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Harry Potter and the Specter of Honors Accreditation

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> I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.
> —George Weasley's activation spell for the Marauder's Map in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*

In higher education today, faculty morale is in the basement. Salaries are stagnant, benefits are being cut, and so-called perks such as travel money are endangered (try earning tenure without traveling to conferences). Students raised in the era of No Child Pushed Ahead are losing respect for us, administrators treat us like adversaries, and the general public thinks we are brainwashing their children with socialist doctrines. Our leaders have been enthralled by business models of assessment and evaluation, commoditizing intellectual development and exhorting us to increase demand for our "product" as though we were manufacturing diplomas like widgets. Contextualizing the faculty role within the institutional impact of honors education, therefore, is difficult when institutions no longer value faculty contributions beyond generating student tuition dollars.

For those of us still committed to high-quality undergraduate education, however, honors programs are an oasis in the midst of this academic desert. Scott Carnicom ponders a seeming contradiction in the fact that the pedagogical innovation touted by honors educators is in reality the conservation of such traditional ideals as small, discussion-driven classes; I think that honors faculty rightly see such traditions as innovative in comparison to the assessment-driven methods that we are told to employ in other classes. All of this assessment, theoretically tied to improving recruitment and retention of students, may well be hindering the recruitment and retention of faculty, especially those who bring with us not only peer-reviewed publications but also national-level committee service that translates effectively to institutional leadership on faculty senates, school-wide committees, and administrative appointments. Seeds of our groundbreaking scholarship incubate in our innovative classroom practices, subject to far fewer of the invasive assessment instruments applied to our regular courses. What happens to our classes, and in turn our scholarship, when the suggested types of honors assessment

become required and regimented, as might happen if NCHC becomes the accreditation body for postsecondary honors education? Will the freedom and originality that drew us to honors be quashed?

Allow me to elaborate by sharing some of my own experiences. In fall 1992, I taught my first honors composition course. I was working toward my master's degree in Teaching Writing at the same university where I had earned my bachelor's degree and had graduated from the honors program. For the syllabus design project in my fall 1991 Composition Pedagogy seminar, I constructed an honors section of English 101 that focused on issues in gifted education. During the same semester, I received a letter from the honors director in which he was surveying honors alumni for opportunities in professional networking, mentoring, and guest lectures. After speaking with my seminar professor, who also served as the writing program administrator and acting department chair, I arranged for us to meet with the honors director to discuss offering the special honors English 101 section.

To me, a novice teaching assistant, the implementation of the course would simply involve enrolling the twenty incoming honors freshmen in the designated honors section. The reality, however, was that I worked through a series of meetings with various administrators: the admissions officer wondered whether other high-achieving freshmen should be identified and included; the registrar had not previously created a course limited to honors students; the assistant department chair doing the scheduling was concerned that I was stealing all the good students from the other 101 sections. Navigating these concerns was an excellent introduction to a career in honors, and, in the end, everyone approved my initial proposal. Seventeen of the twenty incoming honors freshmen could fit my course into their schedules, and the class worked so well that all parties agreed to revive a long-moribund English 102H for the following term with me and all the students returning.

Many people benefitted because my writing program administrator and honors director were willing to take a risk. After I graduated, the revivified honors composition course was taught by senior faculty. The honors program saw a dramatic increase in participation at the end-of-year honors retreat because the freshmen had bonded and felt comfortable with taking an out-of-town trip together. I started down a professionally and personally rewarding path in honors education.

Flash forward to the present day. For the past decade, I have asked my honors composition students to write a website analysis, book analysis, journal analysis, annotated bibliography, and research paper on a topic related to their majors. Over the past few years, however, I have been fighting an uphill battle against AP, dual enrollment, and the elimination of honors composition as a requirement for our honors program. In 2008, the honors director raised

the enrollment cap for honors courses from fifteen to eighteen to accommodate a larger incoming class, but by 2010 only eight students enrolled in my section. Recently, I wrote an impassioned plea in *JNCHC* for honors students and administrators to reconsider the importance of first-year composition, acknowledging that I needed to meet the students halfway by providing them with exciting, creative material that they had not already covered in high school. In spring 2009, I had taught an upper-level honors seminar on "The Hero's Journey," the main draw of which was reading the first *Harry Potter* book at the end of the semester, so I decided to import the core of that seminar into my honors composition course, paring down the reading list to key texts such as Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, retaining *Harry Potter* and redesigning the five-assignment sequence to focus on researching an individual hero/heroine in primary texts, online sources, and scholarly books and articles.

