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Affirming Quality Teaching: A Valuable Role for Honors

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“I praise loudly, I blame softly.”

—Catherine the Great

Frequently university students as well as faculty and administrators need to be reminded of Catherine the Great’s advice: we are wise to affirm the good in others. “Knowing how powerful [celebration] is, it is shocking how overlooked it is in most areas of life, especially education” (Clifton 177). Blanchard adds that, while individuals far prefer receiving “one-minute praises over one-minute reprimands,” evaluation practices more frequently find individuals seeking to catch others doing something wrong rather than catching others doing something right (76–85). Although the culture of honors education traditionally promotes and recognizes excellence in student performance through multiple rituals such as postings on Dean’s Lists and induction into academic honor societies, we often neglect affirming quality teaching.

Considerable research has shown that affirmation of good work is essential to productivity. Hackman and Johnson claim that “compliments, celebrations, and other rewards play an important role in effective leadership,” helping create productive communities (106). Thus, withholding recognition of quality teaching is a missed opportunity, for well-placed praise produces positive outcomes and helps preclude the negativity that flows from low morale. Nuhfer suggests, for instance, that student affirmation of teaching heightens an educator’s “self-esteem and enthusiasm [which] are important traits for successful teaching” (21). Smith observes that harboring the attitude that individuals do not need affirmation because they are “only doing their job” or “that is what they are getting paid for” results in low morale and reduced performance level (57). Wheelan notes, “Positive feedback increases cohesion . . . and facilitates group development” (78). Finally, Gardner suggests that “nothing is more vital to the renewal of an organization than the arrangements by which able people are nurtured,” yet he bemoans the reality that organizations [i.e., universities] are more often preoccupied with “running a tight ship” than with developing and praising people (127).

At universities, faculty members often find praise hard to come by. True, classes conclude with an opportunity for student feedback, but these last-moment attempts to gain insightful reflections occur when students want to bolt

from the classroom as quickly as possible to meet more pressing deadlines. In a technological age, social media have made attempts to address the lack of evaluative feedback available on good teaching by creating such websites as ratemyprofessor.com (RMP). However, these websites have their detractors. Most notably, critics of the widely accessed RMP charge that students equate “good teachers” with “easy graders.” Edward Nuhfer argues, “Pseudo-evaluation damages the credibility of legitimate evaluation and victimizes individuals by irresponsibly publishing comments about them derived from anonymous sources. This is voyeurism passed off as ‘evaluation’ and examples. Neither <http://www.pickaprof.com> nor <http://ratemyprofessors.com/index.jsp> provides faculty evaluation through criteria that might be valuable to a student who seeks a professor conducive to their learning, thinking, or intellectual growth” (2).

Further research cautions that exclusive rewards produce negative effects, including ruptured relationships because only a few individuals are recognized (Cohn). Indeed, we experienced some of this backlash in the early years of our honors college as we attempted to host a *Teacher of the Year* award. This award proved problematic on a number of fronts. First, the recognition typically went to a faculty member teaching within the honors college. While recognizing those colleagues who give their time and talents to honors education is praiseworthy, the award rang hollow on the larger campus as perceptions of inbred favoritism abounded. When an effort to diversify the pool of potential candidates arose, however, a second challenge surfaced: because of the wide diversity of academic majors, no single faculty member received more than a few nominations. Thus, little justification existed for selecting just one recipient.

Despite these initial challenges, we continued to believe that affirming quality teaching was a valuable role that honors should claim within the campus community. Because of its recognized commitment to academic excellence, honors is well-poised to be a visible campus advocate for identifying, modeling, and celebrating outstanding teaching practices. What we needed was a model of celebrating teaching excellence that provides specific definitions of “excellence” and recognizes a wide range of individuals.

West Chester University can now present a model of honors-college-sponsored professor affirmation that has been refined and in place for nearly two decades.

MODEL OF TEACHER AFFIRMATION

Ten weeks into the fall and spring semesters, students enrolled in honors seminars (an average of 180 per term) are given the opportunity to recognize an outstanding professor. Students are provided a nomination form and asked to identify a faculty member who, they believe, exhibits outstanding qualities as a teacher and also to indicate the specific pedagogical practices the individual uses that merit commendation (see Appendix A for sample nomination form). Specificity is a key element in our approach. Smith cautions that the

ambiguity in phrases like “you did well, I am proud of you, and thanks a lot,” while well-meaning, fall short of establishing benchmarks or models of excellence (55–57). The individuals being commended benefit from knowing precisely what they did well; such information becomes both a touchstone for “best practices” worth repeating and quality benchmarks for others to use as a model. All nominations are anonymous, thus limiting concerns over student patronage toward faculty.

