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It's Ten O'Clock. Do You Know Where Your Students Are?

STEPHEN WAINSCOTT
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Sam Schuman's essay urging us to promote excellence broadly and not just within our programs comes on the eve of Clemson's SACS reaccreditation site visit next year. His observations remind me that I need to get busy. Thanks a lot, Sam.

Like scores of others involved in the reaccreditation process, I will do my part by contributing to, but not chairing, the Honors Program's self-study. It will feature lots of golly-gee-whiz graphs and charts. I may toss in a colorful pie chart showing honors students from all over the country and many foreign countries, including Texas. The self-study will note strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures. There will be numerous recommendations for improvement. Above all, it will be an honest document summarizing how well the program has done over the past ten years. Assessment gurus will marvel at this Mother of All Self-Studies. If nothing else, they will be dazzled by my Power Point skills.

Why, then, am I troubled? Why am I haunted by the notion that something not worth doing at all isn't worth doing well? And, just what, you may be asking, does any of this have to do with Sam's essay?

I am troubled because Sam offers a needed and unsettling reminder that there is a lot more to honors than running *The Honors Program*. I am troubled because I realize I have devoted too much time and energy to providing opportunities and challenges to the small fraction of undergraduates who are program "members." I am troubled because I have focused too much on making the program "look good." I am troubled because it has taken me too long to understand that Sam's "knight's move" involves nothing less than radically changing the campus culture. If we really believe this is what honors programs are supposed to do, we cannot accept the idea that honors is simply the crest of a rising tide lifting all boats. Our aim should be to reverse the tide.

In *Beer and Circus*, Murray Sperber contrasts the "collegiate" and "academic" campus cultures. (He also takes potshots at honors programs, but that's the subject of another essay for Sam to write). Increasingly, Sperber contends, the collegiate culture dominates many institutions, especially "BTU's" (big-time universities) with their large and expensive athletic programs. This culture is about fraternity, football, and fun. Courses, books, and other elements of learning are in the scene, but only on the periphery. Professors are regarded as insufferable bores whose demands interfere with the students' more important social needs. In this anti-educational culture, working on a homecoming float is an acceptable excuse for missing a class. On campus kiosks, announcements of a sorority's lip-sync contest crowd out posters announcing a lecture by a Nobel laureate. The academic culture is about the "life of the mind" and other intellectual platitudes we honors people are always preaching. Within this culture are students who are disciplined, motivated, and eager for the "world of knowledge and ideas to reach them." They are present on every college campus, though at the BTU's they are a single-digit minority. Scorned by the collegians for their disinterest in the party scene, academics are often objects of derision. Sadly, they see themselves as outsiders.

What has the Honors Program done to foster and fertilize the academic culture of the entire campus? To expand the ranks of our life-of-the-mind types to double digits? To make students who are here to learn objects of admiration? To put it in "assessment-ese," we will know we have succeeded in reversing the tide, in growing the academic culture, in getting Sam to stop fretting when we see....what?

I submit that the "what" is not the kind of evidence that typically shows up in self-studies. Indeed, we may be searching for indicators that defy anecdotal documentation, to say nothing of statistical measurement. Yet, what we should be searching for may be far more important to our tide-reversing, culture-changing mission than any battery of "success criteria." Here's a suggestion. Instead of besieging our institutional research offices with requests for yet another statistical summary, let's take a walk around our campuses and do a little squinting with our eyes and with our ears. Let's take this walk not during our office hours, nor during regular daytime classes, but at 10 PM. I suggest Thursday.

Aside from the usual activities, e.g., studying, getting drunk, watching MTV, what kinds of voluntary, spontaneous, and largely unstructured activities do you see taking place? Can you spot anyone reading a book

recommended by a professor? Is it possible to hear a group of students chatting about a concert, a dramatic performance, or a lecture they just attended? Are there groups of students and faculty gathered over coffee and dessert to plan a service project? Is anyone listening to NPR? Do you hear arguments about things more important than the price of a keg of beer or the outcome of Saturday's game? Not everyone has to be doing these things all of the time. But if we want to claim that the academic culture is alive and well, some students need to be doing some of these things some of the time, AND the students doing them should not be made to feel like outcasts.

Within the past year our Honors Program took a step, admittedly a small and not very radical one, in the direction of culture change. Under the auspices of the *New York Times* readership program, we arranged for 120 copies of the newspaper to be delivered daily. The sign we made for the newsstand outside the office says that the papers are free and available to students – any and all students. Several times I have spotted faculty members helping themselves. That bothers me a bit, but not too much. Occasionally a custodian will snitch a copy. On my way home one day last week, I spotted the building's security guard, a kind and gentle soul whose limited formal education likely did not include an honors experience. "Whatcha reading there," I asked? "Oh, all about this Kosovo thing." Fine with me.

If we are able to survive impending budget cuts, I want to expand this service to other campus reaches. I'm sure the brothers of Zamma Gamma Wow would appreciate being able to bone up on their current events. I also have a vision that one Thursday night around 10:00, in the vicinity of the athletic department I will spot a defensive lineman reading all about Kosovo.

Culture change. Fine with me.

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