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## Editor's Introduction

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# Editor's Introduction

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## EDITORIAL PRELUDE

The Forum that opens this issue of *JNCHC* is devoted to the topic “Social Class and Honors” and appears in the midst of economic and social turmoil unlike any since honors education started gaining momentum in the 1960s. As a prelude to the Forum, the time seems right to exercise some editorial prerogative and address potential implications that the financial meltdown might have for honors programs and colleges.

In his *New York Times* column on Sunday, March 8, 2009, Thomas Freidman argues that 2008 was the beginning of “The Great Disruption” (a phrase invented by Paul Gilding), that 2008 was the year when rampant greed and its inevitable consequence—abuse of the environment—hit the wall. Rather than seeing this crash as a calamity that we will need to find a way out of, Freidman sees it as an awakening to (and from) the unsustainable exorbitance of our former way of life. Our current woes just might signal the beginning of more thoughtful, careful relationships between each other and with the earth.

While the poor and the struggling-to-be-middle-class are suffering the most from this “Great Disruption,” as they always suffer the most from any economic downturn, the rich are whining the loudest and are the least imperiled (except for the Bernie Madoffs). Those of us who are middle-class—whose retirement accounts and houses are now worth half of their value before 2008—are frightened but still, for the most part, comfortable, at least for the time being. The amount of noise and anguish coming from America’s different social classes seems to be in inverse proportion to the danger each class is facing.

National Public Radio aired a talk show on Wednesday, March 4, 2009, focused on the impact of the economic downturn on young people. The callers were almost exclusively from the bottom-of-the-comfort-zone class, children who were trying to get jobs to help their parents make ends meet, parents who could no longer afford to send their children to college. All of the callers had cut back on the kinds of food and clothes they bought, often to a meager level that would have been unimaginable a year earlier. What surprised me was that every single caller had found benefit in this turn of events.

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Families that had been driven by individual desires for more goods and services, for more stuff, suddenly were becoming families of mutual cooperation, families whose members were all cutting back on spending, trying to help each other make it through rough times, discovering their collective resources rather than pursuing their individual wants. These families were discovering their reliance on each other, their love of each other.

While the economic and political pundits are identifying an inability or refusal to spend as the culprit of the downturn, maybe this drop in spending is a hopeful sign of a saner future. Maybe it is our chance to escape from addiction to “stuff” and to discover our responsibility to each other, both within and beyond families. Maybe the economic engine that has been driving us will stop using up so many of the earth's resources and stop spewing out so much of the pollution that is destroying us.

Before the current economic crisis, several commentators noted—based on surveys and polls—that members of the working and middle classes aspired to the upper class and thus voted for candidates and policies that privileged the wealthy. In my perception, these same not-now and never-likely-to-be members of the upper classes have suddenly grown angry at the rich people they used to envy, grown more aware and resentful of their privileges, more skeptical of their right to have these privileges, and less tolerant of the structures and policies that gave them the privileges.

Although the current economic crisis has had fearful consequences for higher education—shrinking endowments, sliced budgets, layoffs, furloughs, and staff reductions—an example of perhaps more welcome effects might be reassessment of salary differentials. Like CEOs and Wall Street bigwigs, college presidents have increasingly measured their worth and taken pride in bigger and bigger salaries, increasingly out of line with the more static level of faculty salaries. Now many of them are taking voluntary pay cuts and are declining some of the more opulent perks that had become part of the higher-administration culture. What used to be a source of pride has now become a source of embarrassment or even shame. The financial aspirations of the middle class have lost some of their exuberance and are tempered by increased discomfort with privilege.

Honors administrators might now consider how such cultural shifts, combined with their own shrinking budgets, can have positive as well as negative effects on their programs. As Norm Weiner argues, honors programs are a middle-class phenomenon: “We tend to be middle-class educators presenting middle-class values to our students so that they can succeed in a middle-class society.” Honors may have been moving, along with the rest of the middle class, toward a culture of privileges and perks, toward fancy banquets, honors paraphernalia, expensive trips, and lavish merit

scholarships for students with no financial need. Now may be a time to go back to our roots, to value conservation and community, to refocus on students and teachers learning together and helping each other. It may be a time to consider new ways to offer help beyond honors by, for instance, deploying our students in struggling elementary, middle, and high schools, as Bernice Braid suggests in her Forum essay, in order to help these students attain privileges we enjoy in honors.

Our culture is changing suddenly and dramatically, and those of us who are in positions of relative privilege—among whom I count all honors administrators, teachers, and students—need to be sure we deserve them and use them wisely for the benefit not just of individuals but of higher cultural values. As we inevitably complain loudly about our shrinking budgets, we can also quietly go about the business of rediscovering our collective resources, exercising mutual cooperation, and reaching out to help our broader communities. Several of the essays in the Forum on Social Class and Honors point the way toward these goals.

