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"What is an Honors Student?"

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It is first necessary to recognize the distinction between the questions "What is an honors student?" or better "What are the characteristics of an honors student?" and "How do you recognize a student with those characteristics?" The first of these two questions is easier to approach since it is more a matter of prescription than of description, a presentation of an ideal rather than a recognition of an actual state. We can all list characteristics which we would like or expect those special students to have who are worthy in our estimation of the designation "honors." These expectations, I submit, are often informed by our own experiences as honors students ourselves or in association with others, when we were in college, who were considered to be honors students by official or by general agreement. It is quite another matter, however, to be able to detect, directly or indirectly, the presence of those qualities which constitute the character of an honors student; they may or may not be readily evident and, it seems, very often are not so. In my admittedly anecdotal experience, so-called objective criteria for judging the quality of students fail quite miserably when it comes to predicting success in honors curricula.

The Scholastic Aptitude Test fails to account for that imagination, creativity, and curiosity which I believe are integral to the personality of a true honors student; and high school grade point averages are often more indicative of the quality of the school and/or the teaching-to-the-test instruction which seems to characterize so much education at that level than they are of the quality of the student. As for Advanced Placement work, there are times when I feel that the number of Advanced Placement courses a student has taken is inversely related to that individual's potential for success in honors education. I say that for a particular reason. I would posit breadth of interest and commitment to ongoing learning in a wide variety of areas as major indicators of a good honors student. More often than not, I have found that students have taken Advanced Placement work to avoid broadening their experience in college and to facilitate narrowing their college curriculum to those areas in which they feel academically secure or which they feel will advance their professional or vocational agendas for college.

As in so many other areas, elimination of the negative is often more useful than accentuation of the positive in the attempt to identify promising honors students. The process may be facilitated by looking for evidence of characteristics which might **dis**qualify someone for honors work, i.e., it may be easier to tell who is not qualified to do honors work than to tell who is. In vetting a candidate for admission to an honors college or program, I recommend, for example, looking and listening carefully for phrases like "get out of the way" in reference to subject areas in which Advanced

Placement work has been taken. The original intent of the Advanced Placement Program, after all, was to afford students an opportunity to do more advanced work in subject areas offered in the Program rather than to avoid having to take courses in them to satisfy general or distribution requirements in college.

I would say that aptitude for honors depends at least as much on attitude as on accomplishment and furthermore that the presence of the latter without any indication of the former is not a good sign. The problem is, of course, that achievement can be quantified much more easily and so is more readily recognizable than is attitude; therefore, it is very tempting to emphasize achievement almost to the exclusion of attitude. As Director of the Honors College at a public institution which went from foundation to Phi Beta Kappa status in 31 years, I often said that the presence of curiosity is virtually the only personal characteristic necessary for determining a good honors prospect. Once a certain minimally requisite level of intellectual ability has been identified by whatever measure you please—and I would say that, between SAT scores and grade point averages, the latter are more useful in this regard—curiosity would be the only criterion necessary for granting a student admission to the Honors College. Give me the applicants' curiosity quotients, and the rest will be easy. Once, I asked a colleague in Psychology whether there was any way of measuring curiosity. He replied that the only thing of which he knew was a curiosity segment on a particular personality inventory; he was quick to add, however, that the results from this instrument were not terribly reliable where curiosity is concerned.

Here are some other characteristics which I would say indicate a good honors prospect—or, perhaps, I should say that a poor honors prospect can be eliminated by an apparent lack of these characteristics.

Study time—How much study time is the student used to expending on school work? Is he or she reluctant to talk about this? This does not mean that honors requires nerdishness—nerdishness too often goes hand in hand with narrow focus. There should be enough time for the honors student to stop and smell the intellectual roses he or she meets along the curricular way. A propensity to heed the injunction "Carpe diem," whether it emanates from the pen of Horace in a textbook or from the mouth of Robin Williams on the wide screen, is definitely an asset for an honors student. But anyone who does not take seriously the need to have available at least three to four hours outside of class for every hour in class is probably not a great prospect for honors.

