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Honors Needs Diversity More than the Diverse Need Honors

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Awareness of and sensitivity to social class, economic class, ethnicity and gender have been important goals of the academy and of honors for the past few decades. During this time the academy, which has always been the domain primarily of the middle and upper class, has reached out to help those whom they call "the disadvantaged." Typically, academics see such attempts at outreach as acts of generosity or social consciousness, a kind of noblesse oblige. The truth is that attracting students from different social classes as well as ethnicities and nationalities brings at least as much benefit to the college as to the students we recruit. The benefit to an honors program is even greater than to its home institution. Given the emphasis in honors on small classes and discussion-based instruction, representation of the full range of social and economic perspectives is essential to effective education.

In the past, I have been associated with honors programs at homogeneously middle- to- upper-class institutions. At every one, the staffs of the programs have recognized the need to expose the students to diverse perspectives and lives. One way this concern was addressed was inviting a Native American storyteller to spend the evening with a group of students and faculty members. It was a great event, and ten years later I remember vividly—as probably the students also do—some of the stories she told and the insights they afforded us into the differences between our cultures. However, as I have recently realized, this diversity was artificial in nature: an outsider was brought in to the program in order to create a diverse experience, and then she left. In both kind and outcome, this experience was different from the natural diversity of an honors program composed of students with many different perspectives.

I am now the director of an honors program at a public college in Queens, New York City, which is the most ethnically diverse county in the United States. My college and my honors program reflect that diversity. About half of our college's students are Black and 15% Hispanic. Forty percent of our students have immigrated to the U.S.; most are from the Caribbean, and we have sizable minorities of Middle-Eastern and East-, West-, and South-Asian students.

The atmosphere of my college and honors program reflects so many different and unique voices that in addition to describing my college as diverse, I would also describe it as pluralistic. "Diversity," to me, implies that a dominant power or perspective is allowing or inviting different perspectives to join the conversation. "Pluralism" implies that no group or perspective dominates; there are so many voices that there is no majority.

One way this pluralism manifests itself was made clear to me when I attended the 2008 NCHC conference with students from my honors program. When I asked them about the student poster sessions they attended, my students had critiques of some of the posters. They felt that some posters did not address important issues. What kind of issues?—gender, race and ethnicity. For example, one poster (I am disguising its actual content) described the failure of a microloan program for women in Afghanistan. The poster laid the blame for the failure on the women themselves. My students' critique was that the poster did not discuss how the Afghan women would view the loans and said nothing about what roles were appropriate for women in that culture.

As one of my students put it, "We would never be able to get away with saying something like that in class . . . not saying anything about the women's perspective. Other students wouldn't let us get away with ignoring that." She was not only referring to her fellow honors students, but to our student body as a whole. Everyday my students must—both in and out of the classroom—navigate and negotiate issues of plurality, and therefore they develop intellectual abilities that honors students from homogeneous middle- and upper-class colleges may not possess. My anecdotal observation is supported by social psychologist Philip Tetlock's research on being held accountable. He shows that being forced to justify your statements (or the threat of that) leads to greater cognitive complexity. In later studies, Tetlock has focused on the connection among multi-cultural environments, accountability, and complexity of thought.

An atmosphere that engenders such accountability cannot be easily created artificially. Listening to a Native American storyteller or offering a class that highlights a non-dominant perspective may provide insights to students but cannot provide an overall atmosphere of accountability. Focusing on "student diversity" in an honors program's recruitment will also be unlikely to lead to an atmosphere of accountability. Research by psychologists such as Claude Steele shows that minority "tokens" lack confidence in their legitimacy within an organization. In such situations, token honors students would be unlikely to question others or hold them accountable, unlike a situation where a true plurality exists. In order to experience multi-cultural benefits, honors programs must go beyond simple attempts at "student diversity" and attempt to create an atmosphere in the program that is pluralistic.

Creating a pluralistic honors program requires the presence of students from lower economic classes. In my conversations with students who are considering entering my honors program or students who are considering dropping out of the program, their greatest concern about the program is risk. We are asking students who enter an honors program to take personal and academic risks. To a middle- or upper-class student, the risk of failure may be minimal. To a student from lower economic classes, the risk of failure is much greater, threatening not just psychological or social damage but financial ruin.

Many of the students at my college and in my honors program live on unstable economic ground. For example, this week an honors student resigned. She had just started a new job and was concerned about the demands of supporting herself, keeping her GPA high, and meeting the requirements of the honors program. She asked me, "What is more important, for getting into grad school, a high GPA or the honors program?" I told her the high GPA was more important and she resigned from the honors program. For many of my students, my college is their only chance for a better life. It is imperative that they make no mistakes or miscalculations. They must take the more cautious route.

We are left with two conflicting needs. Honors programs create more careful and complex thinkers when they have students in the program who strongly and confidently espouse their different perspectives on life. However, honors may be a risky luxury these students cannot afford. Our programs derive essential benefits from the participation of students from the lower economic classes while the benefits to these students are fraught with risk. I cannot offer a solution to this dilemma, but awareness of it may help us design and maintain better honors programs.

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