## **FORUM ON “SOCIAL CLASS AND HONORS”**

In soliciting submissions to a Forum on Social Class and Honors, we distributed the following Call for Papers to the NCHC membership:

We invite essays of roughly a thousand words that consider this theme in the context of your campus and/or a national context. Questions to consider might include: Do honors programs reflect the diversity in social class of their home institutions? Should they? Do honors programs reflect America’s social hierarchy? Should they? Is a focus on issues of social class important in the honors classroom and curriculum? Are honors programs designed to provide upward mobility, and, if so, is that a worthy goal? Is diversity in social class a benefit to honors, and should it be a goal in admissions? Do honors admissions criteria implicitly discriminate against lower- or working-class students? How does the relationship between social class and race affect honors programs? How do differences in social class affect the extracurricular life, residential living, or service components of honors programs? Do scholarship programs in honors exacerbate or ameliorate differences in social class? Do study abroad programs increase discrimination based on social class? How do service learning programs help and/or hinder awareness of class issues?

Included with the Call for Papers was a lead essay by Norm Weiner of the State University of New York at Oswego and an indication that

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

“Contributions to the Forum may respond to this essay or take an independent approach.”

Norm Weiner's essay—“Honors is Elitist, and What's Wrong with That?”—offers a sociological perspective on social classes and defines the evolution of honors into a middle-class phenomenon, hence the absence of university-wide honors programs at Ivy League schools. Weiner argues that honors is not elitist if what is meant by that term is a sense of entitlement, but he suggests that it is elitist in offering middle-class students a boost up the social ladder so that they might share some of the opportunities and privileges of more socially advantaged students. This latter definition of “elitism” is one that Weiner is happy to accept and embrace.

The subsequent submissions to the Forum, most of which respond directly or indirectly to Weiner's essay, fall into two groups. The first group of four essays addresses the idea of honors as a means to give students a boost up the social ladder. The second group of six essays focuses on the issue of elitism in honors: whether it is justified and/or how it relates to class stratification.

Anmarie Guzy of the University of South Alabama provides a personal narrative about climbing the social ladder in “A Blue-Collar Honors Story.” Her history in academia and beyond is an exemplum of precisely the kind of upward social mobility that Norm Weiner defines as a function of honors. Her intellectual talents, which were countercultural in her financially challenged, blue-collar background, landed her a spot in an honors program that changed her life. Now a tenured associate professor of English and honors teacher, she can help academically gifted working-class students as her honors professors helped her. Although she often feels socially isolated from her typically middle-class colleagues, she has advantages far beyond those of her parents and is grateful to have climbed up the social and economic ladder through the mediation of honors.

Linda Frost, like Guzy, left home in her climb up the ladder, but she works with many students who feel committed to their community and are likely to make it their permanent home. In “Class, Honors, and Eastern Kentucky: Why We Still Need to Try to Change the World,” Frost describes her experience as the new honors director at Eastern Kentucky University, which serves one of the poorest regions in Kentucky and the nation. Students in the honors program face economic, social, and cultural obstacles to moving up the social ladder at the same time that they feel responsibility and loyalty to their region. Frost is learning from her students that her honors program, like them, needs to “improve what we do while remaining who we are.” While she agrees with Weiner that honors needs to help individual students climb the ladder, she also feels—unlike Weiner—that honors can and

should try to change their world by reaching out and helping the communities that these students do and will always call home.

Charlotte Pressler picks up on Weiner's discussion of the cultural attributes that upper-class children take for granted and that other children, if they wish to climb the social ladder, must acquire. In "The Two-Year College Honors Program and the Forbidden Topics of Class and Cultural Capital," Pressler provides an interesting theoretical context for considering issues of cultural capital, socialization, and student engagement. She then describes some of the ways that South Florida Community College—which enrolls primarily rural, first-generation, lower-income students—tries to provide the cultural capital that students need in order to advance their careers and broaden their opportunities.

In "On Class and *Class*," Joan Digby describes her honors students at the C. W. Post Campus of Long Island University as struggling—much like Guzy's, Frost's, and Pressler's students and like honors students across the country—to achieve a comfortable middle-class status. Their parents, often working-class, push them to achieve useful educations that will land them stable jobs in salaried positions. Parents often see these students as "cash cows," their stake in a financially viable future for their families. The challenge for honors, writes Digby, is to give these students more than a shot at higher-class status and to give them also *class*, a grounding in the arts and the intellect and—in Digby's inimitable phrase—"a vision beyond the mall."