Academic purpose—Why is the student coming to college or university? If the answer to such a question is couched in emphatically vocational or professional terms, beware. This is not to say that honors students should be expected to be less practical about the more immediate value of a college education, but only to say that the honors student realizes that there is more to life than making a living. In broader terms, he or she recognizes the need for quality along with quantity and knows that the latter without some concern for the former can result in having plenty of nothing, but not in the positive sense of the Gershwin lyrics. The issue of academic purpose is summed up in the motto of the Honors College which I directed—Learning for living, not just for making a living.

Honors purpose—Why does the student want to participate in an honors program? Be wary of answers to this question that are heavily laced with references to the large number of honors courses taken in high school or the large number of AP courses taken or membership in the National Honor Society or listing on an Honor Roll or Principal's Role. Why do I say this? I have sometimes posited a quirky question: "Who put the 's' in honors?" Here is something of an answer. What you do not want to hear in response to the question "Why do you want to be admitted to an honors program?" is a mere recitation of past accomplishments. Certainly, some confirmation of ability is necessary; but, as already stated, ability alone does not an honors student make, although ability alone may make an "honor" student. I like to say that the "s" in "honors" stands for "student," or more properly, the Latin verb "studeo" from which the English word "student" comes. Among the possible meanings of this verb are "devote oneself to," "apply oneself to," and "be interested in." Honors students have an *interest* in learning, which they see both as an ongoing process and as an end in itself, not merely as a means to something else. Of course, this does not mean that a promising honors student must give evidence that he or she conceives of some grand intellectual plan for the rest of his or her life. But, there should be some indication that, like a mountain climber who climbs a mountain simply because it is there to be climbed, the student wants to know things simply because they are there to be known. Without evidence of that interest, what you may have is a good honor student; but you may be taking a risk by accepting him or her as a good honors prospect.

Communication skills—It is, of course, quite necessary that honors students be adept communicators. Such must be the case both in the written and in the oral medium. Candidates for honors work are generally required to demonstrate written proficiency; in the case of my Honors College, a separate, additional application from the one for admission to the university is required. Part of this application is a composition on one of four specific topics. This composition has been the heart of the Honors College application and is a clear demonstration of proficiency in writing.

Unfortunately, proficiency in writing does not necessarily represent a concomitant proficiency in oral communication; and it is all the more surprising that oral communication skills should be neglected in considering students for admission to honors since one of the hallmarks of honors education is generally taken to be small classes in which students are required to do much more speaking than in regular courses.

I can remember an instance in which the Honors College rejected the application of a young man who had a 1400+ SAT score and had passed AP English in high school with a score high enough to exempt him from the university's composition requirement. His Honors College essay was, however, very poorly written. When I sat down with him and went over the essay, all he could say was "But, I wrote this while I was taking AP English." His evident failure to make an appropriate distinction between performance on a test and what that performance is *supposed* to show—and I emphasize "supposed"—should have disqualified him for honors even if his composition were well written.

On the other hand, there was the young woman who attended an inner-city high school not noted for its academics; her SAT scores were mediocre, not to say "poor," but her composition for the Honors College application showed sophistication of thought and a facility for its expression. A personal interview revealed not only that she was quite capable of having produced the application essay but also that she could express herself eloquently in person. Upon admission to the Honors College, she "took off" intellectually and academically and accomplished a broader curriculum than did many College members whose "objective" admission credentials were much more impressive. Two years later, history repeated itself. The young woman's younger sister applied to the Honors College under the same circumstances—unimpressive high school background, unimpressive SAT scores, but quite impressive application essay. Again, a personal interview produced the impression of a curious intellect and expressive eloquence. Again, admission to the Honors College was followed by a burst of academic energy and accomplishment—with one significant addition. By the time the younger sister graduated, our campus had been awarded a charter to shelter a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa and had installed the chapter; and the younger sister was among the first group of students to be elected to Membership in Course in our chapter.

