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Honors as an Adjective: Response to Jay Freyman

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As an ex-honors program/college CEO, the question raised by this Forum—"What is an Honors (fill in the blank)?"—got me reminiscing about the old days. In some sense the best answers are the obviously circular answers. An honors student is a student participating in an honors program. An honors curriculum is the curriculum required to graduate with honors and is made up, obviously, of honors courses. The people teaching those courses are by necessity honors faculty. But how can an honors course be identified? Well, it is one populated by honors students that meets some curricular requirement of an honors program and is taught by an honors faculty member!

Getting slightly more serious, the expression "honors student" always made me uncomfortable and still makes me uncomfortable since there are many students on campus who can legitimately claim to be "honors students" of one sort or another who have no connection whatsoever with the honors program. (To avoid using up all the slashes on my computer, I will dispense with the awkward program/college and use program generically.) Consequently, I assiduously avoid that expression and instead talk about students participating in honors. I was even more uncomfortable with the expression "honors faculty," an appellation guaranteed to infuriate some colleagues on campus. So instead we had faculty who were teaching honors courses as part of an honors curriculum.

You may not have noticed, but I have narrowed down the set of questions that I am prepared to address. The adjective "honors" ought to be applied primarily to courses and curriculum. In fact, I would argue that it is the curriculum that should be dominant and define an honors experience. An honors curriculum is designed, in principle, to take some students from somewhat unformed freshmen to plausibly intelligent and thoughtful seniors. Therefore, I would suggest that the criteria listed by Jay Freyman in his article "What is an Honors Student?" seem like a wonderful set of outcome objectives for an honors program as opposed to set of admission requirements. Then the question becomes, "What sort of honors program, and especially honors curriculum, would move students, willing and able to participate in honors, toward becoming more "honorable" according to Jay Freyman?"

Of course it is possible that a different set of objectives could be used as a guide for developing an honors curriculum. Also, I am using "curriculum" in a very general sense. For example, the curriculum could include public service, cultural events, or campus lectures. I am assuming these decisions are being made by an inclusive

group of faculty from across campus, who can now be called upon to help develop the specific courses that constitute the pedagogic part of the curriculum.

As part of developing those honors courses, the faculty will be led naturally, or coaxed if necessary, to consider the question, "What is an honors course?" This allows different institutions to come up with criteria designed to meet the specific needs of the students on that campus and also the particular set of objectives decided upon at the start of the process.

After the curriculum is decided upon and courses developed, the questions about "honors" faculty and students become important. How are faculty selected to teach the courses in the honors curriculum? How do students become participants in the honors program? My suggestion is to fall back on the objectives of the program, the curriculum, and the criteria established to define an honors course. I will deal with the faculty first since it seems a little irresponsible to recruit students into a program before knowing who will be teaching the honors courses in the curriculum. Faculty can be recruited, volunteer themselves, or be coerced to teach an honors course with the *a priori* understanding that they agree to abide by the criteria established to define an honors course. For example, if it has been agreed that there will be no multiple-choice question examinations and that all classes should have a writing component, then the faculty selected to teach honors courses need to be bound by those criteria. The faculty selected to teach the honors courses are not "honors faculty" but instead faculty who will be teaching courses in the honors program.

The idea of selecting students based on how well they already meet the outcome objectives of the program seems a little backward. Instead, my strategy would be to emphasize the programmatic features of honors, including objectives, along with some type of statistical summary of the academic preparation expected for participants. I also certainly encourage the use of a separate application form for honors and some sort of writing sample as a way to establish a minimal level of student interest. If a student can't fill out an application and write an essay or short story, he or she should not be encouraged to participate in honors. After that, I was always most comfortable with allowing students basically to self-select into honors. Admittedly there were times when a student was denied immediate admission into honors because of especially weak high school credentials. But our program allowed students to enter honors after completing their first semester, thus giving the student the opportunity to prove how little I knew about predicting a student's performance in college.

If the value of an honors program is measured by its impact on a student over four years of participation, it seems to me that students with the least honorific characteristics as freshmen may be the ones who gain the most from interacting with a robust, broad, and challenging honors curriculum. The assumption being made about students, like that made for faculty, is that students entering the honors program accept the objectives of the program, which for me means they are open to the possibility of growing during their undergraduate years. That willingness to be part of the honors community on campus becomes the primary criterion used to select participants.

In parting, I would like to remind readers that it is much easier to see things clearly and unambiguously, though still possibly incorrectly, when your mind is not

cluttered with the day-to-day details of actually running an honors program. So with that, I will amble back to my rocker to resume my role as an ex-CEO of an honors program.

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