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Costs and Benefits in the Economy of Honors

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As I write, the Dow Jones Industrial Average has fallen two thousand points over the past three weeks, the national unemployment rate hovers stubbornly above 9%, and Congress is playing a dangerous game of chicken during debates about the country's finances—one that threatens the nation's already fragile economy. But the honors community is immune from these worries, right? We have the privilege of dealing with the life of the mind rather than sully ourselves with more mundane matters like budgets, taxes, and making money. We stand with Socrates, who was well known for his modest lifestyle and equated having no wants with godliness, even using the fact that he was not paid to teach as part of his trial defense.

A quick glance at the NCHC conference pre-program for the meeting in Phoenix would seem to suggest the answer is a resounding "Yes!" In sessions featuring honors staff and faculty, the words "money," "economy," and "economics" are not mentioned once, not a single time in 384 pages. "Teaching" appears in the descriptions of over two dozen sessions. The ethos of honors is grounded in the Socratic tradition that values the inner life over material things; the "good life" is one that is beautiful and just. Thus in his utopian vision for educating Greek youth in *The Republic*, Plato hopes to cultivate a lack of desire for money in future leaders. Is it possible, then, that there is an irresolvable tension between honors and, for lack of a better phrase, the money project? And is this tension only increasing in light of the country's economic trials and what students hope to get out of their college educations? According to UCLA's annual national survey of incoming students, almost 73% of fall 2010 freshmen indicated that "the chief benefit of college is that it increases one's earning power," which was an all-time high for answers to that particular question ("Incoming College Students").

It would be easy to misread the situation I have just described and imagine that we in honors have simply stuck our collective heads in our books, hoping we won't have to dirty our hands with economic concerns. Certainly the stereotypical version of what we do in the academy turns on an image of absent-minded professors sitting behind ivy-covered walls pontificating on abstract ideas that have nothing to do with "the real world."

However, to be in honors is to be engaged in many different economic arrangements and exchanges. All of us, for example, work in concert with our admissions offices while recruiting high-achieving students whose decisions often hinge on how much money the institution can offer in the form of discounts to tuition and financial aid. Honors programs that tie scholarships more directly to honors admission deal with an even more vexed question: do they love us for our innovative learning or for our money? Those of us who do not have faculty lines in honors must typically “buy” the services of colleagues in other departments or hire adjuncts to staff classes. In fact, we spend much of our time as honors administrators tracking numbers tied to financial considerations: protecting our budgets, cultivating donations, massaging the entering honors class to hit prearranged recruiting targets, keeping up FTEs, and watching endowment returns if we are lucky enough to benefit from such support.

Many industries use language to disguise the fact that the professional relationships within those fields are centered in economic transactions in which individuals pay for a service. Lawyers call their customers “clients,” doctors call them “patients,” and prostitutes use the term “John.” As Catherine McDonald pointed out recently, “the words we use to describe those who use our services are, at one level, metaphors that indicate how we conceive them,” and such representations are particularly tied up in questions about status (115). Academics are somewhat guilty of the same obfuscation in calling our customers “students.” Yet what interests me more is why we engage in this practice. What would be at stake in being more up front about acknowledging that we are providing a beneficial service that has an established value, albeit a fluctuating one, in the marketplace? Might we be making ourselves more vulnerable in effacing the transactional nature of the educational project even as we complain about the corporatization of higher education?

For example, there may be tangible benefits for colleges and universities that foreground the economic aspects of higher education and ask faculty to take a more overt role in discussions about that side of institutional life. Martin Ringle, chief technology officer at Reed College, made this very argument at a 2011 conference of IT leaders. He suggested that liberal arts colleges have made a mistake in insulating faculty members from the business side of running institutions because it is harder to enact meaningful change when professors are not on board and because potentially unique solutions to these economic challenges could emerge from this group. Another CIO urged administrators and faculty to get together and discuss “in real concrete terms” the value of students’ education (Kolowich). Of course, faculty involvement would also require most administrations to be much more transparent about their own priorities and spending patterns.

I have found that, because of my own collaborations with my college's admissions office during the recruiting of honors students, I have a much deeper appreciation of the economy of honors education even though this is not knowledge that many of my fellow faculty members seem to share. Just the other day, a friend who has been at the college for over a decade expressed shock that we purchased names of prospective students in what are essentially highly involved and extended direct-marketing campaigns. I also find myself appreciating the honesty with which admissions officers discuss and label potential students as they move through the enrollment funnel, first as "prospects," then as "admits," then as "deposits," and finally "enrollees."

