University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive | National Collegiate Honors Council

Spring 2004

Honors In Research: Twenty Years Later

Cheryl Achterberg
Pennsylvania State University, achterberg.1@osu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchcjournal

Part of the Higher Education Administration Commons

Achterberg, Cheryl, "Honors In Research: Twenty Years Later" (2004). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive.* Paper 117.
http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchcjournal/117

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the National Collegiate Honors Council at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Honors In Research: Twenty Years Later

CHERYL ACHTERBERG
PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY

> *"It is evident that the most significant characteristics of the larger post modern intellectual situation—its pluralism, complexity and ambiguity—are precisely the characteristics necessary for the potential emergence of a fundamentally new form of intellectual vision… [one that is] reflected in the widespread call for, and practice of, open "conversation" between different understandings, different vocabularies, different cultural paradigms."*
>
> — Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind.*

Three papers (Estress, 1984; Roemer, 1984; Schuman, 1984) were published twenty years ago on the subject of research in honors. The purpose of this paper is to re-examine those thoughts in today's context and to build forward on them where possible.

Honors programs have a tremendous, but as yet unrealized, potential to make a difference in the quality of higher education. Of course, honors programs should make a profound difference in the learning experience of all honors students. As Renzulli (1998) noted, we have "a responsibility to develop gifted behavior, not just find and certify it." Yet, there are few recognized scholars on honors education at the collegiate level and no recognized area of study on the subject. However, honors education in practice is often a learning laboratory for undergraduate education more generally. Honors programs can test the feasibility and impact of various teaching pedagogies, assessment methods, and outcomes from which wider efforts can be launched. From this broader perspective, research that addresses questions about honors education is not only needed but should be a high priority within individual institutions as well as the general community of higher education.

I agree with Roemer (1984) that the *Forum for Honors* (and *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*) is by default the location for significant thoughts about Honors education. I further agree with him, sadly enough, that the literature on Honors education is still sparse. I recently conducted a review (Achterberg, in press) of the literature on the characteristics of honors students. Certain points were clear. After nearly a century of honors education in America, there is still no standard definition of honors programs or honors students, nor is there a systematic, organized, or comprehensive body of knowledge that describes how or

what honors students should be taught. At the same time, nearly two thirds of all sizes of four-year institutions have Honors programs and such programs are nearly universal at large four-year schools (Baker et al, 2000; see Digby, 2002).

The questions that Schuman (1984) originally posed about Honors research remain unanswered. What admissions criteria for Honors students really work? What happens to comparable students who do and who do not enter Honors programs? What is the "out-of-class" profile of a "typical" Honors student? Is there a difference between the profile of Honors students at comparable institutions? Shuman (1984) also pointed out the need for historical analysis with questions such as what became of the earliest "Honors Programs," how they have evolved and where they are now. Finally, how has growth of the mega-university influenced them? Austin (1986) posed another important question: "If the ablest students... are to be challenged to the fullest, what opportunities must they have?" These are productive questions that should bear important fruit. There are also new questions to answer. Roemer's (1984) focus on only Western culture is probably misplaced in today's context. To wit: what influence has the U.S. honors movement had abroad? What role has internationalization had on honors programs in the U.S.?

The answers to all the above questions should be of interest not only to NCHC members but also to administrators who design and support such programs in their universities and to educators and others interested in the experience and outcomes for gifted children as they mature into adulthood. To move forward, honors education needs some good data. Honors education, in effect, has been a cottage industry for the past many decades. To move it into the academic mainstream, it needs to become more academic. I would go beyond even these musings and suggest that ultimately, honors education needs a theory to drive knowledge construction in honors education. At this point we don't even have a framework or commonly accepted strategy. Choosing and using theory is an investment in our future; it will help us to structure our conversations, inquiries and work efforts. Theory will help us to both identify and test our assumptions. We should also try to link theories, policies, facts, and values together in our instruction, discussion, and planning; ultimately, this will help us do a better job (Achterberg, 2004).

Of course, a theoretical base for honors education will both require and signify a certain seriousness about research on honors education. Estess (1984) pointed out that good research articles about honors education are unlikely to be written by practitioners in honors education and more likely to be published in places that honors practitioners don't read. He questioned whether the membership of the NCHC is "especially well-equipped to engage in scholarly writing on the kinds of subjects Schuman commends." Rather, he advocated that the *Forum for Honors* should be "other connecting," meaning that it should publish articles about "issues not of immediate concern to the functioning or operating of an Honors Program." I agree that we ought to be other-connecting but disagree with what we should connect to. I suggest that the point of publication in *JNCHC* (or formerly the *Forum for Honors*) is not to prove that we are scholars in other fields. There are many other outlets for that. Rather, the point precisely is that honors is a rich field for scholarship about highly performing students, including their needs, interests, and attendant issues as well as for the

pedagogy designed for such students, the organizations that support these teaching-learning efforts, and the leadership and management thereof. In other words, there is much to say, and the *JNCHC* is the best place to say it.

