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1-1-2009

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Weiner, Norm, "Honors is Elitist, and What's Wrong with That?" (2009). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive*. Paper 258.
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Honors is Elitist, and What's Wrong with That?

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A few years ago, an honors colleague from a state university was attending a conference in his discipline and at lunch one day sat next to a professor from Yale. They began chatting, and the Yale professor asked, "What do you teach students in an honors program?" The honors director replied, "I teach my students how to protect themselves from your students." Although this story may be apocryphal—and I hope it isn't—it suggests that issues of social class permeate honors education.

Like many other concepts in the sociological literature, *social class* is easier to discuss than to define. Nonetheless, define it we must in order to have some common ground for discussing it and for explaining it to our students. A quick scan of basic textbooks, those defenders of sociology's virtues, gives us a definition something like this: "A social class is a group of people [in sociology, it's always safe to start this way] who share the same level of income and education and therefore share roughly the same norms, values, and lifestyle." To be perfectly clear about this, sociologists aren't saying that all people with the same income and education—say, high school English teachers—believe and act in lockstep ways. We understand and recognize the powerful effects of geography, upbringing, religion, personal choice, and the like. We are, however, saying that different incomes, values, and attitudes lead people to pursue different levels and types of education. In turn, different levels and types of education lead people to different levels of income and different lifestyles. Generally, more education is likely to lead to a job that doesn't require heavy lifting and hence to higher income and to a lifestyle with more leisure time and discretionary funds.

So how many social classes are there in the United States? To get any sort of realistic answer, sociologists have two tasks. First, we need to understand how people see themselves and others, so we ask them, "What social class are you in? What social class is your neighbor in? What are the social classes in your town?" Then we take the answers and see how they break down. Does the schoolteacher see the dentist as being in the same or a different social class? Does the sanitation worker see the teacher and the dentist occupying the same class? Unfortunately for social scientists, quantifying human behavior is

notoriously difficult, so the disagreements begin. A few sociologists see only three social classes—lower, middle, and upper—but most agree that this schema is too crude and doesn't capture significant value differences within each class. Hence, some sociologists posit six classes—lower lower, upper lower, lower middle, and so on—and some suggest nine—lower lower, middle lower, upper lower, and the like.

Such attempts to define social class are complicated by several other factors. First, a basic American value is equality. Although most Americans acknowledge the idea of social class, it is anathema to them. We see the United States as "a classless society," by which I suppose we mean that we are not class-bound, like England or China, and that a person can start out as a penniless immigrant and become a millionaire—or at least a teacher. Second, Americans value individualism. We are loath to have our perceived individualism analyzed away, to see ourselves lumped with lots of others into a group. Yet, paradoxically, when sociologists ask Americans what social class they belong to, most say the middle class. Americans are uncomfortable identifying themselves as either too poor or too rich—although the latter has begun to lose whatever stigmas it carried throughout most of our history.

What does all this have to do with honors? I suggest that honors education is bound by the same issues of social class that challenge the rest of American society and that, in fact, honors education today is very much a response to these challenges.

In her monograph *Honors Composition: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Practices*, Annmarie Guzy offers us a brief yet excellent history of honors education. In its modern incarnation, honors education seems to have had upper-class, elite origins. According to Guzy, Frank Aydelotte, whom most students of honors education regard as its contemporary founding father, was impressed with the Oxford and Cambridge system of pass-honors. (Anne N. Rinn has also written about the influence of Aydelotte on honors education in "Rhodes Scholarships, Frank Aydelotte, and Collegiate Honors Education," 2003.) Aydelotte brought his ideas to Swarthmore, where he served as president, and then to Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study, which he directed from 1939 to 1947. He encouraged the creation of courses in which students would be required to develop what we today call critical thinking skills (Guzy, 2003).

Guzy notes that, "in the late 1930s, [Aydelotte] undertook an ambitious survey of honors programs at 130 colleges and universities." As a result of this survey, in 1944 he made "his most important contribution to honors education, . . . when he published the first book devoted entirely to honors programs, *Breaking the Academic Lockstep: The Development of Honors Work in American Colleges and Universities*" (Guzy, p. 18). Immediately the cries

of elitism began. Aydelotte responded, "The most persistent objection to this breaking of the academic lock step, to giving abler students harder work, is our academic interpretation or misinterpretation of the idea of democracy. If all men are born free and equal, why should some be given a better education than others? The word 'better' begs the question. The best education for any individual is that which will develop his powers to the utmost and best fit him to realize his own ideal of the good life" (Aydelotte, 1944, p. 128; quoted in Guzy, p. 19). Ironically, as Guzy points out, "these early programs were usually located in small, private East Coast colleges" (p. 19), themselves hardly bastions of democracy and equality.

Honors education went into a decline during World War II but came back even stronger in the 1950s, building on the work of Joseph Cohen, who had brought honors education to the University of Colorado in 1928. Guzy writes, "The launch of Sputnik in 1956 fostered a resurgence of interest in honors education as Cold War concerns caused Americans to rethink their positions on 'elitist' education in relation to preparation for competition with other countries" (pp. 19–20). Institutions began to "look to their honors programs not only as development centers for challenging, stimulating curricula but also as recruitment tools for exceptional students and faculty alike" (p. 21). By the twenty-first century, many people had come to see honors education as a way to bring "ivy league education to state universities" or to small private (often religious-based) colleges. Tellingly, no ivy-league school has a university-wide honors program today. Honors has moved from its upper-class, elite origins to a decidedly middle-class footing.

