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Emerging from the Honors Oasis

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Eden is that old-fashioned house we drive in every day
Without suspecting our abode until we drive away.

—Emily Dickinson

For many of us, honors is our academic and cultural oasis—a refuge from surrounding institutional strife. Honors is not always an idyllic paradise, of course, but the ongoing intellectual stimulation coupled with the sheer joy derived from working closely with the best and brightest of students has often led me to wonder if this could all be just a mirage. Looking out from the safe haven of honors, however, I have observed a potential danger: the segregation of honors culture from the changing climate of higher education.

In her classic 1934 work *Patterns of Culture*, Ruth Benedict discusses the role of custom and tradition in an individual's cultural experience and belief system. In her study of diverse cultures, Benedict documents the rituals, traditions, and ceremonies that give meaning to our lives. The academy has long recognized the importance of tradition, with the donning of academic regalia at commencement representing one of the many examples of long-standing cultural rituals that add meaning to students' higher education experiences. Encapsulated within the modern academy, honors education is a culture in its own right (see Slavin). We can identify a set of common customs and traditions that shape and are shaped by our experience and belief systems about honors education, including active-learning strategies like City as Text™ and Partners in the Park as well as classical pedagogical approaches such as seminar discussions and one-on-one mentoring. Though we may not have a universal honors culture, we have a shared identity. Indeed, for many of us, the culture of honors gives meaning to our role as educators; we identify strongly with the honors communities on our campuses. Honors also provides opportunities to share our cultural experiences at regional and national honors conferences, where we celebrate our honors culture.

While something to be celebrated and cherished, our strong identification with the culture of honors must also be maintained with caution; just as our Western cultural belief system may cast shadows on our view of other

cultures, so our beliefs about education are filtered through the cultural lens of honors. What we consider to be the best pedagogical approaches stem from our own educational experiences as students and teachers in the honors community. As with any culture, our participation in the customs, traditions, and rituals of honors culture reinforce our convictions about the inherent value of the honors approach. However, we must also ask ourselves: Do we assume that our beloved honors culture is better than the larger institutional culture? Do we consider the honors model to be superior to other educational models? If so, then the preservation of the honors culture may come at the expense of integration with the radically changing institutional landscape.

From the vantage of our oasis, the foundations of honors education seem to be eroding beneath our feet. Recent trends in higher education—such as the push toward career training, the three-year bachelor’s degree, and online learning—are incompatible with traditional honors curricula, which are often heavily embedded in the liberal arts. Many honors programs are thus struggling more than ever to attract and retain students from professional schools such as engineering, architecture, education, and business (Hulsey; Noble & Dowling). Honors programs also often exclude non-traditional adult learners, who require more flexible schedules and course offerings, including online courses (Kolowich). Honors could accommodate these students (see Hulsey and Jones & Watson for models), but we too often choose not to because we believe the traditional honors approach is better.

Embracing the assumption that “honors is better” dismisses other educational approaches and affirms the accusation of elitism that, as Carnicom describes, has been cast upon the honors community. In so doing, we create distinctions between our own approaches to education and others within our institution that may alienate us and our students from resources and opportunities. Moreover, by segregating honors education we run the risk of limiting our capacity for innovation, closing ourselves off from pedagogical approaches such as hybrid courses and distance education that diverge from classical educational models. We should instead consider that these approaches might be appropriate or even ideal for some honors learners.

The situation of honors educators today seems similar to that of clinical psychologists fifty years ago when they questioned whether psychotherapy was effective. While the inquiry was legitimate, practitioners in the field soon recognized that this generic question failed to acknowledge individual differences in response to treatment. A better question, as refined by Paul and later Kazdin and others, was: “Which type of therapy is most effective for which groups of people with which sets of problems?” Likewise, rather than assuming that our pedagogies are tried and true for all students, we can instead inquire, “Are classical pedagogies better for preparing our best and brightest

students than other pedagogical approaches?” and, more specifically, “Which pedagogical approaches are most effective for which groups of students with which types of learning styles?” This idiographic approach to honors education prevents us from viewing honors students as a homogeneous group, when evidence suggests that learning styles vary among students of all abilities, including those who are high-achieving (Sternberg, Grigorenko, & Zhang). Honors assessment, while still a dirty word in some circles, provides the tools for answering these questions and thereby justifying our tenets about the value of classical pedagogies. Once we have demonstrated the efficacy of honors education, we have moved beyond assumptions based on ethnocentrism and can debunk accusations of elitism.

Like an oasis, an honors culture is fragile and must be carefully managed if it is to be preserved; it is frequently threatened by dramatic shifts in climate and the surrounding geography. In fact, honors, which is often viewed as a “supplemental program,” is arguably far more vulnerable to institutional and economic changes than other university departments and colleges (Lanier). Yet Benedict reminds us that all cultures are subject to change and that, when faced with cultural shifts, we must consider the rationale used to uphold our cultural rituals and traditions. Rather than assuming that a culture cannot function without its customs, we should instead evaluate the arguments used to uphold its institutions. Each of us must be willing to admit to our cultural biases and be prepared to examine the legitimacy of our claims that honors is better. Only once we have done so can we distinguish our cultural traditions from the essential features of an honors education.

A culture cannot survive without innovation. Fortunately, as Carnicom reminds us, such innovation is a hallmark of honors. Let us not then blindly fight change and reform within higher education. Let us be cognizant of the ways that honors traditions shape our beliefs while remaining open to a diversity of cultures. To be successful, honors educators and administrators must emerge from the oasis to become active and willing participants in institutional change. We may also need to sacrifice rituals and traditions that prove to be too costly to our survival. Otherwise, we may find that honors has become a primitive culture in the larger context of our institution and of higher education.

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