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## Honors Scholarship: Another View

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# Honors Scholarship: Another View

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Samuel Beckett, not Vladimir Nabokov, is the most self-reflexive of novelists; and in a flurry of self-reflexivity, one of his narrators finally admits to a fundamental deficit: “if there is one question I dread, to which I have never been able to invent a satisfactory reply, it is the question what am I doing?”<sup>1</sup> In his usual compelling and concise way, Sam Schuman works in his article to invent an answer to the question, What ought we to be doing in *Forum for Honors*? And invent an answer we must, if the *Forum* is to fulfill its lofty ambition of being a serious academic journal. In many ways, Schuman’s answer is satisfactory. Articles in the *Forum* should indeed be concrete, new, interesting, and important; they should of course be models of good scholarly writing in providing sufficient evidence and proper documentation. Schuman’s proposal serves well, in part, because it states principles about which there is broad agreement, though much disagreement will inevitably arise as to whether a particular submission to the *Forum* meets Schuman’s criteria for good scholarship.

Schuman’s answer is satisfactory, moreover, because it provides the ground for excluding parochial and anecdotal articles about individual Honors Programs. Increasingly interesting and useful, the *NCHC Report*, he rightly suggests, is the proper place for such material. Dissemination of information about individual programs in the *Report* remains crucial for the growth of Honors education among institutions of higher education.

But while much about Schuman’s proposal is satisfactory, little about it really excites the inventive spirit. Were I, for instance, sitting on the board of directors of a foundation considering a request to fund *Forum for Honors*, I would not be inclined to support the journal merely on the basis of this proposal. As a Director of an Honors Program, I wonder whether I would encourage students and colleagues to subscribe.

Why is the proposal only partially satisfactory to me? Perhaps I expected too much from it. Perhaps I would be satisfied only by reading an article that embodies the excellent principles that Schuman recommends. Perhaps *Forum for Honors* occupies the same awkward position as Honors Programs themselves: there is no subject matter proper to it. Perhaps the question as set by the editor—“What is it to write well about Honors education?”—overdetermined the answer and obscured the real question, What is the proper content for articles in *Forum for Honors*?

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Molloy* in *Three Novels by Samuel Beckett: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 173.

## HONORS SCHOLARSHIP: ANOTHER VIEW

Finally, however, I think Schuman's response is unsatisfactory because of the way he conceives "Honors scholarship." He takes "Honors scholarship" to mean scholarship about Honors Programs, their students, faculty, curricula, and institutional settings. He clearly wants to avoid narrowly setting the borders of Honors scholarship, but most of the topics he provides could be adequately addressed in the *Report*. In terms of subject matter, the *Report* and the *Forum*, following his proposal, would look much the same: both would be about Honors Programs, though the one would admit the anecdotal and idiosyncratic, while the other would aim at more general insights buttressed with adequate documentation.

This conception of the subject matter of *Forum for Honors*, like Schuman's and my favorite twentieth-century authors, is too self-reflexive. His proposal tends to promote scholarship on in-house issues for Honors directors and academic administrators; the journal will be of interest to the professionals in the Honors movement. Honors computers; Honors professors and their scholarly productivity; admissions criteria; size of Honors classes; comparative studies of Honors students; regional differentiation among Honors Programs—these are all self-reflexive issues, but hardly scholarly, unless Honors Programs themselves are of intrinsic scholarly interest.

Of course, Honors Programs, to some extent, merit research and scholarship, and they provide researchers in the field of higher education another arena for applying various interpretive and investigative methods. But avenues for publishing such research already exist in journals dealing with higher education, and any good researcher will seek to place his or her research in one of those well-established journals. A more serious problem, to my mind, is that the membership of the National Collegiate Honors Council is probably not especially well-equipped to engage in scholarly writing on the kinds of subjects Schuman commends. Knowing about Honors Programs—indeed, being a good practitioner of the craft of directing an Honors Program—does not qualify one as a good researcher on Honors issues, as Schuman conceives them. Honors directors and faculty tend to come from one of the liberal arts, and they write more persuasively about their academic subjects than they do about the territory Schuman describes. Most persons, I think, work in an Honors Program not to add to their research interests, but to enact a vision of liberal education that incorporates, as seems appropriate, the research areas they have previously developed.

My basic question, then, is this: how many NCHC members are capable of, or interested in producing, good scholarship about Honors Programs? Without wishing to offend my colleagues in Honors work, I fear that the answer is, Not many. We simply do better at other kinds of writing, and what we have to say about Honors Programs will likely continue to be more appropriate for the *Report*, not for a serious research journal.

Having confessed my (partial) dissatisfaction with the answer that Sam Schuman has invented, I must sheepishly confess that I am unsure that I can devise a more satisfying one. But, for the sake of provocation, I recommend that the Board of Editors for *Forum for Honors* declare a two-year moratorium on the publication of self-reflexive "honors" research. With this principle of exclusion, I link a principle of inclusion: that *Forum for Honors* publish essays of the highest quality on any

subject that is of general interest to the membership of the National Collegiate Honors Council. For instance, I would like very much to know why Vladimir Nabokov is Sam Schuman's favorite twentieth-century author, and why he thinks (if he does think this) that Honors students and faculty ought to read Nabokov. His discussion of self-reflexivity in Nabokov's fiction would, I am confident, be more interesting, more important, and more original than a self-reflexive article comparing Honors students at various institutions or tracing the career paths of Honors directors.

Honors education will not be well served if *Forum for Honors* devotes itself exclusively to scholarship about Honors education, as though Honors education were some special brand of something (like the equally dubious notions of a "Christian" science or an "American" aesthetic). Rather, Honors education will be served by persons who write thoughtful and thought-provoking essays on topics of interest to the liberally educated reader. I should hope that the essays would measure up to the high standards for good scholarly writing that Sam Schuman describes and exemplifies. I should suspect that, in choosing pieces for publication, the Board of Editors may tend to favor essays that explore a topic in the field of education, broadly conceived. I should think that an occasional article about an Honors Program would appear. But I should argue that engaging essays on almost any topic could well serve *Forum for Honors*.

Instead of being self-reflexive, *Forum for Honors* might seek to be other-connecting: that is, the *Forum* might reach beyond the professional membership of the National Collegiate Honors Council and connect with issues not of immediate concern to the functioning or operating of an Honors Program. If it does, the journal might indeed provide a forum, or a space, where truth can appear as concerned persons talk and listen to one another.