As we see, from its earliest days honors education has often been disparaged as "elitist." The charge is still common today; it may be one of the first negative remarks that a new honors director hears or that gets leveled when a new honors program is proposed: "An honors program? Isn't that elitist?!" Perhaps. It all depends on what we mean by "elite" and "elitist."

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd edition), *elite* is defined as "the choice part or flower (of society, or of any body or class or persons)"—in other words, the best. It seems hardly a cause for alarm that we want the best of our students in an honors program. Even the OED's definition of *elitism* seems innocuous: "Advocacy of or reliance on the leadership and dominance of an *elite* (in a society, or in any body or class of persons.)"

Yet let us admit that this definition of elitism is not what most of us think of when we hear the word. Perhaps our more contemporary, American sense of it is better conveyed by the definition in the *American Heritage Dictionary* (First Edition): "1. The belief that certain persons or members of certain classes or groups deserve favored treatment by virtue of their perceived superiority, as in intellect, social status, or financial resources. 2a. The sense of

entitlement enjoyed by such a group or class. b. Control, rule, or domination by such a group or class." What these definitions suggest but never state is that 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. This sense of entitlement certainly arises sometimes—Donald Trump comes to mind—but my experience and observation tell me that most honors students do not feel this way; they feel damn lucky to have the advantages that an honors education brings them.

Nor do most honors educators feel a sense of entitlement. We see honors education as a way to bring benefits like smaller classes and a higher level of intellectual challenge to the best students at our institutions. Does this make honors education elite? Well, by every definition I can find, yes it does. Selecting the "choice part or flower [I love that word]" of our students? That's what honors education is about.

In sociological analysis, we try to look at the functions a social phenomenon performs for the individuals involved, for the groups they belong to, for other groups, and for society as a whole. Typically we distinguish between manifest functions—the intended or obvious functions—and latent functions—the unintended or largely unseen functions. Exposing people to information and ideas is a manifest function of education. Putting people of the same economic range and educational level in a common mating arena could be seen as a latent function of education.

The manifest functions of honors education are at the center of our honors belief system, at the heart of our public relations: to provide quality education to our students, provide them with intellectual challenge, stimulate their thinking, make them more community-conscious and globally aware, present them with study opportunities that they might not have otherwise—the list goes on. These are good and noble goals. Yet let us admit that the desirability of these goals is already taken for granted among the upper classes. Children of the upper classes rarely have to question the value of such goals, which they inherit as part of their birthright and take for granted; thus, the colleges and universities they attend do not need to offer honors programs to ensure that their students pursue the goals. As for most of the poorest among us, they see these goals as simply beyond their grasp.

Why offer these goals to our students? Because at some level, most of us involved in honors education understand that successfully reaching these goals will help our students—our clients, so to speak—move up the social ladder, will make them more attractive to employers and to graduate schools. We tend to be middle-class educators presenting middle-class values to our

students so that they can succeed in a middle-class society. As a result, honors programs tend to thrive at state schools or at small, religious-based institutions. The Ivies don't have university-wide honors programs because they don't need them. Helping our students climb the class ladder is an important latent function of honors education. So is helping our students realize how smart and talented they are despite their society's assumption that the more something costs the better it must be. So is encouraging them to develop their own ideas and explore means of living up to and benefiting from their full potential.

As members of American society, our students and their families have learned to believe in American values: equality, hard work, success, individualism. Our students are often the first in their families to go to college, and they believe that hard work can lead to success, *should* lead to success, both financial and professional. College is a step up the social ladder. As honors educators, we understand this belief. We also recognize that, while our students may be highly motivated and talented, they often lack the habits and graces that will make their move to the middle class (and upward) easier. So another latent function of honors education may be to polish some of our students' rough edges, however subtly.

Honors programs have other functions. Our schools typically see honors education as a recruiting tool, as a way to attract the best students to an institution they might otherwise overlook. I remember having a conversation with a colleague at a large state university about recruiting: "Of course," I said, "I'm not looking to attract students who got offers from Harvard"; "Well, I am," she replied. While many honors directors might not see social mobility as a manifest function of honors education, I suspect that many of our students do. They recognize the benefits that honors education gives them as they present themselves to the world. As our colleague Joan Digby wrote recently, our students are often "extremely sensitive to where their families stand in the social hierarchy. A good percentage are first-generation college students, and many have been pushed by their families to achieve the highest possible credentials as a matter of pride. The students' . . . parents see an honors [degree] as a credential that will raise the status of the student" (Digby, 2008).

A society's social institutions always reflect and reinforce its values. The values of American society focus on achieving—and ascending within—middle-class status. We should not be surprised then that much if not most of what we do in honors education is in service to this goal. As honors educators we select what we hope are the best students and offer them (and their families) the opportunity and the tools to better themselves, to improve their resumés, to acquire an education and outlook that will help them solidify and

enhance their middle-class status. Honors then is, perhaps paradoxically, both elite and middle-class.

While I suspect that most honors educators believe that the benefits we offer—the smaller classes, the intellectual challenge—should be offered to every college student, the reality is that they aren't. Honors programs are by definition selective. As educators, most of us have learned that we cannot change the world—or even our society. We can, however, help make the lives of our own students better. Let us admit that honors students are among the best at our institutions—the elite. If it is elitist to try to improve the lives of these students, then honors education is indeed elitist. And what's wrong with that?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank Mark Anderson, Bruce Carter, Joan Digby, Ada Long, and Dail Mullins for their invaluable suggestions.

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