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Honors and Class

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Since the 1980s a steady stream of scholarly works has examined stratification along class lines in American education. A recent work on this subject is *Tearing Down the Gates*, by Peter Sacks, which won the Frederic W. Ness Book Award in January 2009. It draws a detailed portrait of changes in demographics over the past thirty years or so. His time line allows him to pinpoint a growing polarization that shows a severely reduced college population of students from low-income families, displaced by an enormous increase in students from affluent families on our college campuses. As his subtitle indicates, this shift in economic status is a challenge to “Confronting the Class Divide in American Education.”

Several aspects of this profile give pause. Although everyone is admitted to school in K–12, what Sacks and others he cites call “tracking” begins in pre-school. The kind of teaching offered to children from middle- and upper-income homes is radically different from that given to the poor. Books (too few); equipment (too little); class size (too large): all of these exacerbate the already weak position of children whose homes have no books, whose families have a minimal education, who live in spaces too small or too cramped to read or study.

What’s striking about his argument is his conclusion that family background has so powerful a negative effect on the long-term educational outcomes of these children, who are also often from disadvantaged minority communities. What begins in pre-school continues through high school, where tracking splits the vocational from the academic (pre-college) sectors. Here everything from the kinds of courses to the number of professionals available to guide students becomes dramatically prejudicial to the poor; at one extreme public high school college counselors work on a thousand-to-one ratio, which Sacks calculates translates into one hour per year/per student of advising about kinds of colleges and how students might get into them. Given his statistics, all drawn from US Department of Education data, it is small wonder that the disparity in numbers between children of the poor and of the rich in American colleges is so great.

In what feels like a parallel universe, honors discussions about access to honors programs almost always focus on questions about: appropriate size of the entire program or of small seminar courses; selection procedures and

concerns about performance statistics students present; recruitment strategies and scholarship policies; enhancing opportunities for research and international study. Almost all comments about demographics relate to scholastic standing of applicants and, in recent years, to an interest in diversity among participating honors students. As in the case of discussions about general student admission statistics, “diversity” is defined as race, ethnicity, gender, and specialization but not economic circumstances. Where finances are mentioned, they most frequently come into play in terms of merit scholarships and only occasionally in terms of Pell Grants, which are available to the lower-income group we are concerned with here, the group currently represented in very low numbers in higher education compared to relatively very well-off students.

A few programs among NCHC member institutions have reported on versions of open admissions policies (“If they want to take an honors course, they should be allowed to”). Also, increasing numbers of honors options are available at community colleges, which according to Sacks have the majority of low-income students now in higher education in the States and are reporting success in linking with four-year schools to help their clientele move toward a four-year degree. In the context of this discussion, though, it should be noted that the connection between community colleges and four-year institutions often focuses primarily on merit scholarships, honors programs handing off students to honors programs, and on recruitment of academically very accomplished applicants who are almost certain both to earn scholarships from and be accepted into prestigious four-year schools.

Not many colleges pride themselves on providing access to students who are “diverse” both on grounds of ethnicity or race and economic status. In practice such a broad cross-section is a challenge for recruiters and is an issue that has been raised in higher-education circles for more than a decade. Given the data Peter Sacks offers and that have become important in sociology departments, the broader definition of diversity that includes economics is far more than just a challenge; it is a threat to the concept of universal education that is presumed to prepare individuals for constructive roles in a democratic society.

One of the more fascinating portions of Sacks’ argument appears in the opening chapters, where he depicts the many advantages of attending elementary school in the company of the affluent. He singles out teaching styles that are creative, methodologies based on inquiry and problem solving, and active-learning strategies. Everyone in honors will recognize immediately that this cluster of approaches characterizes the richest experiences in college honors courses. These approaches have been around in elementary school at least since the 1930s—though not in all of them, and not available

to all students. Often called “opportunity rooms,” these tracks are designed for strong academic performers, sometimes also called “the gifted” in these settings. This separating out of the already strong into more creative environments is precisely what disturbs Sacks; its appearance at the very outset of the entire trajectory, he argues, leads inevitably to the stratification he records in our colleges.