Admittedly, these anecdotal cases represent dramatic, exaggerated situations. But, as a student of the didactic nature of ancient Athenian drama, I can attest that dramatic exaggeration can be effectively and practically instructive.

There are, I submit, a number of additional values which should be part of the character of a good prospect for success in honors. Let me list just a few.

An understanding of the difference between "needs" and "wants"—Many honors students receive a considerable amount of merit-based scholarship aid. In addition, those who qualify may receive need-based aid. Such students should be willing to devote the vast majority, if not all, of their time to their studies. They should be serious, in a way in which many other students are not, about taking intellectual advantage of the opportunities afforded by college. They should be willing and eager, for the time they are in college, to become professional students; being students is what they are doing for a living. Unless it is absolutely necessary to support their education, they will not seek employment and certainly will never allow such employment to encroach on their studies. A student with scholarship aid that pays for tuition, room, board, and expenses should not be working at any more than a minimal job and should never allow the hours of such a job to prevent him or her from taking a particular class. A true honors student knows that such outside employment serves to satisfy a want rather than a need. Of course, I do not mean that honors students should not have jobs to support such incidental expenses as entertainment. But, certainly, a student who is receiving an award which includes full tuition, room, board, and expenses should not plan to be working at a full-time job.

Patience—An honors student should have the patience to defer, if need be, the satisfaction of wants and the patience, at all times, to listen to and to consider seriously all sides of an issue.

Appreciation of diversity—An honors student should understand that the world is culturally diverse and that technology has made unavoidable a daily contact with

that diversity. He or she appreciates that this diversity both imposes a responsibility and confers a benefit on those who live in its midst: the responsibility to be tolerant of others' ways of thinking and of doing things and the benefit of an opportunity for personal enrichment by learning from others and thereby possibly improving one's own way of thinking and of doing things. This appreciation of diversity implies both a commitment to be reasonably conversant throughout life with what is going on around the world and an awareness of and an ability to use the media available to facilitate that conversance. Flowing from this appreciation of diversity should be a certain degree of altruism, i.e., with regard to Aristotle's dictum that it is natural for humans to live not as hermits but in association with others, success in such living necessitates a consideration of "the other" and, consequently, a resignation of self-interest to one degree or another.

Recognition that life consists of more than mere physical existence—This characteristic has various manifestations. An honors student appreciates the difference between the concepts of "concrete" and "abstract"; she or he knows that an idea can provide as potent a motivation to action as physical force does. She or he appreciates that only a portion of life is spent in seeing to the security of physical existence and that there are more or less human ways in which to account for spending the balance of life that is at one's disposal, i.e., one's leisure time. Such a student may not be able to recite the etymology of the word "school," i.e. the Greek term "scholē" meaning "leisure"; but this student appreciates to some extent what the late Mortimer Adler meant in 1988 when he interpreted the phrase "liberal education" as studies pursued by one who is "free from having to get his hands dirty" all the time to stay alive. The student both knows that an unexercised intellect is as susceptible to atrophy as is unexercised muscle tissue and believes in living as if she/he could have composed the slogan "A mind is a terrible thing to waste."

Recognition of the distinction between means and ends—For example, does the student see that ideally the performance of an act is most successful when it not only produces the intended result but also gives the performer him- or herself a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment from the very act of performance? Why has the student chosen the professional goal which he/she has chosen? Does the student evidence a sense of intrigue with what the chosen profession involves? Whether or not the student has chosen a professional goal, what questions does he/she feel it is important to answer by way of making such a choice?

Understanding the concepts represented by the terms "rights," "privileges," and "responsibilities"—For an immediate example, does the student understand that membership in an honors program or college is a privilege? What rights and responsibilities does the student understand to be connected with that privilege? Can the student appreciate his/her association with the honors program or college as a paradigm for life as a citizen or family member?