The nominations, distributed and collected by members of the Honors Student Association’s Awards and Recognition Committee (HSA-ARC), are collated in a standard letter (see Appendix B for sample text of award letter). Nominees receive the letter through campus mail the week prior to final exams under the signatures of the Director of the Honors College and the President of the Honors Student Association. Additional copies of each letter are sent to the nominee’s department chair and college dean.

In fall 2010, the HSA-ARC made strides toward a more public and accessible domain for recognition by posting each nominee’s name, department, and accolades on the honors college’s website. Nominees appear alphabetically under the listings of the departments within each college unit. These postings, updated each semester by members of the HSA-ARC, now serve as an online database for student-reported best teaching practices, which has become a beneficial resource for students when selecting courses and compatible professors for greater academic success.

In April of each year, our honors college hosts an Outstanding Faculty Reception in one of the most historical and beautifully furnished venues on campus. Nominated faculty from both fall and spring semesters and all the honors students are invited to attend this open-house event. Approximately three weeks prior to the event, invitations are generated for nominees. Members of the HSA-ARC and Executive Board personally deliver the invitations, along with a polished red apple, three weeks before the event. Generally, the delivery is made by a student who has taken the professor for class but has not submitted a formal nomination for them. This personal contact, along with the inclusion of an “apple for the teacher,” enhances the power of affirmation and has yet to fail in receiving a warm response.

On the day of the reception, programs on parchment paper list the name and department of each year’s nominees; name tags and light refreshments make mingling more comfortable and personable; and brief remarks of welcome and appreciation are made by the Director of the Honors College, the President of the Honors Student Association, and a senior member of the university administration. The faculty members being celebrated can sign a registration sheet and provide personal contact details to learn more about opportunities in and affiliation with the honors college.

RESULTS

The benefits of recognizing outstanding teaching have included the enhanced self-esteem of the honored faculty; documentation of teaching effectiveness; acknowledgment of honors by the campus-wide community as advocates for quality teaching; empowerment of honors students; and effective role-modeling for all students seeking an enhanced educational experience.

Over the years our office has received countless communications from appreciative faculty members such as “You made my day”; “I never expected this, thanks so much for caring”; and “We so often hear grumbles and complaints, having such specific feedback about what is working well is a gift.” These comments generally continue by praising both honors students and the honors college. “While I am not sure who may have written these kind words about my teaching,” shared one nominee, “I know how much I have enjoyed working with honors students. Keep them coming my way!” Others more directly extend their appreciation to the honors college for supporting the recognition of teaching effectiveness, “Beyond the obligatory end-of-term fill-in-the-bubble-computer sheets, I do not often get feedback about my teaching. Thanks for promoting teaching and providing such useful and specific feedback.” These snapshot comments reinforce the work of Blanchard (75–85), Clifton (177–193), Hackman (103), Kouzes (114–127), Smith (55–59), and Wheelan (78), demonstrating that praise is a direct contributor to enhanced self-esteem and community building.

Beyond the “feel good” experience that faculty celebrations provide recipients, a more tangible positive outcome is the documented evidence of effective teaching. Most institutional administrators value student feedback. In fact, the Center for Educational Development and Assessment (CEDA), offering adjudication of faculty performance since 1988, claims that, “Student ratings of teaching serve as an important component of many faculty evaluation systems. Either by design or default, institutions often place great weight on student rating data in making decisions that impact faculty rewards, career progress, and professional growth.” While our model does not replace standardized evaluations, jointly approved by campus administrators and faculty governance entities, the honors college’s commendation letters for teaching often find their way into faculty tenure and promotion packets. Such letters provide unsolicited documentation heralding the professor’s pedagogical practices as experienced and expressed by their students.

The honors college enjoys a direct benefit from this project beyond enhanced public relations. Such celebration events increase the pool of proven professors with potential to teach in honors. In institutions like ours that have no designated honors faculty, the honors college director must recruit colleagues to teach honors seminars, which, while offering in-load credit, frequently represent new or additional preparation. We follow up our annual spring Outstanding Faculty Reception with notes of invitation for faculty to submit proposals to teach a special-topics seminar. Because of the affirmation

afforded by appreciative students, faculty members are predisposed to put forth the extra effort required to propose, produce, and present a seminar offering.

The practice of celebrating teaching excellence also garners campus-wide appreciation of honors education. Key administrators often express gratitude for our program. The chair of our chemistry department, for instance, remarked, "We tend to hear a lot from students about how hard our courses are. It was really great to see that we had more chemistry faculty identified by honors students for outstanding teaching this semester than any other department. I hope that news gets around." College deans also routinely send notes of appreciation for the recognition that honors extends to their faculty.

