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Listening Lessons

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As I began writing about helping college honors students, I described my task to a nine-year-old boy. Puzzled, he asked, “How can they be in *trouble* if they are honors students?”

“They may have problems, but people expect them not to,” said the honors director. “That’s not fair,” the boy replied. Precisely! Many honors students at my small public liberal arts campus prefer the work to the title. They opt for intensive academics, welcome challenges, and ask for close interaction; they value classes in which they are going places, doing things, investigating, experimenting, and reflecting; but they experience many of the same personal and academic challenges as their non-honors peers while sometimes not getting the help they need.

Whether they embrace the descriptor or not, many honors students seek out and spend time with students in their cohort, defining themselves as part of an affinity group. While some view their privileges as well earned and necessary for success, others, who may love the depth of study that honors offers, prefer to see themselves as individuals with multiple interests. They see their membership in an honors program not as their primary status but as one among many identities. An equally important reason that students may not wish to emphasize their honors status is that, when trouble arises, they find themselves in the same predicaments as their non-honors peers: navigating difficult friendships, facing an uncertain future, dealing with failure, or suffering the consequences of breaking rules. Such struggles are roughly the same across all categories of students.

While some honors students have access to an abundance of family resources and mentors, many struggle without strong connections or lifelines. The common refrain that honors students are “entitled” is an overgeneralization. Some receive far too much unsolicited advice about what to do, who to become, and how to be happy, and they may resist that sort of pressure, finding it more an encumbrance than an entitlement. Just like their non-honors peers, many honors students do not have the benefit of familial aid and are incurring debt as well as managing adult financial and household responsibilities while they are pursuing their degrees. Honors students are no more likely than their non-honors peers to possess the language to talk openly about these experiences in academic settings.

LISTENING LESSONS

The reality is that students in honors programs are an *invisibly* diverse group. While they may appear homogeneous with respect to their achievement and ability, they arrive at their programs from noticeably different backgrounds, and they face the same stressors that all college students face. Students today are “troubled” by feelings of anxiety and depression as well as binge drinking, eating problems, acting out, and thoughts of suicide. Of course, when the issue is a serious personal or health problem, an appropriate referral to a trained professional or other resource should be made. Collaboration with other campus offices is essential. When the question is how to navigate the honors labyrinth, however, an honors director can provide support.

Research reveals that honors students approach their learning in a more strategic fashion than non-honors students, applying planning and forethought to their studies (Entwistle cited in Light, Cox, and Calkins, 52). My direct teaching experiences affirm some of this research. Honors students like to read the syllabus ahead of time, and they pay attention both to their assigned work and to the larger universe of their career trajectory. At the same time, some students find it difficult to commit to a major en route to graduation because they genuinely have a lot of interests; they wrestle with the boundaries of their major requirements and with new questions they have formulated about the world in their honors classes, service learning, or travel.

Honors students also express difficulty with the contradictory demands of being fully in the present while also keeping a steady eye on the future. According to Annette Lareau’s *Unequal Childhoods*, this future orientation has been cultivated and reinforced from an early age by many suburban middle-class parents. Margaret Nelson, in *Parenting Out of Control*, also finds that financially elite families closely monitor and influence their college age children’s lives.

At the end of the last academic year, I invited a dozen of our honors students to reflect on their experiences in the program. Current students offered advice to new students, and we published videos of these “pearls of wisdom” on our blog. From the students’ “pearls of wisdom,” I learned that students in the honors program feel pressures that could signal academic trouble, even when articulated with an upbeat tone and sense of self-confidence. Perhaps the most important insight of these candid clips was that honors students are like everyone else except that they know not to squander their time, are aware of others counting on them, and are motivated by past success.

Having shared similar backgrounds, the current students in our honors program were able to offer the following advice to their younger peers:

1. Be flexible. Plan ahead.
2. Don’t be too concrete with your plans. It’s okay to change them.

3. [Honors] is going to challenge you, but it's worth it.
4. There's a club for everyone, but if you don't see it, start it.
5. Get as much out of [college] as you can, because you're given this special opportunity. Not everyone has it.
6. Think about where you are right at this moment, and you have to know where you are going.

While this advice may not keep honors students out of trouble, it will help them have a secure foundation to build on.

Most capable students are fine at strategizing and are also comfortable asking for what they need to realize the goals they have set. A lot rides on students' educational outcomes. Honors faculty should listen to the concerns of less financially privileged students and others who are facing trouble so that we can better understand their sometimes confusing reactions and ambivalence toward the demands of college learning. The honors director should know that some students may not be comfortable seeking honest answers even from those who are there to give them. Thus, the director needs to be sensitive to individual students' needs. This learning process takes time, patience, and willingness to deal with difficulties directly. As one student put it, "I wish someone said 'If it's not okay at first, it will be okay.'" Cultivating honors students requires listening and understanding, not just instructing and directing.

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