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2009

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Rinn, Anne N. and Cobane, Craig T., "Elitism Misunderstood: In Defense of Equal Opportunity" (2009). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive*. 256.

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Elitism Misunderstood: In Defense of Equal Opportunity

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At one time or another, we have all dealt with colleagues who expressed doubts about dedicating resources to honors students. They argue that gifted and high-achieving students do not need or deserve additional resources to pursue their educational goals; they will do just fine on their own. Critics of honors often comment that money spent on honors students, who will graduate anyway, should be invested in helping students with traditionally low retention rates; these latter students are the ones who need the resources. At some time in the discussion, such critics typically say that honors education is inherently “elitist” because it serves the “upper” social class. In this essay, we make the argument that honors is not elitist and that the unique needs of honors students from all social classes are no less nor more important than the needs of other students.

If we consider the normal distribution, or bell curve, in level of intelligence, we find that just fewer than 70% of the population should fall into the average range of intelligence (those with an IQ in the range of approximately 85 to 115, with 100 considered average; Eysenck, 2006; Herrnstein & Murray, 1995). Five percent of individuals fall into the extreme ranges with about 2% at either end of the normal distribution. In other words, about 2% of individuals have an IQ lower than 70, which places them in the mentally retarded range, and about 2% have an IQ greater than 130, which places them in the intellectually gifted range. Since the average IQ is 100, if we had students with an IQ lower than 70, should we provide special services for those students? In fact, don't we? In public education at the elementary and secondary levels, federal law (the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, revised in 2004) mandates that states provide free and appropriate public education for all students with an IQ lower than 70. Now, what about students with an IQ greater than 130? Should they receive special services, too? The upper group and the lower group each represent about 2%

of the population, so we might assume that they should get equal treatment, but they do not. Only students at the lower end of the normal distribution are protected by federal laws, not students at the upper end. Intellectually gifted students are usually served only by state and local laws, if at all. In 1988, the federal government passed the Gifted and Talented Students Education Act, which recognized that intellectually gifted students have needs but did not require states to provide special services for them. In efforts to give everyone a chance to succeed, public schools at all levels are often guilty of ignoring the needs of the intellectually gifted with the expectation that, since gifted students are able to succeed on their own, resources should be given to students with greater needs. Also, special programs for the intellectually gifted are seen as promoting elitism.

One of the reasons that gifted programs, honors programs, and honors colleges are seen as elitist is the demographic make-up of their student populations. Those afraid of elitism believe honors students typically come from the “upper class,” or higher socioeconomic backgrounds and tend to belong to majority ethnic and racial groups. Such is definitely the case prior to the university level. Students typically under-identified for gifted programming at the elementary and secondary levels include students living in poverty, students from racial or ethnic minority groups, students living in rural areas, and students for whom English is not their first language (Borland, 2004; Borland & Wright, 1995; Frasier, 1991; Passow & Frasier, 1996). The under-identification of these groups of students leads to lower rates of inclusion in gifted programs at the elementary and secondary level, thus perhaps leading to lower rates of enrollment in honors programs at the university level. University honors programs are nevertheless not exclusionary, as some critics of elitism point out. A lack of students from lower social classes and minority racial and ethnic groups may simply be a byproduct of a faulty public education system at the pre-college level. Of course, to alleviate concern about elitism at the university level, educators and policy makers should find ways to be more inclusive of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, students from racial or ethnic minority groups, and other disadvantaged students. Indeed, research shows students from racial or ethnic minority groups may particularly benefit from participation in an honors program (Shushok, 2003; Seifert, Pascarella, Colangelo, & Assouline, 2007).

Educating intellectually gifted students is not about taking the “best” students and offering them special privileges. It does not involve taking the majority race, the upper class, the English-speaking, suburban, and other advantaged groups and then offering them a “better” education than everyone else. That being said, if honors programs and colleges are not serving those from the lower class, from racial and ethnic minority groups, from rural areas,

from non-English-speaking backgrounds, and so on, it is our responsibility to make sure these students are identified and provided the appropriate education for their ability level. Honors education involves taking the abilities or potential abilities of an intellectually advanced group and nurturing those as much as possible, just as we would nurture a group of students at any level of intellectual ability, high or low. This is not “elitism”; this is providing equal opportunity. Just because these students have intellectual ability that exceeds the average population does not mean they are not deserving of the most advanced education of which they are capable. In the Jeffersonian tradition, “people are indeed all equal in terms of political and social rights and should have equal opportunities,” and so “the goal of gifted education is not to favor or foster an elite, but to allow children to make full use of the differing kinds of skills they have and can develop” (Sternberg, 1996, pg. 263). This is also a goal of honors education, as nicely illustrated by the father of honors education in the United States, Frank Aydelotte. As cited by Norm Weiner, Aydelotte says, “The best education for any individual is that which will develop his powers to the utmost (Aydelotte, 1944, p. 128 . . .).” In withholding or limiting special programming for intellectually gifted students, we are pushing them into mediocrity rather than allowing for intellectual fervor and growth. Intellectually gifted students are deprived of opportunities to develop to their fullest potential if they are not offered an advanced education. If we do not provide education that allows for excellence, then we are not providing equal education for all.

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