A new campus initiative resulting from our celebration of teaching began this year with a partnership between the honors college and the university division of library services. In a joint promotion of teaching excellence and student reading, six of the outstanding faculty nominees were photographed holding a favorite book. Using a template program developed by the National Association of Libraries, the photos, enlarged to poster size, proclaim "READ" and include the professor's name, department, and recognition as an outstanding teaching nominee by the honors college. The posters are prominently placed in the main floor of the library along with a display case of the selected books. The posters remain on display for the full spring term and then rotate with new additions in the following fall.

Beyond the value expressed by faculty and administrators, the teaching celebration program benefits students, both those formally affiliated with honors and those in the broader campus community. Honors students take their role of nominating faculty seriously. As one student noted, "So many students have strong opinions about poor teaching strategies and are able to complain and vent about professors they struggle with. Identifying the good work people do through their profession reflects an improved mindset and perspective. Good professors make a difference in our lives; it is our turn to help make a small difference in theirs." As faculty teaching in honors have noted, the nomination process requires that students articulate specific pedagogical skills, thus enhancing their critical thinking. As a professor of education shared, "Any time we can get students, particularly those outside of education who may not be trained in such methodology, to reflect thoughtfully on what styles of learning work best for them, it is a win. Having students develop a language for extending praise towards a professor, through such affirmation as the teaching nominations, is truly a win/win situation." Additionally, honors students value the impact they have in advocacy for quality educators. "I feel," one student said, "that my comments in the letter sent out through the Honors College, helped [the professor] get the promotion that was certainly deserved."

Finally, the largest cohort to benefit from the honors commitment to public recognition of quality instruction is the student body at large. The website posting of Outstanding Teaching Nominees offers students a model for assessing quality instruction. By affirming a range of teaching styles instead of inviting

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students to comment on a professor's personal appeal, students learn to appreciate various educational approaches as they contemplate those that have contributed most profoundly to their learning. By displaying only positive commentary, students receive, if only subliminally, the wisdom of Catherine the Great, that it is better to praise than blame. While still in its infancy, we hope to track the hits to our Outstanding Faculty website, gain feedback on its utility, and provide further opportunities for helping match students with educators who can best meet their needs.

By championing public recognition of quality teaching, honors provides an appropriate and valuable service to the campus community. Our largely student-directed and relatively low-cost program of identifying and recognizing outstanding teachers is a model that honors programs and colleges of any size could readily adopt. Moving beyond the usual emphasis of honoring only honors faculty, this approach lifts up excellent educators in and beyond the honors curriculum. Serving the inherent mission of honors, to promote academic excellence, celebration of the fine work of colleagues is one way the honors community can encourage teachers who motivate students to stretch beyond what they think they can achieve.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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APPENDIX A

SAMPLE NOMINATION FORM

HONORS COLLEGE
CORE CURRICULUM & SEMINAR PROGRAM

OUTSTANDING FACULTY NOMINATIONS

Fall 2011

Class Rank: FR SOPH JR SR **Gender:** Male Female

We continue to recognize excellence in teaching with our **Outstanding Faculty Nominations**.^{*} Please identify and describe one professor you believe exhibits outstanding qualities as an educator.

- 1. **Name of Professor and Department (please *print clearly* since many professors are new)**

- 2. Clearly state **WHY** you think the professor deserves this recognition. Consider what specific pedagogical practices the individual uses that merit commendation. Use complete sentences and explain by examples why you advocate for this individual. (Write 4–5 sentences please!)

The Outstanding Faculty Reception will be held on **WEDNESDAY, APRIL 25, 2012 from 3:00–5:00PM in the Philips Autograph Library.**

Please mark your calendars so you will be able to attend!

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE AWARD LETTER

West Chester University Honors College

To be honorable is to serve

December 2, 2011

Dear Professor _____,

During priority scheduling this year, we asked honors students to identify and describe outstanding faculty they have met while at West Chester University. We are writing to let you know that your name appeared on our compiled list. Specifically, here is what students had to say:

Insert student comments

On behalf of the Honors College, we would like to thank you for the extra effort you gave our students through your teaching. We encourage you to visit the Honors College web site <<http://www.wcupa.edu/Honors/outstanding.asp>> where you will find your name listed with other colleagues recognized for quality teaching. All the best!

Sincerely,

Kevin W. Dean, PhD
Director, Honors College
Professor, Communication Studies

Michael B. Jendzurski
President, Honors Student Association

Cc: Department Chair
College Dean