How, then, can a good honors student be identified if the usual criteria do not address or do not address satisfactorily the characteristics suggested? I submit that firsthand communication with the candidate for honors, i.e., an interview, is the most useful means by which to make such an identification. To paraphrase a well-known expression made by the esteemed Justice Potter Stewart, "I may not be able

objectively to detect the qualities of a good honors student, but I know when I am talking to one." What types of questions are useful in such interviews? Again, while it may be difficult to describe these questions in the abstract, I can give several examples from my own experience:

Ask the student to give an impromptu interpretation of something relevant to some point in the conversation. For example, if the conversation turns to a discussion of materialism, the Gershwin lyrics noted above might provide an opportunity for the interviewee to demonstrate his/her interpretive ability. Incidentally, also, such an exercise may provide some indication of the candidate's general store of knowledge. Does the name "Gershwin" or the title *Porgy and Bess* "ring a bell"? It is not necessary that any particular piece of knowledge be part of the candidate's store; but if it is, there is some reason to think that you have both an interested and an interesting student in front of you. (Given the apparently pervasive lack of concern for history on the part of the generation recently and currently of an age to be applying for admission to honors work in higher education, I have had occasion to be impressed as one or another student in conversation has shown familiarity with such individuals as Emma Goldman or Harry Hopkins.)

Ask the student how he/she uses solitary spare time, i.e., what activities occupy time not devoted to satisfying physical needs (e.g., sleeping, eating), to required activities (e.g., schoolwork, job), nor to group activities (e.g., sports, playing in a musical group). It is promising if an answer involves reading and/or writing. If watching television and/or listening to music is part of an answer, probe further for the type of material enjoyed. Does the candidate like to watch quiz shows such as *Jeopardy* or to do crossword or acrostic puzzles?

How does the candidate feel about issues of reason and emotion and of utility and aesthetics? For example, what reaction does the student have to the fact that the conveniences and luxuries of a modern automobile (e.g., CD player, automatic windows and door locks, aesthetic appointments like rally stripes, availability of various engine options) may make its price two to three times what it would be for a simple, utilitarian mechanism which efficiently and safely transports passengers from point A to point B? Or, is nourishment a matter simply of physical survival, i.e., is a diet of simple, inexpensive foods, limited in variety and modes of preparation, a universally acceptable form of human nourishment? What accounts for the fact that so many people, aware though they may be of the dangers of smoking, continue to smoke?

How does the candidate feel about the fact that, despite the availability of public transportation in many instances, people still fulfill their transportation needs and wants with their own vehicles which are becoming increasingly expensive to operate?

What are the candidate's thoughts on the situation in which ailment-curing and life-saving procedures and substances are available only to those in certain economic circumstances or in which bottom-line corporate economics dictate that such procedures and substances shall not be available at all?

How does one reconcile a sports figure's signing a contract for $252,000,000 with an elderly gentleman's sleeping under newspapers at the entrance to the Charles Center Metro Station in Baltimore in winter?

It has been demonstrated that economical mass production of portable, easily assembled and disassembled shelters for the homeless is possible. What answer is there to the objection that pursuing such production serves to perpetuate homelessness?

At one time or another time during my tenure as Director of the Honors College, I believe I touched on each one of these issues in conversations with candidates for admission to or with members of the College.

I am aware that time and distance are the enemies of requiring an interview for admission. Honors programs/colleges seem generally to be too woefully understaffed to make a personal interview with each applicant feasible. Location of honors operations at schools which attract applicants from a geographically wide area makes the travel to attend such interviews impractical. Technology can compensate to some extent for these difficulties, e.g., telephone interviews can be held with students who are applying from a distance. Honors faculty can be enlisted to do interviews on campus at the crucial time of year when applications are numerous. Honors alumni can be enlisted for the same purpose or, in the case of alumni at a distance from the campus, to interview in their own localities. In the last analysis, students who cannot be interviewed in person can be asked to address in writing some key issues that might arise in the interview. But, in view of the amount of meaning conveyed by body language, every effort should be made to accomplish a face-to-face meeting with the candidate.

In sum, again, while this approach to identifying the promising honors student may lack the science and objectivity of SAT scores or grade point averages, it does recognize that there are more things relevant to the process of such identification than can be dreamt of in any fixed, descriptive methodology.

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