In some respects, it is both the best of times and worst of times in honors education. Some institutions, aware that the population of high-achieving students prepared to do honors-level work is a finite one, are pouring money into enhanced honors experiences like study abroad programs and fancy residential learning centers. They are also going after these students with generous scholarship packages, in some cases literally paying students to attend the institution. Donors are getting involved, too. In the case of the University of Arkansas Honors College, the civic-minded Walton family contributed over \$100 million to endow the college as a way of attracting talent to the state's flagship institution. Some of these efforts are driven by presidents and boards chasing higher rankings in outlets like *U.S. News & World Report*, and they see honors as a key piece of this enhancement puzzle; surely most honors directors play up this benefit during conversations about their budgets. Other institutions, pressured by declining state support for higher education and by families struggling to afford the costs of college during perilous financial situations, are cutting honors budgets, increasing class sizes, and even shuttering entire programs.

For colleges and universities that are able to increase honors funding, especially in the form of endowment support and scholarships, the landscape might appear rosy, but ancillary costs accrue to framing the educational experience primarily in economic terms. Kevin Knudson's recent cautionary tale in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, which highlights the increasing sense of entitlement among students he recruits to the honors college at the University of Florida, makes perfect sense in an environment where all of us are chasing the same limited pool of high-achieving students with promises of benefits, advantages, and enhancements. Why wouldn't a parent request to see the layout of the honors residence, as Knudson notes, to "ensure that her son's room location was optimal"? We have enabled and encouraged such behavior in the way we discuss honors with potential students. I would argue that we are all better served by a recruiting process that emphasizes the distinctiveness of the *learning experience* in honors and that we should spend

most of our time educating families about the way honors classes are different rather than better. Of course, this strategy only works if honors faculty have thought intentionally about the unique features of honors pedagogy and if programs do not rely heavily on honors contracts or h-options. Finally, we should ask if the “haves” in the NCHC have a responsibility to the “have-nots” that might take several forms: formulating a tiered NCHC dues structure based on a program’s annual budget; scaling back on some of the more ornate and expensive features of the annual conference; or finding other creative ways of being as inclusive as possible as an organization. University presidents raised this very issue over the past summer as it applied to athletic programs, exploring ways to close the gap between the wealthiest and poorest programs through plans like revenue reallocation even though meaningful change is unlikely any time soon (Sander). Still, we might have something to learn from this group.

The escalating cost of a college education has a number of good and bad consequences although the effects are heavily weighted in the negative column. The primary benefit is that increased expenses have encouraged families to ask hard questions about the value of the education we are providing, therefore giving even greater momentum to the burgeoning assessment movement that privileges learning over teaching and outputs over inputs. While some faculty members still frame the educational project in terms of their interests, their ideas, and their research, I’d like to think that honors educators have been out in front of the crusade to make learning primarily about the student experience. On the other hand, this boon is slight in comparison to the harm wrought by skyrocketing tuition and fees, costs that are soberly chronicled by economists Robert Archibald and David Feldman in their new book *Why Does College Cost So Much?* In the past twenty-five years, the cost of a college education has risen at a rate well in excess of two times the rate of inflation while at the same time revenues are increasingly devoted to non-instructional areas (Archibald and Feldman 6–7). Andrew Hacker and Claudia Dreifus point out that “between 1976 and 2008, the ratio of college administrators to students basically doubled” (30). Such changes have created skepticism about higher education even though more women than men still see the value of college; according to a recent Pew Research Center study, 50% of female graduates gave the U.S. higher education system good or excellent marks while only 37% of male graduates were similarly satisfied (Wang and Palmer).

The money-squeeze has consequences for the honors classroom. Increasing pressures on college balance sheets potentially raise class sizes, thus striking at the heart of the interactive, discussion-based honors seminars. An increasing reliance on adjuncts potentially harms the honors student

experience; the close relationships between honors students and mentors are challenged by the increasing numbers of contingent faculty, who often have no permanent offices and have varied responsibilities on multiple campuses. By far the most insidious effect is restricted access to the honors classroom for low-income and first-generation students, or students from other under-represented groups. Honors programs and colleges have a noble history of providing excellent educations for gifted students who might not be able to afford an expensive private education or whose families have experienced other hardships, which is why I am always depressed when honors programs get labeled as elitist. At my own institution, for example, I am proud of the fact that the members of last year's entering honors class had slightly greater financial need than the incoming freshman class as a whole while having an average ACT score about six points higher—an impressive statistic since it is well-documented that scores on standardized tests are closely correlated with family income.