As I had done in my first honors composition course twenty years earlier, I reviewed my proposed changes with my writing program administrator to confirm that the new assignments would still meet the requirements for a freshman composition course. The honors director and assistant director, however, expressed concerns about what impact the changes would have on the honors program and the English department. I showed them in-progress drafts of the syllabus, daily reading and writing schedules, and assignment sheets for the semester, and I argued that I would use the new material to promote the five core writing assignments and other in-class writing exercises, not turn the honors composition course into a literature class as some faculty tend to do. I had also brought a copy of my vita in case I needed to support my decision with my qualifications: I have been teaching and researching honors composition for twenty years; I literally wrote the book on honors composition; I serve on the editorial boards for *Honors in Practice*, an NCHC-based publication, and *First-Year Honors Composition*, a journal situated in composition studies; and I have made multiple presentations on honors composition at both NCHC and the Conference on College Composition and Communication. I did not have to play that card, though, because the writing program administrator had hinted to me what a key issue might be.

SACS is coming this year.

Yes, I had forgotten that the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools will be conducting our university's accreditation review this year; thus, I had chosen an inopportune time to overhaul my course. Fortunately, I was able to assure the directors, with the writing program administrator's support, that the course would be fine for SACS.

That same week, I received the latest issue of *JNCHC*, and I started by reading Christopher Snyder and Scott Carnicom's article "Assessment,

Accountability, and Honors Education." Their comments on the position of faculty in honors assessment resonated with me:

> Honors programs, for the most part, rely on faculty volunteers who are looking to try something new, creative, and challenging with undergraduate students. Nothing can dampen the enthusiasm of such faculty quicker than to explain that their courses must go through additional committee review and include an assessment plan. . . . Extra work to prove that you are competent in your job is hardly satisfying motivation. (123)

As a lifelong participant in gifted and honors programs, starting in my elementary school years and continuing through my current professional pursuits, I have enjoyed the intellectual freedom and the opportunity to take risks that honors education encourages. I am troubled, therefore, by the growing susurrus in the halls at the national conference about whether NCHC should flex some organizational muscle and become an accrediting body for post-secondary honors education.

I understand how the accreditation process would appeal to directors and upper administrators who have to fight for their schools' honors programs; one need only review our recent publications and conference programs to see a growing emphasis on administration and assessment, as in the Best Honors Administrative Practices (BHAP) conference thread. Having served on the NCHC Board of Directors, I also acknowledge that beleaguered honors directors need all of the administrative tools we can provide. However, aside from the fundamental problems of how to standardize requirements for diverse honors programs at multiple types of institutions, I fear for the future of the pedagogical originality and risk-taking that honors has afforded to faculty. Faculty participation in honors education has an impact that extends beyond honors to the larger institution: honors programs strengthen working relationships among faculty from different departments and units, leading to increased participation in shared governance opportunities such as institution-wide committees or the faculty senate; working with intellectually curious students reinvigorates faculty members' approaches to undergraduate education in their disciplines; and honors classes frequently serve as laboratories in which faculty can try something new that they would like to expand into their other classes. Honors accreditation would thus, through standardization, restrict this pedagogical freedom and creativity in ways that would reduce benefits not just to honors but to the larger institution.

When Carnicom invokes Frank Aydelotte in his lead essay, he does so in the spirit of advocating the liberation of honors pedagogy, not the regulation of it. Like many of my honors students, I do not simply think outside the box;

I live outside the box, and sometimes I kick the box a few times for good measure. Surely honors accreditation would curtail my experimentation. I can imagine having to dump *Harry Potter* and return to reading a dozen research papers on stem cells. Before his honors tenure at Swarthmore, Aydelotte was himself a composition scholar at Harvard, Indiana, and MIT, and I like to think that he was partly inspired to title his book *Breaking the Academic Lockstep* because he was tired of reading the same essays over and over, too. Twenty years ago, without the willingness of my professor and my honors director to take a risk in allowing a graduate student to teach a special topics honors composition class, I probably wouldn't have pursued honors education as a vocation, and I certainly would not have had the confidence to tell my current directors, "Trust me, I know what I am doing, and I would not do anything to hurt the students or the program."

Honors programs have not escaped higher education's ever-intensifying focus on career preparation in the face of diminishing budgets and rising tuition costs, and I anticipate a concurrent erosion of what used to be a strong liberal arts foundation in honors. Faculty in the humanities face a special challenge in justifying the teaching of what might be considered unorthodox material that scandalizes other faculty, administrators, students, and the general public: "They're reading *Harry Potter* in a college class? In an *honors* class?!?" No, reading popular works such as *Harry Potter* does not relate directly to pre-professional preparation for medical school or law school or professional engineering licensure, but it does encourage bright, motivated students from all majors to sharpen their critical-thinking skills, to make metaconnections among disciplines, and to engage passionately in their own intellectual development, which is what honors education is supposed to about.

Do we really need to standardize that?

> Mischief managed.
>
> —George Weasley's deactivation spell for the Marauder's Map in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*

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