

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council -
-Online Archive

National Collegiate Honors Council

2009

To the Charge of “Honors is Elitist,” on Advice of Counsel We Plead “Guilty as Charged”

Robert Spurrier

Oklahoma State University - Main Campus, robert.spurrier@okstate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nhcjournal>



Part of the [Higher Education Administration Commons](#)

Spurrier, Robert, "To the Charge of “Honors is Elitist,” on Advice of Counsel We Plead “Guilty as Charged”" (2009). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive*. 257.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nhcjournal/257>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the National Collegiate Honors Council at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

To the Charge of “Honors is Elitist,” on Advice of Counsel We Plead “Guilty as Charged”

ROBERT SPURRIER

OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY

Norm Weiner’s introductory essay for this issue of the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* challenges us to face the charge of elitism that so frequently is lodged against honors programs and honors colleges (as well as against those of us who are involved in honors education as administrators, faculty, and students). On advice of wise counsel, my plea to the charge is “guilty as charged.”

As an honors college administrator at a large public land-grant university founded in response to the Act Donating Public Lands to the Several States and Territories which may provide Colleges for the Benefit of Agriculture and the Mechanic Arts—better known as the Morrill Act (named for Congressman Justin Smith Morrill who introduced the bill in the House of Representatives)—signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln on July 2, 1862, I am fully cognizant of the original legal mandate of our institution: “without excluding other scientific and classical studies and including military tactic, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, in such manner as the legislatures of the States may respectively prescribe, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the *industrial classes* in the several pursuits and professions in life” (emphasis added). The concept of social class, therefore, was very much involved with the foundation of land-grant colleges and universities.

Consistent with this mission, our institution is committed to instruction, research, and outreach (formerly known as extension). In my thirty-seven years of teaching here, I have found an admirable commitment on the part of our faculty to reach out to students from all types of backgrounds who come to us from within our state, the rest of the United States, and many other nations. Added to the land-grant mission of our university is the fact that we live and work in a state with a strong populist heritage that includes a dim view of elites and elitism. When I became involved with honors administration more than twenty years ago, I found that there was a good deal of resistance in some quarters on campus to our goal of expanding honors education

TO THE CHARGE OF “HONORS IS ELITIST”

from the College of Arts and Sciences (where it had been in place for more than twenty years) to a university-wide honors program (now honors college) that serves students from all six undergraduate colleges. Chief among the reasons for opposition to expanding honors education were the elitism allegation and a corresponding assertion that honors had no place in a land-grant institution such as ours.

I admit to having been a bit perplexed by these challenges at first, having myself graduated from the honors college at a land-grant public institution in the same athletic conference. (I don't like comparisons of academic programs to athletic conferences any more than the rest of you, but it does seem to serve as a measuring stick in some administrative circles.) Attending my first NCHC conference in 1988, I had a keen desire to learn how other honors directors dealt with the elitism charge. No doubt I received a number of thoughtful responses, but one sticks in my memory to this day and has framed my response to the allegation throughout the intervening years. C. Grey Austin from Ohio State University was kind enough to take time from his hectic conference schedule that year to visit with an honors neophyte, and his response was, “At Ohio State, that question never would be asked.” What an eye-opening and liberating response!

In the years since that NCHC conference in Las Vegas, I have referred to Grey's comment over and over on my own campus, at NCHC conferences, and as an NCHC Recommended Site Visitor. On my home campus, my pleading “guilty as charged” had an interesting effect in that it began to wipe away misconceptions and force some colleagues to think about the mission of our university in the context of the talents and aspirations of some of our best and brightest students—whether they come from the “industrial classes” or not. Should we not offer the opportunity for these students to excel, at least in part for the upward social mobility reasons described in Norm Weiner's essay? Should we not give our best students opportunities consistent with their needs in much the same way many land-grant institutions often provide extensive resources and opportunities for under-prepared students who enter their hallowed halls? Why not challenge our finest students to be the very best and then provide appropriate support as they seek to achieve this goal?

Who, for example, would champion the “branding” (I hate that term!) of their university with the logo “Mediocrity ‘R’ Us,” set as the goal for their own academic department to be no better than average at best, or advocate issuing the clarion call that “our students are mediocre” to recruit the finest freshmen and transfer students? Who—heaven forbid—would aspire to fielding athletic teams that don't seek to win a championship? Who would discourage our students from successfully competing for Rhodes, Marshall, Goldwater, or Truman Scholarships because their selection would damage the

ROBERT SPURRIER

institution's reputation? Outside the university setting, who needing heart surgery would intentionally seek out a mediocre cardiovascular surgeon to perform the operation? Questions such as these, in combination with frequent repetition of Grey Austin's comment, have helped us move to the point at which the elitism question almost never rears its ugly head on our campus in the twenty-first century.

If you and your honors program or honors college face the charge of elitism, I would counsel you to enter a plea of "guilty as charged" and then invite your accusers to join you in what can become their most rewarding experiences in undergraduate education. It would be too much to predict that they will rise up and call you blessed, but some of your critics may be converted over time into advocates for honors education who actually come back to thank you.

The author may be contacted at
robert.spurrier@okstate.edu.