In fact, these opening comments, combined with Sacks’ conclusions about higher education, lead me to focus particularly on his book in the framework of thinking about “honors and class” for *JNCHC*. What he never mentions, and what generally does not appear in research about polarization in our educational system, is that the active-learning environments that college honors programs nourish—indeed battle to create—are deeply successful with learners of all ages. The pages of NCHC’s publications often report instances of successful application of honors pedagogy to high school populations, including those that the high schools themselves consider “not honors material.” Several of the earliest articles about City as Text™ make extensive reference to the exceptional work of S.B. Heath, who wrote about similar approaches to teaching, using experiential strategies to pull students into the fields around their schools for interviews with local farmers about their planting practices and to compare these practices with the crop theory they were reading about in their biology texts. Students were looking for patterns in their observations to support local folkways, to sort out complex analytical material, to think independently and creatively. These small-town and rural children in Appalachia, most from poor families, achieved dramatic improvement in their performance on standardized tests once they entered “the field” to ask their questions, to look at and see the world around them in analytical ways, and to present their findings in small-group work in school.

Those of us who work with NCHC’s Honors Semesters have learned much from Heath’s field explorations and have applied that insight to our own work with honors students. Her students were children, in middle school or high school, who were already able to set and solve problems once exposed to what amounts (for us) to honors pedagogy. The application of that pedagogy to high school experiments run by honors programs as outreach efforts for their campuses has also proved to be successful: as a recruiting device; as a way to bring to campus those without money who might never have breached the frontiers of college on their own; as enrichments offered to local schools grateful for the labor and imagination of academically talented college students; as working mentorships gifted to middle and high schools that they cannot afford to buy otherwise.

When students from poor families—students who have already been abused by immersion in sub-standard teaching situations—remain confused about college and unable to secure extended mentoring from overstressed

high school teachers and staff, they typically do not perform well on tests like the ACT and SAT, nor do they write eloquent application essays for whatever colleges they might hear about. As advocacy organizations within higher education have repeatedly argued in the past fifteen years, students graduating from schools that serve poor and low-income populations never show well on competitive examinations, certainly not nearly as well as those from schools serving affluent students.

Once again, some honors programs are attempting to equalize this situation by conducting in-person interviews that, among other advantages, bypass the inherent inequities of relying on massive tests that require fast recall under the pressure of time limits. Analyses of results on these tests show that, the more affluent the test-takers and the higher the educational level of their parents, the likelier they are to get high scores. By relying on interviews rather than test scores, honors programs, far from being just another instrument in the slow torture of low-income aspirants to a better life, can be an instrument for circumventing the ills of an education system that has become a business enterprise. The aspirations of this enterprise are increasingly to raise money from wealthy alumni or to gain points based on high levels of freshman talent and high numbers of outstanding competitive scholarships among graduating seniors.

In an effort to identify what exactly makes an education for democracy, perhaps we should begin by extrapolating what honors does really well—effective teaching, original research, active learning—and applying it to elementary, middle, and high schools. If we were to make sure that all the creativity, artistry, and commitment to intellectual and emotional development gets spread around a bit more to the rest of us, if we were to reach the forty or fifty percent who should take part in universal education as a right and not just a privilege, we would see that honors practices have everything to give, and nothing to lose.

Many of our colleagues in higher education are now embarked on thinking about educational inequity as a danger to our democracy and to our country. I am offering a brief opening to what I hope will be a long conversation about these matters in honors. Many works cited by Peter Sacks can inform this conversation, among them these:

- Astin, Alexander W. and Leticia Oseguera. “The Declining Equity of American Higher Education.” *Review of Higher Education* 27.3 (2004).
- Bowen, William and Derek Bok. *The Shape of the River: Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- Brantlinger, Ellen A. *Dividing Classes: How the Middle Class Negotiates and Rationalizes School Advantage*. New York: Routledge-Falmer, 2003.

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McDonough, Patricia M. *Choosing College: How Social Class and Schools Structure Opportunity*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1997.

Mortenson, Thomas. "Family Income and Higher Education Opportunity, 1970 to 2002." *Postsecondary Education Opportunity* 143 (May 2004).

Sacks, Peter. *Tearing Down the Gates: Confronting the Class Divide in American Education*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

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