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Michael Giazzoni

University of Pittsburgh, giazzoni@pitt.edu

Nathan Hilberg

University of Pittsburgh

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Dealing with Subjective and Objective Issues in Honors Education

MICHAEL GIAZZONI AND NATHAN HILBERG
UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

Professionals working in higher education who are concerned with social justice need to consider questions of objectivity and subjectivity. Even though some assessments are objective and some subjective, neither kind of assessment is guaranteed to separate out the effects of socioeconomic benefits from student ability. Honors programs and colleges should therefore concern themselves with the problem of awarding membership based on test criteria because the benefits inherent to honors programs could end up being given more often to those families with extra means and therefore the ability to provide opportunities like private tutoring and test preparation classes. Such actions can reinforce class hierarchy. A critical examination of the subjective/objective social problem as addressed by Norm Weiner, followed by a discussion of the philosophy and mechanisms for distributing benefits at the University Honors College (UHC) at the University of Pittsburgh, can provide insight into alternative ways of handling the problem, even for membership-based programs.

On the matter of whether honors education is elitist, Norm Weiner suggests,

... elitism is in the eye of the beholder. Elitism isn't objective, isn't simply about being the best or selecting the best in some field, whether college students or football players. It's subjective; it's about some people believing that those selected for a benefit or exclusive opportunity feel superior to them, that those selected feel entitled.

A preliminary issue is to distinguish between two different senses of elitism. One sense has to do with undeserved privilege and the other with a concern for standards. Perhaps elitism as undeserved privilege is subjective in that one can imagine that what a person deserves is in the eye of the beholder. However, it seems that elitism as a concern for standards is plainly objective; the standards, even if they are culturally generated, would be the object

against which assessments are made, making such assessments “objective.” Could the standards by which assessments are made (e.g., SAT scores, GPA) be poor indicators of who is worthy of certain benefits? Certainly, but that is a separate matter from whether such assessments are meaningful only in the eye of the beholder. If an honors program or college has admissions criteria, then the matter of who gets admitted is objective in that the standards by which admissions decisions are made would be the object against which applicants would be measured. To be sure, such admissions criteria as SAT scores and GPAs are going to favor certain demographics, students who have better access to higher-quality school systems and support networks.

At the University of Pittsburgh, the UHC is organized on a participant model, not a membership one: the UHC has no separate admissions criteria. Therefore, although the UHC can concern itself with the question of whether our opportunities reinforce socioeconomic hierarchies, the staff has less cause for concern that we have a membership of students drawn exclusively from families of means. This isn't to say that we ignore GPA and SAT scores; we have found, though, that high grades and standardized test scores are poor indicators for the type of inquisitiveness and love of learning that characterizes students who achieve the goals that speak to the recommendability of an institution of higher learning (e.g., admission to the graduate or professional school of students' choice, winning national scholarships, and viability on the job market). By emphasizing the human attainment and intellectual breadth that are associated with genuinely high-achieving students (e.g., those who win national scholarships like the Marshall or the Rhodes), our conception of quality is not merely in the eye of the beholder and it is not demographically exclusionary. Emphasizing human attainment tends to ameliorate issues of social class whereas fixating on quantitative criteria might exacerbate them. For example, consider access to tutors as emblematic of social privilege. Perhaps tutors can help increase one's SAT scores or GPA, but they can't make a person more curious. At the University of Pittsburgh, who gets access to UHC opportunities is not merely “in the eye of the beholder.” Ours is a meritocracy of curiosity.

As a participant-based program, the UHC has students who participate to varying degrees in the experiences that we offer (honors coursework, special advising, intellectual community, and a special research-based Bachelor of Philosophy degree); perhaps honors-course participation provides the best example of how our system works to both implement objective standards and still recognize that the subjective creation of those standards necessitates work-arounds. Although there is a grade-based threshold for taking UHC courses (a combined SAT Math and Critical Reading score of 1400, or 3.25 for continuing students), if students want to take a UHC course but do not

meet these nominal criteria, they are directed to speak to a UHC advisor. If the students are on the borderline and demonstrate curiosity, motivation, and ability, the advisor awards permission. If the students have weaker records of academic achievement, they are invited to make their cases to the appropriate course instructor, who has the ability to grant that permission. In these ways, the reward of participation in an honors course is not solely tied to high school test scores, which, as mentioned above, can be influenced by previous economic opportunities. This method may be an inefficient way to offer honors opportunities, but the UHC's concern is that curious, motivated, and able students should not be blocked from an experience if they can demonstrate their readiness to participate. Although this system of organization does not wipe out socioeconomic effects, it allows for more participation than prescriptive programs offer. The other UHC programs mentioned above have similar mechanisms to allow participation by students who do not meet nominal criteria.

The results of our experience lead us to two recommendations that have served us well and can be applied even to institutions with membership-based programs:

1. Pay less attention to quantitative measures that can often be more a gauge of economic means than of ability, and look for evidence of curiosity. Use essays and interviews to help distribute opportunities.
2. Establish paths for participation (or membership) of students who do not fit the quantitative criteria for incoming freshmen but who have or develop promising intellectual signs as they progress through their studies. Develop outreach to faculty and students in order to stay open to students who were missed by high school test score criteria.

These processes are inefficient but tremendously worthwhile. If honors educators are to concern themselves with issues of class and social justice, then they must pay attention to whether their organizations can be adjusted to help the situation. We hope that these suggestions provide a mechanism to do just that.

The authors may be contacted at

giazzoni@pitt.edu.

