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What Honors Can Do

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Since becoming honors director at a small regional institution in March, I have had more than a few opportunities to reflect on what honors might be and what it is not, or should not, be. When Dail W. Mullins, Jr. writes of "balancing tensions" between meritocratic and egalitarian tendencies, it is a reminder that honors education is not a single linear pursuit as outsiders often conceive it, "working with the best and the brightest" (what could be easier or more straightforward!), but involves a reconciliation of opposites that is fundamental to paradox. Most of us arrive in our profession with an outlook similar to the colleague of Sara Hopkins-Powell who said that "teaching is the most important work in the world, and we do it one student at a time." College teaching, however, is already a serious compromise with this sterling premise since, as a matter of institutional organization, we teach classes, sections, labs—not students. Prefaced by sound justifications, honors programs introduce a drastic selectivity into the dynamic of who might constitute the "one student" even before we begin to struggle with the business of teaching her or him. This conflict is only one of many involved in thinking through the honors process and administering a program based on consistent principles.

So far I have found it difficult to unravel the paradoxes in my own mind and at my own institution, where some departments lack faculty to staff their current required courses. In this context, how do I ask for a concentration of resources to meet the needs of a few, albeit important needs, if the needs of the many are not being met? Often at the places where I have taught I have found myself clinging tenaciously to the two or three or four shockingly bright and curious students in a class who make it all worthwhile. What kind of response should I expect when I, to invoke an art metaphor, ask my colleagues to relinquish their private collections for the national gallery?

There are, of course, powerful contradictions operating at the level of the individual honors student as well. An honors director I once worked for emphasized above almost all else that we would not "coddle" honors students or encourage their already well nourished sense of "entitlement," a term that has lent itself to the cadre of young people—"The Entitlement Generation"—that is our current responsibility. It goes almost without saying that in the recruitment portion of our jobs we do contribute something to those feelings of entitlement, which perhaps we should expect given our fawning attention. Jay Freyman's essay politely suggests that we exclude these and other students from our programs in the first place. But even if we have applicant pools strong enough to turn some away, others will undoubtedly slip through

Freyman's screening methods, leaving us with a fresh contradiction in how to address the needs of students in honors programs who do not match our expectations.

It seems fairly plain that honors programs originated at least in part out of a desire to duplicate a mostly mythical undergraduate experience believed to be the provenance of some of our oldest and most elite institutions. Having set out to imitate programs at schools that lay claim to being "the best" for undergraduate education, I wonder if honors programs have not evolved into a very different animal altogether. To compete for the pool of students certified by grades and test scores as the very best, honors programs go heavy with bells and whistles, the academic equivalent of inducements used to recruit college athletes. We employ all the catch phrases Mullins found in his research, making great claims about our "innovative" teaching (as if we could always control how our courses are taught), "advanced" and "enriched" academic offerings (easier said than done), small classes (by no means an unequivocal good), intensive use of technology (also by no means an unequivocal good), individual research projects (a "perk" students are often eager to trade in), field trips, high-priced speakers, and desperately creative alternative assignments. That is what we say about ourselves at any rate, and, in doing so, have we defined honors as well?

I suppose I ought to come out more strongly in favor of all these good things that now pretty much mark off honors from non-honors courses at our institutions. Certainly, they are not harmful as features of our educational practice. But while these and other ingredients make up honors as we aggressively market it today, I would venture a guess that they did not characterize much of what was excellent—"one student at a time"—in our own experience as undergraduates. We were taught by faculty prepared for their work by a lifetime of learning, men and women deeply involved in the life of their disciplines but not distracted by research from the welfare of their students. Prolonged immersion in texts, laboratory, and fieldwork was compounded with questioning, experimentation, writing, and explication, followed by more criticism and questioning. The maxim about "commitment" applied to that experience: when it comes to eggs and bacon, the chicken is involved but the pig is committed. Pig-like dedication from scholar-teachers formed most of us years ago, but even as I write this I realize the paradox in that we cannot simply say so. Something sexier seems to be required.

Let me hasten to add that this is not an anti-technology screed. We have an ethical duty to outfit our students for survival in an economic climate changing brutally fast. Reading *Origin of the Species* with our students is hardly enough. Yet while I wish every classroom I taught in were "Smart"-er than it is, I still find myself conducting a lot of chalk talk even when I have other tech resources at hand. It is not the technology that makes it good teaching, nor will the latest technologies do as a substitute.

Often our eagerness to out-do, out-tech, out-gadget, and out-hype the competition does something to incubate the usual honors pathologies: an expectation of the "A" grade and other special privileges as if they were rights and a cavalier attitude toward the hard work of learning. Honors students are often among the least well-adjusted participants in campus life socially and emotionally. It may be that these are

not the students we want to exalt with the special status we used to recruit them in the first place.

Candor requires that I stress these contrary perspectives, but at the same time the last six months' work of putting together an honors program has led to some encouraging discoveries. I have observed that faculty—"innovative" and otherwise—find new professional energy when offered an opportunity to work with honors students. Maybe we all need fresh pretexts to drop the guise of Paolo Freire's teacher who "knows" and resume the role of teacher-student that all good teaching demands. The honors program on our campus was in some sense an administrative initiative; ironically, through involvement in the start-up of the program, many faculty have begun to let go of their cynicism toward administrative means and ends and have embraced a guarded optimism about the remarkable potential of the university. While I share some of Emerson's disdain for "badges and names," at the two universities where I have worked in honors I have seen that a new honors program becomes an emblem around which institutional energies organize to support academic improvements that serve the entire learning community. In short, finding a harmony among some if not all of these discordant elements has been very satisfying.

Take them all in all, a fully accessorized honors program is a fine thing, but serious study, serious teaching, and serious inquiry are the basis for an excellent education, call it what you will. If we promise them a laptop or a summer abroad to get them on campus, we had better be prepared to deliver something more substantial once they are here. Ultimately I am reminded if we are to make any headway with the paradox of teaching one student at a time when our funding entities would rather we teach one hundred at a time, and online at that, we must start out by trying to make a difference to one student at a time doing the things that honors can do.

REFERENCE

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