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Cultivating Too

Bernice Braid
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In his plenary comments at NCHC's Washington conference (2000), Sam Schuman raised topics of compelling interest to us all: the role of honors and of the NCHC in the context of attitudinal matters in higher education generally, as he sees them. These topics are important to all of us. What individual honors programs actually do, these days, and what NCHC does for them and for honors are deeply important issues as we begin a new millennium. My response is a personal attempt to frame the issues Sam has raised, consider the same span of time he cites—the final thirty years of the old millennium—and suggest a challenge that honors might well address better than almost any other segment of the academy.

First, individual honors programs: increasingly, as I hear about them, they sponsor public events of all sorts, including speakers whose presentations are open to the public. They engage in outreach efforts—to the rest of their campus community, to local junior high and high schools, often both to high achievers and to under-achievers. They increasingly have been providing leadership in student affairs campus-wide, and they continue to provide a laboratory both for teaching from the sensibilities to 'learning styles' that Sam cites and from expertise they have gained from pedagogical innovation and curricular experimentation.

It is fair to ask why they do these things, why more now than in the early 70's. My own guess is that there are many reasons, among which these: Few programs were genuinely well funded when Sam attended the Williamsburg conference. Many more now have their own grants, restricted funds, and/or significant support from their administrations. Indeed, honors programs are now solicited to partner with departments and other programs, partially because honors can help market events, but also because honors is a source of financial backing necessary for others to present these events.

Initially, I think, honors programs rose to accept the counsel of NCHC in order to create "visibility" for honors by becoming a presence on campus and in the surrounding community. They sought implicit justification for

their existence in reaching for visibility, and in that process they found they were not utterly ineffectual fundraisers once they had a recognizable face. They were also helped significantly by the need of their administrations to engage in aggressive recruitment efforts. By the 80's, bringing students to campuses around the country became an essential task so demanding that administrative staff sought help from faculty in general and from honors in particular. A kind of quid pro quo emerged: "Help us recruit, and we will help you raise funds."

One tacit element of this kind of recruitment outreach was also the need to improve town/gown relationships. Another was to provide professional stimulus on campus to colleagues who wanted development opportunities in times of restricted budgets and no new hires. In short, honors became a resource during the market downturn which hit our colleges hard. Burdened with large residual mortgage debt left over from the post-World War II GI Bill boom, faced with shrinking student pools, attempting to cope with pressures for open admission—all issues well documented in The Chronicle of Higher Education in those years—our colleges gradually came to value honors for more than its products.

When the academy discovered pedagogy and began to think about alternate modes of teaching and learning; when it began to think about modes of inquiry rather than the deposition of information into empty vessels (not that everyone in the academy has switched, but lots of talk about the distinctions between these pedagogies took place in the late 80's and 90's), then the usefulness of honors as laboratories for innovation began to seem clearer to more people. That is, structures were already in place. Students with abilities were already willing to experiment, some. Faculty who had already tried new strategies were willing to try more.

So the context for honors and for higher education contains, at this point, both promise and peril. The acceptance of mediocrity, for instance, that Sam laments, could well be an opportunity for honors to carve out another pivotal role for itself. There are dangers in that line of discourse, though. NO department that I know of is eager to claim that THE center of excellence on its campus is an existing honors program. Hence the peril, which comes from a need for unusual diplomacy on this excellence thing, and from the need to maintain centrality for honors in areas of outreach and recruitment. Success has, after all, bred what some think of as greed. Colleges see themselves far more as businesses than as laboratories for open-ended experiments.

My fear therefore is that honors walks a kind of tightrope just now. Its cry for excellence must be one note in a chorus of notes. None of the great advances of the past thirty years can really be abandoned. Sam's idea about "bringing speakers to campus" is provocative since the public venue of such occasions provides both an occasion when excellence can be experienced, touted, and appreciated, while also offering the service of excellence-provider to the larger community. Likewise other forms of service could, if documented and presented, increase the taste for quality even as they establish honors as a center of excellence locally.

There is a possible weapon available to honors programs, moreover, that could help them engage in the precarious balancing act I fear all of us are now in. During those same days Sam refers to as his entry into NCHC, the early 70's, there was still a strong commitment to liberal education in the academy. That commitment has weakened over the years in proportion to the growth of specializations rooted in professional schools and vocational training. For nearly a decade NCHC's yearly conferences have reflected deep concern that overall exposure to liberal learning might shrink too much to sustain honors. There were encouraging reports in some sessions about grants at large state universities meant to embed liberal learning in professional education, and these reports were seen as genuine progress in what some felt to be an age of philistines. The most prevalent 'solution' to the challenge of liberalizing professionals, or professionalizing liberals, was expressed as the ideal marriage of honors programs—general education, liberal learning—and specialization. I went to many such panel presentations, where the argument rang out clearly for breadth in honors conjoined with depth in the major; in which examples of senior theses satisfying disciplinary depth but offered within honors were given as instances of successful partnership between honors and departments.

All the polarities implied by this central set of concerns persist, of course. Often the strength of honors as a broadener of vistas rests firmly on the power of tracking into professional programs, even at the same campus: that is, the possible risks in a broad-based liberal arts and sciences curriculum appear minimized by a guarantee of acceptance into professional programs. Commonly cited population configurations in particular honors programs indicate that large numbers of students come from applied science and business, and all of us in honors are pleased and proud of our inclusiveness when such numbers allow us to be.

All of which is preamble to the point of my response here, namely that

at this moment, in 2001, honors is posed to perform a service for all of higher education, and for all of its honors students, that is hard to come by otherwise. Employers and graduate schools have been saying for fifteen years now that college graduates are not insufficiently trained in a specialization, but that they are on the whole not very articulate, reflective, careful about detail, alert to innuendo, or cognizant of the ramifications of their own culture which make for high quality graduate study or workplace performance. In fact it is because of this weakness in many undergraduates that honors students are sought out by competitive companies and graduate programs. One significant advantage we should note, therefore, is that honors programs can provide the broad learning, strategies for continued learning, and love of problem solving and engaging with unfamiliar territory that are otherwise not necessarily characteristic of the newly minted bachelor of arts or sciences.

The capacity to ask good questions, to set problems and attempt to address them; the hunger to try new fields and see life whole; the adroitness to attack life in all its multi-disciplinarity: these are the greatest gifts an honors program can give its best and brightest students. NCHC, for its part, can once again provide a forum in which needs and appropriate preparation to serve them can be discussed, and information about relations between the academy and the workplace can be explored. Annual conferences, both regional and national, have consistently been arenas for this kind of interchange and support. In addition to sessions on competitive scholarships and professional school access, then, NCHC can provide real-time conversation among those who recognize the indivisibility of our worlds, the one in here and the one out there, in which our students must not just survive, but thrive.

If we can help our member institutions by leading in this direction, we will be helping honors, to be sure. But we will also be helping, big time, higher education as a whole.

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