I wish we could do a better job making these sorts of cases for honors education to audiences beyond our own listservs and publications. I also wonder if, as an organization, the NCHC could get out in front of some of the conversations about higher education and economics so that we are influencing the debate instead of reacting to decisions made by others. In some respects, we are trained as academics to be reactive: to refute arguments, find fault, and ask questions (*vide* Socrates). But the perils of becoming entrenched in reactive habits in today's rapidly changing economy are right in front of us, whether they take the form of the music industry's struggles to adapt to the digitalization of songs or network television's stumbling around amidst challenges from video games, cable television, computers, and Netflix. Both these examples reveal threats tied to the delivery of content, which just so happens to be one of the ways to describe the higher education business. Honors should thrive in this environment because it has often been about more than content, but we need to make that case clearly enough and to the right audiences, especially since we seem not to be talking about such issues even at our own meetings.

"Economy" comes from a Greek word that means, roughly, household management; the economy of honors places directors in the position of managers, a role that some of us do not want or feel trained for. Exacerbating that challenge is the fact that the "new normal" in higher education is to do more with less, even though this flies in the face of honors, which has always been about doing more with more: taking advantage of the motivation and talent of high-achieving students, asking them to challenge themselves in a supportive environment, and thus yielding benefits for the student, the class, and the institution.

Yet as honors directors and deans, we must have actual resources to manage. One of my most memorable early lessons as a young impressionable honors director occurred while listening to Ted Humphreys from the Barrett Honors College at Arizona State explain at a conference that senior administrators will take advantage of you if you let them, even “stripping the very skin off your back.” (The passing of time may have made the trope more vivid in my imagination, but I don’t think so.) Ted’s point was that honors directors and deans can only do so much with limited resources, and, if those resources aren’t forthcoming, we should not kill ourselves trying to turn water into wine. I actually took his good and fair advice at a previous institution where I resigned after four years of building an honors program because the administration would not step up and support us with more money. It was one of the best decisions I’ve made in twenty-five years in academia. At my current institution, I have been blessed by material and emotional support from my president, provost, and dean, assistance that has translated into a thriving, vibrant program.

Part of managing involves planning. Oklahoma State’s Bob Spurrier always encourages colleagues to have a list of “wants” ready at hand, which is excellent advice because you never know when opportunities might present themselves. However, in these times of shrinking budgets, it helps perhaps to be even more aggressive—though not necessarily to the extent of David Mamet’s salesmen in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, who are driven by the mantra “Always be closing” (72). With the added challenge of thick administrative chains of command, we have to be a bit bold and enterprising about pressing our case, which is not a habit typically cultivated in graduate school. Perhaps we should say, “Always be asking.”

One of the well-kept secrets of academia, which took a while for me to unearth, is that funds are always available to do interesting (and uninteresting) things at colleges and universities. Money is always sloshing around in the institutional coffers. In fiscal year 2008, public and private four-year institutions took in over \$360 billion in revenue (“Finances of Colleges and Universities”). You just have to know whom and how to ask, which is especially important in honors programs since they can be seen as expensive by an institution’s accountants: the tuition of our students is often deeply discounted, class sizes are often smaller, and costly supplemental experiences are the norm. Adding to the difficulty of campaigning for funds is the fact that we have no natural constituency of the sort that gives a critical mass of students to disciplinary departments. Most honors programs and colleges have few if any dedicated faculty, further isolating honors in the university hierarchy, and this is why it is so important to have direct access to the offices where such decisions get made, a reality acknowledged in NCHC’s “Basic

Characteristics,” which suggest that honors directors and deans report to the institution’s chief academic officer. One way to protect an honors program’s economy is to advocate for faculty lines since they lend stability to scheduling, provide allies in making the case for honors, and put a human face on potential budget cut-backs.

While we might not typically think about honors in economic terms, there are myriad benefits in doing so. Highlighting some of the economic advantages of honors to institutions might put programs on firmer footing in debates about funding while at the same time demonstrating to families that their valuable tuition dollars are being well-spent, especially if we are able to discuss honors in terms of distinctive learning experiences rather than entitlements. Engaging faculty more overtly in the economies of their universities might lead to more creative thinking about financial challenges, which can often result from collaborative approaches to problem solving. Foregrounding discussions about monetary matters in our own meetings and publications might help us better understand the challenges and opportunities that exist on the campuses of our colleagues and perhaps enable NCHC to speak with a firmer and more intentional voice during national debates about the economy of higher education.

We might easily get discouraged or resentful in the face of recent critiques of higher education that identify massive deficiencies in the learning experiences of today’s college students (see, for instance Arum and Roksa). But if honors can play a part in helping students envision the learning project as something deeper and more meaningful than boosting their earning power, then we have created something of real value.

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