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What is Honors?

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For several years I have edited a small, in-house journal for the School of Education's Technology Advisory Committee at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), a journal which is distributed to the faculty and posted on the School of Education's website. Until last issue. The last issue I submitted—while dutifully made available to the faculty and staff—never made it onto the website. No one offered an explanation, and I never inquired about the matter—after all, I was still able to add the activity to my already portly and now largely useless post-retirement *vita*—but I remained mildly curious about it and wondered whether it was a simple oversight or something "unseemly" I'd written in the newsletter. After some months, I decided that it was the latter and that it was likely the article I'd written about a graduate student at MIT who had developed a computer program that generates random Mission Statements. (Sample: Our mission is to continue to efficiently supply innovative opportunities in order to professionally facilitate high-payoff technology for 100% customer satisfaction. In addition, we strive to continually leverage existing error-free resources such that we may continue to synergistically maintain corporate data.) It was, I figured, simply a matter of poor timing on my part. The university, it turns out, was in the midst of a SACS accreditation visit and no doubt had dozens of vision and mission statement "specialists" poring over its school and departmental websites. My guess is that the dean of education didn't want to take the chance of offending one of the SACS folks—accreditation personnel are notoriously lacking in a sense of humor—and so requested that the Technology Committee not add my last issue to the school's website. Fair enough, I reasoned, and that was the end of that.

I bring all this up, however, because when Ada Long asked if I would write an introductory piece for this issue of *JNCHC*—devoted, as is indicated on the cover, to the question "What is Honors?"—I began by researching several dozen honors program websites from around the country and came to the quick realization that their various program descriptions all seem to be "cut from the same cloth" and might very well have been produced by an "Honors Program Description Generator." Most notably, certain words and phrases appear again and again on these websites: "challenging," "innovative," "intellectually rigorous," "enriching," and "enhanced" to describe the educational environments offered by the programs themselves; "talented and highly motivated," "high-achieving," "promising," "academically superior," and "high ability" to describe the kinds of students enrolled and/or sought. Thus, one answer to the question "What is Honors?" seems to be that it is a system that exposes students of exceptional ability or promise to an equally exceptional educational

experience. The details of just how each program goes about these matters are also typically revealed on their respective websites or in literature made available to prospective students. Alas, the devil, as they say, is in the details.

Most of these details, it seems to me, are of two broad types: practical/programmatic on the one hand; philosophical/political on the other. Although these are most conveniently addressed separately, they have obvious and critical points of overlap that demand some measure of simultaneous consideration, and both are worthy of serious debate and discussion, whether in NCHC itself or within individual programs.

From a practical/programmatic standpoint, perhaps the two most fundamental issues affecting honors administrators and faculty include: (1) defining and identifying the kinds of students a particular program hopes to attract, be they "academically superior," "talented and highly motivated," "high achieving," simply "promising," or all of these; and (2) designing and implementing the desired academic environment (or curriculum), whether "innovative," "intellectually rigorous," "enriched," "enhanced," or some combination of these descriptors. Add to these issues such concerns as funding demands, faculty and staff recruitment, and the question of whether a particular "honors experience" ought to exist as a "program" or "college," and most honors administrators may find they have scant time left to reflect on the philosophical/political dimensions of their activities. Which is unfortunate, I think, because these dimensions are in many ways far more interesting topics, and it may even be argued that they help address more fundamentally the question "What is Honors?"

Ada Long, the former director of the University Honors Program at UAB, past president of NCHC, and an editor of *JNCHC* and *HIP*, once remarked that as much as she enjoyed working in honors—both with students and with her colleagues in NCHC—she wasn't altogether sure she actually approved of honors programs. She was referring, I believe, to a paradox of sorts which has resulted from two contradictory cultural beliefs that have helped shape American higher education since the late 1950s and in which the "honors phenomenon" has helped play an interesting role. As described by Elena Galinova in her recent doctoral dissertation from The Pennsylvania State University (*The Construction of Meritocracy Within Mass Higher Education: Organizational Dynamics of Honors Programs at American Colleges and Universities*, 2005), these two cultural beliefs include: (1) the egalitarian notion that a college education should be the right of every American citizen regardless of wealth or social standing; and (2) the equally strong notion of a meritocratic system whereby the ". . . best rewards, including [the] best education" are distributed to the most motivated, talented, and capable individuals.

