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Research in Honors and Composition

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Throughout higher education, hundreds of writing programs at two-year, four-year, and graduate degree-granting institutions offer special honors sections of composition courses, many in conjunction with their institutions' own honors programs. The wide and varied body of scholarship, however, that comprises composition theory and pedagogy contains very little discussion of honors composition at the college level. At the elementary and secondary levels, journals dedicated to gifted education, such as *Roepers Review* and *Gifted Child Quarterly*, regularly feature articles focused on research and pedagogical practices in teaching writing to gifted children. The two-year college level has produced a few pieces that focus on honors courses, such as Jean B. Bridges' "Honors Composition: A Possible Alternative in the Two-Year College." Aside from sporadic articles, though, such as Kenneth Bruffee's "Making the Senior Thesis Work," published in 1993 in *Forum for Honors*, those who teach honors composition at four-year and graduate degree-granting schools have few resources from which to draw.

This lack of resources can be frustrating for those responsible for teaching honors freshman composition courses; where are the guidelines, the heuristics, the templates for assignment design that distinguish the honors class enough to merit a separate course altogether? As Sam Schuman asks in "Honors Scholarship and *Forum on Honors*," what makes an honors course *different*? It's not as if the composition community does not acknowledge difference; on the contrary, we celebrate it. Much attention has been paid to various "marginal" features of writers and writing, such as gender, ethnicity, English as a Second Language, basic writers, and nontraditional students. Many books, anthologies, and journals that cover the spectrum of theory, research, and pedagogy focus on these specialized communities of writers. Honors composition, however, has no touchstone, no equivalent of Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*, Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*, Geneva Smitherman's *Talkin and Testifyin*, or Elizabeth Flynn's "Composing as a Woman."

I would like to posit two interconnected possibilities for this dearth. First, if we research, write, publish and present, not merely to achieve tenure and promotion as Robert E. Roemer argues, but to identify problems and to propose theoretical and pedagogical approaches to solving said problems, then perhaps we have little to say about honors composition, for these are the classes in which students are intellectually gifted and academically talented, able to speak and write at levels beyond traditional freshman composition students. The romanticized version of the honors course

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is one in which intellectually mature students exhibit exceptional organization and development, complex diction, and, of course, mechanical and grammatical perfection. The reality is, however, that honors freshmen making the transition from high school writing to college writing can benefit from first-year writing instruction regarding all facets of writing. In “Breaking with Tradition,” Elissa S. Guralnick argues for the importance of the honors composition course, and her opening comments are particularly pointed:

Attend to the least proficient students and the best will take care of themselves. Here is an educational philosophy that few university faculty would rush to embrace . . . except with respect to expository writing. If composition courses are the issue, nearly everyone agrees: Students with little discernible talent should be required to take them, while those with a proverbial “good ear” should go free. As for honors composition—a writing course designed not for freshmen who fail to test out of it, but for seniors who succeed in testing into it—the very idea seems oxymoronic, if not moronic pure and simple. But “seems” in this instance is simply dead wrong. (58)

Guralnick proceeds to present and discuss samples of student writing to justify her claim, but her discussion of honors students’ problems is not nearly as dramatic as those presented in the touchstone works listed earlier.

This leads to my second possible reason for the dearth of research in honors composition: we cannot transfer the struggle of the honors freshman writer to the larger political struggles presented in much of our canonical research on writing difference. Honors composition seems antithetical to the Marxist underpinnings in theoretical discussions of composition and gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and so forth. Honors composition lacks the narrative pathos of the student who stayed after class, went through five drafts, thought about dropping out of school, but decided to finish and eventually succeeded because of the support of his or her composition teacher. Such anecdotes allow us to feel instrumental in chipping away at the facade of the Althusserian ideological state apparatus of higher education, and honors students simply do not fill this role. In fact, honors students excel within the educational apparatus, and those faculty and administrators who cry that honors education is elitist would argue that it is simply another cog in the Althusserian wheel. Compositionists fight against negative labeling and stereotyping of marginalized groups of students, however, so why should we accept the stereotype of the honors student who excels because of socioeconomic circumstances, who breezes through introductory classes, and who writes more skillfully than other freshmen?

I would argue that this stereotyping continues into the curriculum itself: if the honors students can take care of themselves, then the courses can take care of themselves as well. In many cases, this is simply not true, and the struggles of honors program directors, faculty, and other advocates of honors composition continue well beyond simple issues such as how to change a regular freshman composition syllabus to make it an honors course. While the decision to include honors in my own

composition research and teaching has always seemed natural and promising (see the preface to *Honors Composition*), the resistance I encounter from time to time always surprises me, thus causing me to wonder why I am surprised in the first place. As a doctoral student, I encountered my first true taste of resistance to scholarly research in honors composition when, during my last semester of coursework before beginning my dissertation, my advisor announced to me that he thought I was a “wild card” for continuing to pursue this topic and that he no longer wanted to be my advisor, recommending another faculty member who turned out to be far more supportive of the whole project. More recently, heartened by the warm responses I received upon the monograph’s publication, I made a first attempt to bring my honors composition research into the composition community by submitting an article to the *Writing Program Administrator* journal. The editor and reviewers liked the material but wanted to see certain sections developed in more detail, so I dutifully revised and resubmitted; in the meantime, the journal changed editors, and the new editor responded that the material in the revision would be more appropriate for honors program administrators than for WPAs, hence its inclusion in this issue of *JNCHC*. I also presented this material at the national 2004 Conference on College Composition and Communication during a session titled “(Re)Constructing Academic Spaces for Differently-Abled Students.” The other two papers presented in the session focused on issues of access and physical (dis)ability in the composition classroom, and as I questioned why my work was placed in this session, I thought back to the 1970s-era national legislation on special education and the ways in which gifted education wrangled start-up funding under this umbrella.

In the end, considering the calls by Schuman, Estess, and Roemer to reexamine what constitutes research in honors, I would argue that honors composition presents unique problems that need to be reexamined as well and not simply in our offices and hallways but in professional forums, such as conferences and scholarly journals, including *JNCHC*, and not simply by honors program directors but by English departments, writing program administrators, and their faculty.

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