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The Benefits of Honors Education for All College Students

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As we learn from Scott Carnicom's informative and thoughtful essay "Honors Education: Innovation or Conservation," the lead essay for this Forum, honors education, the brain child of Frank Aydelotte, was designed to "create a more individualized educational experience for gifted students that focused on the creation of knowledge more than its mere reproduction." From the beginning, honors programs and later colleges have drawn and continue to draw students we often identify as "the best and the brightest," and traditional measures bear out such a designation (for a general overview of honors students across and within colleges and universities, see Achterberg and Kaczvinsky; cf. Freyman for a prescriptive view of honors students). While we may agree that honors colleges and programs bring in gifted students, do these students alone deserve an education focused on the creation of knowledge rather than its reproduction? Shouldn't we aspire to this goal for all university and college students? If so, what role might honors colleges and programs have in furthering this lofty aim? Bell argues in general terms for the intervention of honors in undergraduate education, especially at large research institutions (cf. Braid [2009], who takes this idea further and offers suggestions about how honors education could be employed in K-12). In this essay, I would like to point out ways that honors already benefits all students and how it might expand its outreach to the rest of campus.

HONORS STUDENTS

Even when an honors curriculum fulfills all the general education requirements of an institution, as it does at the University of Oregon, honors students still take most of their courses outside of honors. One of the "Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program" is that "program requirements themselves should include a substantial portion of the participants' undergraduate work, usually in the vicinity of 20% to 25% of their total course work and certainly no less than 15%" (Spurrier 193), implying that

honors students typically take at least 75% of their coursework outside of honors. The influence of honors education beyond the perimeters of a particular program is thus substantial as these bright students interact with their peers and teachers outside of honors.

One of the defining features of honors education resides not so much in the stellar array of designer courses we offer as in the students themselves and the kinds of questions they pose. Smart, incisive, quirky, challenging questions coming from students with interests and expertise from across campus do not reproduce knowledge. Rather, they often critique and expose gaps in the basis of that knowledge and have the potential to lead us to new insights and directions of inquiry (for a useful study of the differences between honors and non-honors students, particularly in the area of “deep processing,” see Carnicom and Clump). These talented young men and women bring their engaged and sometimes aggressive curiosity to non-honors classes within and outside of their departments, raising the intellectual stakes for all students; they ask questions that transform lectures and discussions into moments of uncertainty, ambiguity or wonder; and they have the potential to inspire or provoke other students to search for answers on their own. Honors students also meet with faculty to discuss social and political issues outside of class with greater frequency than non-honors students, as noted by Shushok, and thus model greater intellectual engagement as well as acumen.

A critical impact of honors colleges and programs on home universities, then, resides in the students themselves who populate many non-honors courses and commit to departmental majors with all other undergraduates. Although this impact may be obvious to us, we often need to remind our colleagues, administrative and academic, of the fact that many of our most successful and dynamic students, those who often take leadership roles in class and on campus, choose our respective institutions because of honors. In a recent survey at the University of Washington, for instance, 243 of 484 honors students reported that they chose to come here because of the honors program, and 224 of the same stated that they would have gone elsewhere if they were not accepted.

HONORS CURRICULA

The second and equally significant impact that honors colleges and programs can exert on their home institutions lies in their ability to model curricula that hold students responsible for synthesizing their education, a feature made possible because of their small size and target audience. For example, many—perhaps most—non-honors students “box-check” their way through distribution requirements. This approach to general education should not elicit surprise because many students, especially in large universities, are

often forced to select classes that have available space or are offered at a convenient time. Upon completion of their distribution requirements, such students are neither required nor given the tools to reflect on their general education. No one asks students to connect what they have learned in these diverse non-major courses in order to achieve the metacognitive experience that comes from pondering integrative questions and developing one's own core inquiries. Many honors colleges and programs, on the other hand, either have clearly defined general education curricula with specific academic outcomes (e.g., curricula based on the "Great Books," as at University of West Florida) or provide opportunities for reflection through capstone courses (e.g., American University) and/or learning portfolios (e.g., Miami University). Students who complete such programs have the opportunity to integrate what they learn during their time in college.

