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A Way of Life

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SRIRAM KHÉ

A Way of Life

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The question “What is Honors?” could not have been posed at a better time for me: earlier this summer, I took up a new responsibility of directing the Western Oregon University (WOU) Honors Program while only in my fourth year at the university. Work has commenced at WOU to prepare for the accreditation process, which is also a wonderful opportunity to think about questions such as “What is Honors?”

The simple answer to the question is that honors is a way of life. Faculty and students in honors understand that inquiry and learning happen everyday in a continuous mode and not just in discrete courses or lab sessions. Sometimes they are formally conducted in classrooms and libraries; they happen while pursuing other activities such as watching movies or hiking in the woods or having dinner table conversations. I do not mean to suggest that honors faculty and students are the stereotypical “nerds”; I merely wish to emphasize the point that honors people are aware that learning opportunities exist everywhere and that they *think* about things mundane and profound.

Of course, learning in honors does not mean the same as, say, majoring in geography. By its very nature, honors is not a field of study. Instead, honors faculty and students come from a number of different disciplines. This also means that honors offers valuable opportunities for students and faculty to interact across disciplines. The result is that years after graduation honors students will not be the ones at dinner parties to proudly pronounce that they hated science or philosophy or the arts. Instead, they will be the ones who will be able to engage in meaningful and intelligent conversations about many intellectual subjects. An ideal honors program, therefore, should be able to develop in students a way of life where learning happens all the time. In this sense, the ideal honors student will be like the ones that Jay Freyman describes: “Honors students have an *interest* in learning, which they see both as an ongoing process and as an end in itself.”

Dinner table conversations with friends and family are places where there is potential for people to interact as people, with minimal conscious references to professions and degrees. In such contexts, discussions related to a movie such as “Bend it Like Beckham” will evoke from honors students not only images, story lines, and details about actors but also ideas that might range from the physics behind the trajectories of the footballs kicked by Beckham to the transformation of Britain by globalization or the role of religion. A movie no longer is only a movie, and honors becomes a way of life.

It has occurred to me that “What is Honors?” was not asked any time in the interview process for my position as Director. Neither had I ever paused to think about it. I suppose “What is Honors?” is one of those questions that never come up because

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somehow such academic initiatives are taken for granted and, therefore, may warrant only a Bart Simpson-like “duh!” as a response. In fact, I would argue that if we have not systematically thought about the question, it is only because in our work there is an implicit understanding of honors.

Ironically, the description of the WOU Honors Program is totally unlike anything I have attempted to articulate here. The program website boasts that we “challenge the intellectual life of students” through an “interdisciplinary curriculum” in a “learning community.” Of course, as Dail Mullins observes, these do sound like phrases churned out by a computer that is programmed to generate such AcademicSpeak. The immediate task for me, and possibly for directors at other universities, is to make explicit in the brochures and websites the implicit understanding of honors with which we approach our work.

As I think more about these issues, I begin to realize the parallels between what I am attempting to articulate as a response to “What is Honors?” and my personal and professional commitment to multi- and inter-disciplinary learning. My undergraduate degree is in electrical engineering, and my graduate degrees are in urban and regional planning. I have taught in geography and economics departments, and the faculty colleagues I closely interact with are often outside my “home” department or division.

Interestingly enough, the backgrounds of former directors are vastly different from mine: the immediate past director is a cell biologist, and former directors include an anthropologist and a humanities professor. When we recently celebrated twenty years of the Honors Program at WOU, I do not recall there being any explicit discussion of what Honors is. It was evident, however, that the nuts-and-bolts details of “What is Honors?” have gone through an evolution. In the process, each director has brought to the program unique approaches to every component of the program, including curriculum changes, student recruitment, and student activities. While the specifics have significantly changed, the underlying connecting thread appeared to be one of honors being a way of life.

This does not in any way mean that faculty and students outside of honors programs do not perceive education *à la honors*. Some faculty whose values resonate with those of the honors programs self-select themselves to become participants in honors. However, many faculty and students may not even know about honors programs in their universities, where they can constructively engage with like-minded people. The challenge then is not only to cultivate honors as a way of life but also to draw in people who may otherwise not know about such environments within their campuses.

Ultimately, whatever the brochures or websites may say, perhaps the often unstated answer to “What is Honors?” is simple and is not about grades or the thesis or preparation for graduate school or anything else that may be listed in glossy brochures or colorful websites. Honors is simply a way of life.

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