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Honors Education: Innovation or Conservation?

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Over the last ninety years, we have witnessed an explosion of diverse honors programs and colleges throughout the United States, often with the sole common feature of providing differentiated experiences and individualized instruction for an institution's most academically talented students. Concomitant with the tremendous growth in the number of honors programs and colleges in the U.S. has been the growth of honors as a separate and distinct niche in higher education. Indeed, the National Collegiate Honors Council, which publishes two journals and a monograph series, recently held its forty-fifth annual meeting in Kansas City. Additionally, a small yet increasing number of academics are slowly being recognized for their work within honors, not only applying some of their honors contributions towards tenure but also being selected for top administrative posts and prestigious fellowships. Given the proliferation and professionalization of honors, the time is ripe to evaluate the impact of honors on institutions of higher learning in the U.S.

Honors education in the United States can trace its roots in large part to the groundbreaking curricular changes that Frank Aydelotte introduced at Swarthmore upon becoming its president in 1921 (Rinn, 70). Reacting to increased enrollment and influenced by his experience as a Rhodes Scholar, Aydelotte wanted to break the lock-step, homogenizing approach of American higher education that catered to the average students in a group or class, holding back the best and brightest. Using Oxford-style tutorials as inspiration, Aydelotte wanted to create a more individualized educational experience for gifted students that focused on the creation of knowledge more than its mere reproduction.

College and university ranks in the U.S. swelled again after World War II, the G.I. Bill, and the baby boom that followed. To deal with this amazing growth, America applied its business savvy to higher education and led the way in efficient, mass-production approaches, with introductory college classes sometimes taught in theaters, auditoriums, or even basketball arenas capable of holding thousands of students. Like Charlie Chaplin caught in the gears of progress in "Modern Times," we became capable of churning

students out on an educational assembly line that would make the most ardent Fordist proud (Huxley). One can easily see the immense benefit of the wide availability of higher education opportunities; the U.S.'s high GDP and standard of living are directly related to the education level of its inhabitants and, quite frankly, who among us wouldn't want to live in a society surrounded by well-educated neighbors? However, as Aydelotte noticed years before, the massive expansion of our colleges and universities came at a cost, particularly for students of high ability.

During the many social changes of the 1960s and 70s, colleges and universities revisited Aydelotte's approach and attempted to raise academic quality by initiating a host of new honors programs specifically tailored to smaller groups of students with higher academic credentials and/or intellectual abilities (Wolverton et al, 27). Consistent with Aydelotte's original vision and rooted in the liberal arts tradition, most honors programs continue to complement high-achieving students' curricula with an individualized experience that uniquely challenges their talent and encourages original thinking. Honors at most institutions is by design *different*, providing a counterpoint to the mass-production model of education. While honors is now noted for its diversity of pedagogical approaches, individualized teaching practices (e.g. independent research, tutorials, small classes) remain common features of almost all honors programs and colleges. The NCHC's monograph series, *Honors in Practice*, and the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* are brimming with original research and unique, innovative pedagogical approaches custom-designed for collegiate honors students, but, at the same time, virtually all honors programs provide classes limited to a maximum of twenty high-achieving students in order to encourage discussion and critical thinking as opposed to memorization and replication. Similarly, most honors programs require significant independent study in the form of tutorials and/or thesis projects. But, I ask, are these approaches innovative, or is the honors community advocating and preserving tried and true pedagogical models?

As my historian colleagues like to remind me, nothing is new. The seminar discussions, tutorials, and independent research that compose most honors program and that might have seemed innovative or original to some in the 1960s and 70s are even older traditions within the academy than Aydelotte's introduction of honors in the 1920s. As a scientist, I should point out that the tutorial or guided apprenticeship, with students mentored by more senior scientists, dates back hundreds of years. Nonetheless, in our noble and laudable effort to provide schooling for everyone, our modern educational system shifted away from this individualized model, instead grouping students, usually by age, into larger and larger classrooms. Academic success tacitly entailed being able to adapt to this homogenous group environment, with

students receiving sporadic personalized instruction only if struggling to succeed. Honors programs were formed to meet the needs of the small number of students at the other end of the distribution, under-whelmed students who found the typical curriculum slow or tedious, students who longed to engage in the kind of interdisciplinary or creative scholarly work that Aydelotte articulated.

While I argue that the key features of most honors programs are not actually innovative, they are extremely valuable and effective teaching approaches that must be preserved. As the greater public hypocritically cries out for more accountability while simultaneously decreasing money available for institutions of higher learning, we must articulate and advocate for the merits of these traditional, individualized, and relatively expensive approaches. Arguably, effective individualized pedagogical techniques such as these are logically self-evident; we know what good pedagogy is and it involves the intensive one-on-one mentoring of individual students. This is why many institutions boast of their low student-to-teacher ratio. Learning tends to be inversely related to the size of the group in which it is meant to occur. Small teaching environments such as those typically found in honors provide students with the opportunity to vet their ideas in a constructively critical environment. In this sense, a class doesn't merely represent an easily assessable one-way information-transfer session but rather an open-ended exchange, evaluation, and creation of new ideas and arguments meant to hone synthetic and original thinking. While the honors community, like all scholarly fields, certainly fosters innovative teaching approaches, it more importantly preserves the opportunity for students to learn how to think innovatively using traditional discussion and mentorship.