This is so, even though the consequences of a "pure meritocracy" could never be acceptable in this country. In the public consciousness and through public policy, the laws of meritocracy have constantly been challenged, ameliorated and complemented by the idea of social justice and the responsibility of education to eradicate social injustice. Nevertheless, the modern higher education system would be inconceivable without its meritocratic foundations. (Galinova, p.1)

While egalitarian motives have been crucial to the development of the American system of higher education—one of the first systems of mass higher education in the world—meritocratic forces have at the same time contributed to a simultaneous ". . .

process of increased differentiation and stratification within that system, both among and within institutions" (Galinova, p. 2). The honors phenomenon (programs and colleges) which began appearing at state universities in number in the late 1950s and early 1960s—although the very first such programs date back to the 1920s—have reflected and contributed to a system based both on egalitarian access and meritocratic sorting.

The controversy—perhaps tension is a better word—surrounding the meritocratic and egalitarian forces at play in higher education, and honors programs in particular, can perhaps be illustrated by an experience I had while serving in my dual roles as a faculty member in the School of Education at UAB and as an administrator in the University Honors Program.

UAB currently has two campus-wide undergraduate honors programs (the University Honors Program and the Science and Technology Honors Program) as well as twenty-three school or departmental honors offerings. Moreover, during the last few years I was with the university, schools and departments were being strongly encouraged by the central administration to initiate more such in-house programs, the rationale apparently being that the promise of an "honors" curriculum for almost every capable student—i.e., an egalitarian movement—helped attract more and better students. Three years before I retired, the dean of the School of Education asked me—primarily because of my simultaneous involvement as Associate Director of the University Honors Program—to research, design, and coordinate the implementation an honors program within education. As he and I found out in fairly short order, however, it was not an idea particularly well received by the faculty in the School of Education (although a few informal surveys I administered to students in my own classes suggested that they were by and large amenable to the idea.) And, as best I could tell through my own inquiries into other universities, school and departmental honors programs in the field of education are generally rather scarce across the board.

Certainly much of the opposition or at least hesitant skepticism about establishing yet another administrative and academic "program" within the School of Education at UAB had to do with the proverbial questions of funding and staffing, space allotment, and release-time issues for faculty involvement—that is to say, practical/programmatic issues. At the same time, however, there was widespread reluctance on the part of many of the faculty in education even to discuss the issue, and this seemed to have more to do with latent philosophical/political matters within the discipline itself.

As a kind of "interloper" in the field of education (see Mullins Jr., Dail W., *JNCHC*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 21-29), I was aware of the fact that honors programs and courses in general are likely to be viewed with a jaundiced eye by teacher educators and that the charge of "elitism" is not uncommon. This was perhaps particularly true for a school of education which is expected to play a major role in preparing teachers for service in a large, underachieving, and troubled school district such as exists in the city of Birmingham. While a meritocratic system of honors education might be fine in principle, many argued that it was not something that future secondary school teachers in Birmingham were ever likely to encounter in the public schools; that the

implementation of such a program would only serve to further increase the "differentiation and stratification" of teacher candidates themselves; and that in the end no good purpose would be served. When I retired on July 1 of last year, the School of Education was the only professional school at UAB serving undergraduate students that still lacked an honors program.

So is honors a means by which the educational system "subverts" its broader egalitarian traditions? Or can egalitarian motives perhaps be used to soften the "differentiation and stratification" phenomena inherent in honors programs themselves? And does it matter so long as access to a chance at higher education is made available to anyone who seeks it?

In some respects, the sentiment voiced by Ada Long about honors programs in general can be viewed as echoing all these concerns. Her response, as many of her colleagues know, has been similar to that of Andrew Delbanco at Columbia University, who believes that students are best educated by arranging for classrooms which allow them to know "opposite lives." In her view, this means bringing students of proven high academic ability and privileged educational backgrounds together with those who may lack these advantages but who clearly show promise and ambition. I used to think that the University Honors Program at UAB was the only program in the country that did not set minimum GPA and standardized test scores for admittance, and I suspect it was one of a very few for almost two decades, but my recent survey of honors program websites indicates that admissions criteria are now more diverse and complex.

Like vision and mission statements, honors program and honors candidate descriptions are often idealized representations which can become devilishly difficult to reconcile with day-to-day administrative matters, coursework design and implementation, and perhaps especially the screening of applicants. It is obviously up to the administrators of individual honors programs to decide how they will balance the tensions inherent in trying to accommodate both meritocratic and egalitarian goals. My survey revealed the full range of options, from those which admit every incoming student on a conditional basis to those which go strictly on the basis of standardized test scores and other quantifiable measures. Increasingly, however, there does appear to be a tendency to look at the "whole" student from the perspectives of both achievement and promise, past performance and recognized latent talents. Whatever one's philosophical/political views of honors might be, there does seem to be room for more and different minds in the boat, thus adding a new dimension and urgency to the question "What is Honors?"

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