If NCHC members are not capable of producing the research described above, then they should actively try to catalyze it elsewhere, partner when possible, and read it when it comes out. *JNCHC* could also publish abstracts of more technical work published about honors in other journals. If NCHC members are genuinely not interested in this kind of work, if they are devoid of even curiosity on the subject, then one must wonder about their suitability for a position in honors education. Having said this, I also recognize that many administrators in Honors education participate on a part-time basis and primarily as a service to their institution and students. This point again re-emphasizes the importance of publishing honors research. Simply put, NCHC publications should assist these members in learning what they don't know about the subject and educating not only these administrators but also their institutions on the seriousness of the venture in honors education.

I think the time is past when we had the luxury of asking if we should be honors scholars. Boyer's (1990) work in *Scholarship Reconsidered* has forever changed what scholarship means. So, Roemer (1984) rightly pointed out that the *Forum* offers the opportunity to "write as a teacher rather than simply as a scholar," but we should go beyond that. Boyer (1990) defined scholarship to include four types: the scholarship of discovery (or traditional research), the scholarship of integration (interdisciplinary interpretive connections), the scholarship of application (or service) and the scholarship of teaching (i.e., teaching as a *scholarly enterprise*). The UniSCOPE 2000 model (UniSCOPE Learning Community 2000) distills Boyer's work even further, converting these forms of scholarship to make them analogous to the three missions of the University: Research Scholarship, Teaching [and Learning] Scholarship and Service Scholarship. Perhaps the *JNCHC* could be organized into sections like this and solicit papers for each section in each issue. I think it is important to include learning specifically, in addition to teaching, as higher education moves toward student-centered rather than teacher-centered policies and pedagogies. Ironically, Honors programs have long led, in practice, the student-centered approach that is loudly trumpeted on college campuses today. The fact may be little recognized, however, for lack of documentation about our experiences, philosophies, or outcomes.

We are presented with an extraordinary opportunity. We work with the best and brightest students every day. They are eager to embrace the intellectual challenges, social changes and new developments occurring around us every day. We need to keep up with them in order to serve them better! Surely there is room in our journal pages for all three forms of scholarship as they pertain to Honors students, Honors education, and Honors administration! Moreover, we must take ourselves seriously if we want others to do so as well. *The Forum for Honors* should offer us all an opportunity to publish as scholars in the field of honors education.

REFERENCES

Achterberg, Cheryl. "Characteristics of Honors Students." In: *Student Characteristics Matter*. Proceedings of the Division of Undergraduate Students Regional Meeting. September 18, 2003. White, Eric (Ed.). University Park, PA: Penn State University (in press).

Achterberg, Cheryl L. "What's Missing in Honors Education: A Theory-Driven Approach." In: *Innovations in Undergraduate Research and Honors Education*. Proceedings of the Second Schreyer National Conference. Josephine Carubia and Renata Engel (Eds.). Ames, Iowa: National Collegiate Honors Council, 2004, pp. 139-143.

Austin, Grey. "Orientation to Honors Education." In: *Fostering Academic Excellence Through Honors Programs*. New Directions for Teaching and Learning, No. 25. P.G. Friedman and R.C. Jenkins-Freidman (Eds.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986, pp. 5-16.

Baker, D. P., S. Reardon, and K. Riordan. "Creating the Upper Track in American Higher Education: An Organizational Ecology of the Rise and Spread of Honors Education." 2001 Annual Meeting of American Society of the Study of Higher Education.

Boyer, E. *Scholarship Reconsidered*. Princeton, NJ: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990.

Digby, J. *Peterson's Honors Programs and Colleges*. 3rd Edition. Princeton: Peterson's Guildes, 2000.

Estess, Ted L. "Honors Scholarship: Another View." *Forum for Honors.* 16.1 (1984):8-10.

Renzulli, J.S. "A General Theory for the Development of Creative Productivity through the Pursuit of Ideal Acts of Learning." *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 36.4 (1992):170-182.

Robertson, James H. "The Superior Student: Characteristics, Aspirations, and Needs." In: *The Superior Student in American Higher Education*. Joseph W. Cohen (Ed.). New York: McGraw Hill, 1966, pp. 50-74.

Roemer, Robert E. "*The Forum for Honors*: An Expanded View." *Forum for Honors,* 16.1 (1984):11-14.

Schuman, Sam. "Honors Scholarship and *Forum for Honors*." *The Forum for Honors,* 16.1 (1984):3-7.

UniSCOPE Learning Community. *UniSCOPE 2000: A Multidimensional Model of Scholarship for the 21st Century.* University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University, 2000.