought honors faculty status, the opportunities for approved faculty to teach honors courses could become even fewer.

Having more faculty who want to teach honors classes than there are classes to teach can be a good problem to have, but, if the problem gets too great, the honors council will need to discuss ways to address it. For now, though, the ratios seem to be working well. One helpful criterion is that faculty seeking honors faculty status must have taught at UNCP for at least two years; this gives faculty time to acclimate to the university and to their departments. Most often, faculty hear about the program from students or other colleagues, and if they are interested in teaching for the honors college, they contact me to discuss their interests and their possible application. Though I have personally recruited faculty who have reputations as being excellent teachers and scholars, most honors faculty are ones who approach me. Though I have heard that some

faculty resent the honors faculty designation and see it as elitism in action, any faculty member who meets the criteria is free to apply. I am willing to live with the resentment of a few in order to build a community of teachers and scholars who support the program and our students.

On a few occasions, I have had to convince chairs that the faculty who are approved as honors faculty must be available to cover honors courses. Chairs sometimes feel that I am overstepping my bounds by *informing* them of who will teach, say, the honors composition course, which is not my intent. I have handled this problem by trying to make sure to have at least two honors faculty members from key departments so that I can ask the honors faculty and department chair to work together on availability as we schedule the honors classes; the tension has not gone away entirely, but it is decreasing. The system has been in place for only three years and, coupled with long-range course projections I supply to the chairs, is slowly making the relationship between honors teaching and departmental needs a much better one.

The most impressive benefit has come from the energy and investment honors faculty have put into the honors college. The new process of achieving honors faculty status established public and formal recognition for the faculty who were already interested in working with honors students and teaching honors courses. It has also aided in the recruiting of highly motivated and skilled faculty to teach honors courses. I have noticed a marked increase in faculty participation in honors social and co-curricular activities, helping us to forge an even stronger honors community on campus. Since the faculty are formally and officially linked with the program, I also see more energy dedicated to curriculum development and teaching innovation. I have a much easier time recruiting faculty mentors for honors projects, and the honors faculty seem to have a much keener interest in the academic progress of honors students in general.

Another benefit, from the point of view of a program administrator, is that the system helps to place the best teachers in the honors courses. If an honors college or program is going to exist, and if resources are going to be allocated to the program, the students who show the most academic potential should have the best opportunity to realize their potential. Part of providing that opportunity must be an attempt to place them in classes with professors who can help students excel, academically and otherwise. Ignoring that key piece of honors education or pretending that all professors are equally good teachers does a disservice to our students.

I also believe that it is my duty as an administrator to support honors faculty as they further develop and hone their skills in the classroom. Having a defined honors faculty helps me argue for funds directly linked to honors faculty development. So far, I have been able to fund five faculty to attend NCHC Faculty Institutes. Once faculty become part of the honors college program, it makes sense that they want and need faculty development opportunities specific to honors education; NCHC workshops and institutes have a profound impact on all courses they teach, not just on honors courses. I am glad to argue

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for funds from Academic Affairs to support these faculty because they are a formal part of my academic unit, and I know that they will be an integral part of our success and our identity. The ideas they have gained about honors teaching have been invaluable already, and they have helped us implement several new programs.

At least two other main benefits ensue from implementing a system of awarding honors faculty status. The first is student retention. Having invested, highly motivated, and well-trained faculty teaching *regularly* in the program should help us retain students and achieve a higher rate of completion. I plan to measure such increases in the near future with data I have been collecting, but anecdotal evidence from students already leads me to believe that retention and graduation rates are rising; as faculty investment increases and the academic community grows stronger, students seem to increase their own investment in the program. Having an honors faculty has also given the honors college greater equality with the other colleges and schools on campus. Instead of the college consisting only of a dean, staff, and students, we now have a core faculty as well. What we do as a unit is becoming more and more visible and significant within the university as a whole; the impact of administrative and curricular decisions on the University Honors College is now as much a part of the discussions among deans as the impact of such decisions on Arts and Sciences, Business, or Education. Equality means both a stronger voice on campus and more academic resources. Establishing an honors faculty is one step towards addressing the academic marginalization which can be common for honors programs.

Our next steps will be to involve the honors faculty with honors advising in a formal and systematic way. After that, I hope to explore the possibility of full-time faculty housed in the honors college. At the very least, we will argue for greater recognition of the central role these faculty play in the program, including course releases, stipends, and formal links to the promotion and tenure process. Educating undergraduate honors students is no less important than educating graduate students, and the time and energy faculty put into making the honors college function well should be noticed and rewarded. Down the road, we hope to establish a separate general education core curriculum for honors students. The main thing to realize here is that, whatever we do in the future, now it is not a matter of *what I want*; it is a matter of what the honors faculty want as well. And we all know that faculty are the cornerstone of every facet of the university.

Overall, setting up an honors faculty has been well worth the effort of planning and implementation. The potential benefits to the program and the students far outweigh the drawbacks I have experienced. Finally, I would add that nothing is wrong with publicly recognizing faculty for hard work and excellent teaching. After all, students rarely remember who the dean and provost were at their undergraduate colleges and universities; they remember the faculty members who changed their lives, or at least tried to. An honors program, even a

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small one, should honor its faculty with a designation that means something. Once this faculty is established, then the program or college has a much greater chance of building a vision and an identity collaboratively and from within. Too often, external forces define honors colleges and programs, and therefore they can become stagnant or function only in the way others allow them to. Though I am sure programs can be successful under other models, the implementation of honors faculty status has positively affected the honors experience at UNCP. An honors council and an honors faculty infuse a program with energy and ideas, creating a much better learning environment for the students.

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