As a scientist, I admit to some discomfort in arguing on the side of tradition; tradition in and of itself is not a good argument and can be antithetical to the empiricism and innovation of science. I constantly remind my students that just because we have always done things a certain way doesn't necessarily make them correct. The word "tradition" also can be a euphemism for privilege or worse, dogma, glossing over social ills like exclusion, bigotry, and intolerance. However, as Weiner deftly argued, honors, which is sometimes incorrectly criticized as being elitist (not to be confused with actually being elite), has historically been an antidote for elitism, democratically leveling the playing field and providing a top-notch education to students outside the hallowed halls of the oldest and/or most prestigious institutions.

While the stubborn stalwarts of tradition and convention can flummox scientists, scientists themselves use a tried and true methodology or logical framework that guides their innovations. Scientists make carefully controlled observations, attempting to eliminate the effect of extraneous variables. Thus,

as Edelstein argued, all innovation is a form of conservation, with new discoveries based on sound investigative techniques and the revision of previous ideas. Obviously, we should seek to innovate; as scholars, we seek the truth, we seek to generate new knowledge and understanding, but in the case of education we have yet to find a substitute for the power of small classes and one-on-one mentoring.

Thus, honors preserves the value of innovation by maintaining a tradition that affords our best students the opportunity to practice thinking and communicating creatively, something that is best facilitated in small, face-to-face environments. Nonetheless, despite the obvious pedagogical value of the honors approach, it continuously faces numerous challenges including charges of elitism based on disproportionate support for more talented students. This criticism lacks merit because it is not limited to honors; throughout the academy, we differentially support all students' special talents, whether they are football players or pianists. Perhaps some people are true egalitarians and would go so far as to spend identical amounts of money on every student, but this simply isn't the reality of higher education. While higher education at its best would apply the honors approach to every student, we face severe economic pressures that prohibit the discussion-based learning environments valued by honors. In this current environment, one important value of honors is to keep alive the tradition, which now seems like innovation, of small classes and one-on-one instruction. In the current culture and economy, honors is like a time capsule, keeping alive the best educational practices of the past.

Compared to the assembly-line approach or new distance-learning models heavily favored by the for-profits, the pedagogical traditions maintained by honors are relatively expensive in the short term but infinitely less expensive to society than if we abandoned them. Honors is an investment in our future and operates on the same act of faith that undergirds the whole institution of education. Ironically, though, it seems that the academy, or more to the point decision-makers outside it, have forgotten the roots of education and are galloping headlong into a limiting world of homogenous, cost-efficient learning with lowest-common-denominator accountability outcomes of questionable validity (Carnicom & Snyder). Society has become more focused on how the professoriate grades than how we teach, and a college education is viewed as a simple, transitory commodity to be traded for a high-paying vocation. As the educational community seems to be careening into a brave new world of similarity, honors programs and colleges maintain traditional approaches to education, creative and flexible approaches that provide a personalized education and foster independent thinking and discovery. Our

colleges and universities need this tradition of innovation, and we cannot be innovative if we are all expected to be the same.

Despite the value and growth of honors as an academic field (and perhaps due to its "expense"), some faculty members dedicated to honors continue to struggle to find firm footing on their campuses. Frequently, honors is either not viewed as a proper academic discipline or seen as something outside the domain of the traditional academic department and thus not relevant in determining rank or tenure. Furthermore, most assistant professors work under promotion and tenure guidelines that value external vetting of increasingly esoteric work within a traditional field over internal work (teaching and service) and the interdisciplinary or extra-disciplinary work associated with honors. While the number of honors programs has grown, faculty members are still explicitly encouraged to be independent contractors or specialists with an ever smaller research focus that generally does not include interdisciplinarity or honors. Generating discipline-specific knowledge is crucial, but it should not have to come at the expense of nurturing creativity, modeling innovation, and mentoring a new generation of scholars.

Despite pressures placed on institutions and individual faculty members, honors vigilantly and admirably preserves traditional pedagogical approaches that prepare tomorrow's intellectual leaders. For this reason, our educational institutions need honors programs and should support and reward them as central to their mission. Many institutions do provide financial support, sometimes even generous support, because they value honors for recruiting students who raise the average entrance scores, become campus leaders, win prestigious national scholarships, and increase the institution's national ranking. The better reason to value honors, however, is that it fosters the best educational practices of our culture's history, maintains a tradition of critical inquiry that transcends disciplinary boundaries, promotes creativity, and prepares students to become learners, thinkers, innovators, and leaders for the rest of their lives. Honors programs and colleges should always be central rather than peripheral to the academic enterprise; the more they are fully institutionalized in their curricular development, interdisciplinary impact, and faculty status, the more the institution can embrace at its core the tradition of innovation that history tells us is essential to an excellent education and a viable society.

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