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Kevin L. Dooley

Monmouth University, kdooley@monmouth.edu

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Defending the Traditions by Preserving the Classics

KEVIN L. DOOLEY
MONMOUTH UNIVERSITY

In the lead essay of this issue's Forum, Scott Carnicom poses a multifaceted question: Do the approaches taken by honors programs and colleges focus on innovation or preservation? The following essay takes a philosophical look at honors education within the present context of American culture and argues, similarly to the lead essay, that a traditional approach is best suited for honors students because it focuses on the education of the entire human being and is grounded in disciplines that seek perpetual innovation and flourishing. Although the essay underlines a number of Carnicom's arguments about the importance of preserving tradition in the delivery of honors education, it also examines other problematic trends such as anti-intellectualism, entitlement, and the false expectations created by many pre-professional, for-profit colleges.

ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM, EXPECTATIONS, AND PRE-PROFESSIONAL PROMISES

According to Susan Jacoby, between 1984 and 2004 “more than 40% of Americans under 44 did not read a single book—fiction or non-fiction over the course of a year . . . while the proportion of 17-year-olds who read nothing (unless required to do so for school) more than doubled” (para. 6). While this reality is a cause for concern, those of us who deal with honors students may tend to ignore it. However, ignoring this reality is a mistake.

Long heralded as the heirs of classical education, honors students today face financially incentivized, pre-professional programs that are marketed to student “consumers” who expect to learn specific skills that will help them land a job upon graduation. As Carnicom has stated, “college education is viewed as a simple, transitory commodity to be traded for a high-paying vocation” (para. 10). Although honors administrators and faculty may like to focus on the academic prowess of their students, reflecting on the belief that honors students view the learning process differently or that they are somehow more committed to their work than other college students, they must face the harsh reality that this generation of students has been defined by the

mantra that “everyone is a winner,” thereby dragging the gifted and talented to levels of equality and mediocrity unheard of in previous eras (Twenge and Campbell). Furthermore, as anti-intellectualism, cloaked in the twin guises of customer service education and grade inflation, continues its upward march, honors programs with high standards become less attractive to their student populations to the same degree as those with lower standards contribute to the problems (Rojastaczer). To simply assume that honors students are somehow different is to assume that they have grown up in another time and place.

In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Edmund Burke warned that, in a world that increasingly prefers the equalizing trends of modern ideology and profit-seeking individualism to the traditional values of laws and customs, the truly exceptional would become indistinguishable from the mediocre (38). Although Burke was referring to the new French leadership and its refusal to praise any aspect of the *ancien regime*, his critique is more than applicable to the present generation of young intellectuals because it appears that society at large has committed the same indecency. Being an honors student is no longer honorable in many circles. In this spirit of anti-elitism, many colleges and universities have made students seeking the traditional honors disciplines feel as if they might not be getting their “money’s worth.” In fact “Cary Nelson, president of the American Association of University Professors, wrote in the January/February 2010 issue of *Academe* that ‘the only thing the Ph.D. now reliably confers is the potential for lifetime poverty and underemployment’” (Polak, para. 2). Nelson describes not only a crime against the humanities but also a problem for a generation of American students (and their parents) who place the practicality of supposed professional skills above the ability to think in a critical, creative, and time-tested manner.

GROUNDED IN TRADITION

Academic traditions and traditional disciplines in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences are significant because their foci move far beyond the limited goals of careerism promised by many of today’s pre-professional programs and for-profit universities. Carnicom is unnecessarily apologetic in defending the working relationships between faculty and honors students in individualized research (para. 7). The traditional disciplines have a lineage of success that reaches back to the working relationships between teachers and prize students in ancient times. We must not forget that Aristotle studied at Plato’s *Academy* and that Plato studied with Socrates. What separates the idea of traditional education from its contemporary counterparts is that the former focuses on the creation and development of the fully formed human being while the latter is preparation for a particular

profession, which the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2008) says that a person will change several times over the course of a lifetime. When Plato described the pursuit of truth as the pursuit of immortality, he was arguing that the goal of education was to challenge humanity in order that we may improve the human condition or, as Carnicom's essay reminds us, to use traditional methods to bring about innovation. As we flourish, we help to improve the quality of life of those around us; this is why the Greek concept of happiness, *eudemonia*, was not thought of as the immediacy of pleasure but as human flourishing in the aggregate.

Honors students should understand that learning is a life-long process and that the pursuit of truth will provide greater happiness and success in the long run than more contemporary, profit-driven models of education. A classical, honors-based education is by definition rooted in tradition; honors programs must see themselves as grounded in a larger discussion that began long ago and will continue far into the future. We must remember that this expensive tradition is the reason that so many honors programs provide honors housing and linked-learning communities or clusters, which are physical representations of the intellectual experience and serve as reminders that we flourish best when we live together.

Although some have argued that specialized residencies and learning communities promote ivory-tower elitism, I respectfully disagree. For decades, similar charges have been levied against university professors deemed guilty of promoting elitist agendas. These challenges are not terribly difficult to dismiss because they assume that the elitist arguments are somehow contrary to what "real" people believe (Berube). We should also remember that the contradictory insights and conclusions of James Madison and Alexander Hamilton as well as John Maynard Keynes and Milton Friedman emerged from a firm grounding in the classics within similar academic circles. Both Scott Carnicom in this Forum and Norm Weiner, in a previous lead Forum essay, have reminded us that, without the arguments of intellectuals in their ivory towers, we would never have had reasoned discourses over important issues like civil rights, child labor, health care, or social security.

A traditional, classical liberal arts education is not only vital to the well-functioning of the United States but to the future of democracy and its variants around the world. As honors administrators and faculty, we must impart this wisdom to our students and show them that they are both the heirs to and beneficiaries of this legacy and that hope for the future lies not in the immediate gains of the present but in the lessons of the past.

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The author may be contacted at

kdooley@monmouth.edu.