These days, college and university administrators, particularly in large state institutions, struggle to provide the requisite number of general educational courses with a dwindling faculty and often think about the delivery of such courses in new and efficient ways; these can include mega-classes with clickers or on-line courses with e-texts and e-tests, virtual education for the twenty-first-century student who has grown up wired to the Internet and much of whose social life takes place on *Facebook* and other social media (the Forum on "Honors in the Digital Age" in *JNCHC* 10.2 [2009] is particularly helpful in its discussion of the new technologies in honors education). E-portfolios such as those used by a number of honors colleges and programs could be more widely employed for the integration of non-major course material than is presently the case given that they naturally accommodate the ways in which the modern student communicates and allow for a conscious appreciation of diverse academic and methodological approaches so that all, not just honors, students can approach work in their majors armed with the variety of intellectual strategies presented in their general education courses. An initial investment of time and money is required for large-scale implementation of e-portfolios, but the results, as the widespread success of honors education can show, will more than justify both expenditures. What is more, e-portfolios that cover non-major courses provide colleges and universities with outstanding information for assessing the effectiveness of general education (an outstanding study by Zubziaretta is one example of the extensive literature on e-portfolios; on the use of portfolios in program assessment, see as an example Davies and Le Mahieu).

Another common feature of honors colleges and programs is the opportunity, in some cases requirement, for students to engage in experiential learning—that is, learning outside of the traditional classroom. Braid (2008) offers a compelling essay on the importance of experiential learning in

general, the topic of two NCHC monographs: one edited by Machonis and the other by Braid and Long. Foreign study, community service, student internships, work in faculty labs, leadership roles, and research in support of honors theses serve to underscore the fact that education can exist beyond the formal setting of classes and departments, can teach students that they own their own education, and can set the stage for a life of continuous learning and engagement beyond college. Here, too, honors provides a valuable and useful model for the rest of the college or university.

For potential contributions such as e-portfolios and experiential learning to move beyond modeling and into practice outside of honors, we need to engage our colleagues actively. Some small-scale activities that started in honors at UW have been adopted by the general campus. Entering honors students have long been assigned peer mentors. Three years ago, thanks to the inspiration of an honors student who was president of the Associated Students of the University of Washington, a peer mentoring program was offered to non-honors students. Technologies first used in our foreign study programs (blogs, wikis, vlogs) have been adopted by our Office of International Program and Exchanges. The honors program in Sierra Leone has become the model for other Africa programs run by our university. Some of the community scholars whom we brought to honors now teach elsewhere on campus. This past year we launched the UW Honors Librarian Mentor program with the hope that it will in time expand to include all students. We are currently developing a creativity seminar that will reside in honors but, once established, become available to all students. Having made these contributions to the campus at large, we are starting to be seen as an asset to the whole university and are now regularly consulted regarding a number of pedagogical and programmatic issues.

CONCLUSION

In the past, administrators, faculty, staff, and students across many campuses have often viewed honors education as insular, dedicated exclusively to serving an elite subset of the student population. This view has waned in recent years, presumably due to the increased need universities feel to compete for talented students and to the positive role honors programs tend to play in such competition, as noted by Bell (56–57). Volume 10.1 (2009) of *JNCHC* includes several papers on the topic of honors and elitism that explore the issue from several vantage points. That said, we need to confront what remains of this erroneous opinion about elitism and honors on campus by stressing the fact that honors students contribute their talents and their freely inquisitive natures to all the non-honors classes they take and to the departments in which they major. Secondly, honors directors and deans might

well take the lead in promoting educational models that, with some creative adjustments for larger numbers, can benefit the general student population. As quixotic a goal as it may seem, honors education can exert a significant impact on our colleges and universities if we reimagine our mission as serving all students by bringing in the kind of student colleagues who question traditional academic points of view. We can also export innovative pedagogy developed within our smaller groups that, in the words of Katherine Bruce, “stretch our boundaries . . . challenge us to learn in unexpected places, to learn in unexpected ways” (Bruce 20). The goal of active participation in the creation of knowledge needs to be available to and reachable by every student, and honors has the experience and wherewithal to assist in creating such opportunities across campus.

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