The first of six essays that focus on elitism in honors is "To the Charge of 'Honors is Elitist,'" on Advice of Counsel We Plead 'Guilty as Charged'" by Robert Spurrier. While agreeing with Weiner that social mobility is an important function of honors, Spurrier also delivers unashamed praise of elitism as a worthy goal even, or perhaps especially, at a land-grant institution such as Oklahoma State University, where the mandate is to educate "the industrial classes." Spurrier sees no more reason to apologize for elitism in an honors program than in an athletic team or a surgical staff. Academically gifted and motivated students, he argues, are worthy of special attention as much as underprepared students, and no honors director should shy away from charges of elitism.

Anne N. Rinn of University of Houston-Downtown and Craig T. Cobane of Western Kentucky University also stand up for elitism in "Elitism Misunderstood: In Defense of Equal Opportunity." In an argument similar to Spurrier's, they defend special educational programs for intellectually advanced students because all students should receive an education appropriate to their needs. Since students with IQs in the lowest 2% receive special help, the authors suggest that students with IQs in the top 2% should also benefit from special programs. While acknowledging that the pre-college

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

public-school system under-identifies poor, minority, rural, and non-English-speaking students for gifted programs, Rinn and Cobane contend that honors at the college level is not exclusionary or elitist but is rather a form of equal opportunity for intellectually gifted students.

The following two essays present a different perspective on elitism, suggesting that inequalities at the pre-college level often lead to discrimination against lower-income students in honors at the college level and thus to an elitism of privilege rather than merit. In "Dealing with Subjective and Objective Issues in Honors Education," Michael Giazzoni and Nathan Hilberg see a serious problem with quantitative criteria for admission to honors programs since such measurements are biased by special advantages of affluence, including test-preparation programs and private tutoring. The authors describe the honors college at the University of Pittsburgh, which is based on participation rather than measurement and which takes careful steps to ensure the possibility of access for lower-income or disadvantaged students who show signs of the curiosity and love of learning that the honors college values. Their essay includes suggestions of ways to provide such access.

Lisa DeFrank-Cole, Rose Cole, and Keith Garbutt suggest another possible form of discrimination against lower-income students in "Does Broad-Based Merit Aid Affect Socioeconomic Diversity in Honors?" The authors describe the impact of West Virginia's merit-based PROMISE Scholarship program on socioeconomic diversity in the West Virginia University Honors College. In line with published research on broad-based merit scholarship programs, their data show that, as the eligibility requirements for PROMISE scholarships went up, the number of lower-income students in the honors college went down. Numerous states now award merit-based scholarships, and similar studies at other honors programs and colleges would help determine if discrimination against lower-income students is a consequence of state-sponsored merit-based scholarship programs.

In "Honors Needs Diversity More than the Diverse Need Honors," William A. Ashton, of York College, City University of New York, makes the important point that honors programs may have more to gain from the participation of lower-income students than these students do. The plurality of voices, insights, and perspectives provided by honors students from all socioeconomic backgrounds is an essential benefit to honors education whereas students who are struggling financially can risk putting themselves and their GPAs in jeopardy by joining an honors program. Honors administrators and faculty would do well to be alert to this imbalance of benefits.

The Forum concludes with "Honors and Class," an essay by Bernice Braid of Long Island University-Brooklyn. Based on her experience, wisdom, and close reading of Peter Sacks, Braid offers an argument that honors

can too easily be a contributor to social stratification, privileging the privileged, when it has the means and opportunity to work toward a more democratic educational system in the United States. In particular, she suggests ways to translate effective honors pedagogies into educational and social benefits for students in elementary, middle, and high schools, the aim being to create a pipeline for lower-income students into higher education and thus to become part of the solution rather than a contributor to the problem of unequal access.

## RESEARCH ESSAY

The issue of unequal access, which is the focal point of many arguments that honors is elitist, usually centers on the ACT and SAT as potentially (or actually) discriminatory criteria for admission to an honors program or college. Two of the essays in the Forum—“Dealing with Subjective and Objective Issues in Honors Education” and “Does Broad-Based Merit Aid Affect Socioeconomic Diversity in Honors?”—argue that national test scores reflect a bias in favor of advantaged students and against lower-income students. A significant question throughout the history of honors has been whether the predictive value of the ACT and SAT for success in honors counterbalances any discriminatory bias in the tests. “Predicting Retention in Honors Programs,” a research essay by Kyle McKay, presents new evidence that the answer is “no.”

Kyle McKay provides data in support of previous research indicating that the SAT is not a predictor of success in honors. Based on his study of over a thousand students who entered the University of North Florida Honors Program over a four-year period (2002–2005), he shows—using a logit regression methodology—that the high school GPA is a strong indicator of program completion while the SAT has no predictive significance. McKay then suggests that further research in SAT- and GPA-related studies needs to be done regarding gender and ethnicity. In light of the Forum, further income-related studies in honors would also be useful. We hope that future issues of JNCHC will bring us further research such as McKay’s that can help honors administrators examine and re-examine their admissions criteria and all the policies and procedures of their programs and colleges.

