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Articulating the Distinctiveness of the Honors Learning Experience

Angela M. Salas
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Richard Badenhausen's essay "Costs and Benefits in the Economy of Honors" has been a splinter in my mind since I first read it. As Director of the Honors Program at Indiana University Southeast, I have been immersed in what Badenhausen describes as the financial issues that honors faculty and administrators may not, as a group, be sufficiently aware of. Yet, despite wrestling on a regular basis with student financial difficulties, finite honors program scholarship resources, long-term planning (in which I propose improvements that cost money), I find, thanks to Badenhausen, that I have been neglecting the issue of the distinctiveness of the honors learning experience. He writes:

> 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. . . .

If we want to move beyond career goals and entitlement privileges as motives to join honors, Badenhausen argues, such questions about what makes honors special need careful thought and specific responses.

Since reading Badenhausen's manuscript, I have sought to learn what the Indiana University Southeast Honors Program students consider distinctive about their honors experience as well as to ascertain the hopes and assumptions of the Honors Council and honors faculty. Because we "buy" our faculty out of their departmental teaching obligations to teach within the honors program, the challenge can be harrowing to offer a useful array of courses for our students and at the same time assure that faculty understand their role in the larger learning experience. In the past, I have hoped that the carefully

worded call for faculty applications, followed by the Honors Council's selection process, weeds out people who are temperamentally unsuited to work with our students; now I have begun to think about ways both to solicit faculty commentary and to offer a consistent, coherent narrative of honors learning in order to develop a sense of common purpose.

While addressing the issue of educating students, their families, and prospective faculty members requires a multipronged approach, I have discovered that the website is potentially our best way of disseminating information about the program, its possibilities, and its culture. The site is, at this moment, a huge weakness. Websites certainly evolve over time, but ours resembles an untended garden. The weeds—out-of-date, conflicting, and ambiguous information—are crowding out the vegetables, and it is time for a lot of weeding, pruning, and preparing the garden for a new season.

We in the Indiana University Southeast Honors Program are thus undertaking a large revamping of the website to make sure that any visitor will easily find answers to the questions that brought them there. This process requires that we define the distinctive nature of the honors learning experience at Indiana University Southeast. I offer our definitions to my honors colleagues in case Badenhausen's essay has made them also consider the importance of assuring that students, their families, faculty colleagues, and the institution itself have a readily accessible source of information about what makes honors a desirable component in the undergraduate experience of particular students.

In preparing to revamp our website, I have been surveying people, poring over Noel-Levitz results, chatting with Honors Council members, and talking to honors program alumni. I have learned that honors students particularly remember and value their co-curricular activities, and so, to the extent that it remains possible in difficult budgetary times, we will continue to see plays or go to lectures together. I have also learned that our yearly trips to the Mid-East Regional Honors Association (MEHA) conference are our most effective team-building experiences; that our honors program can do more to encourage students to study abroad or to pursue internships; and, to my chagrin, that some of our current seniors have been too proud to ask for help in preparing for life after graduation and that I have been so non-intrusive in my efforts to help them that I have been less effective than I should have been.

I have learned that recent graduates think that the distinctiveness of their honors education involves their ability to handle ambiguity, to tolerate disagreement, to be friends with people of different political stripes, and to be more intellectually self-sufficient. Seniors with whom I have been speaking this semester say that they are better researchers than they think they would be without the honors program and that they are both more confident and

more humble intellectually. They say they appreciate the small classes, the interaction with their classmates, their relations with their faculty members, and the reliable source of positive reference letters. Their satisfaction with the level of academic and personal support they have received is ironic in light of their not having asked for nor received all the help they need to make a smooth transition into post-graduate study or work.

One of the distinctive qualities that honors students lend to the program and to our school, is their gratitude. Most are smarter than they know, and they also bring more to the honors program and the university than they know, but they well up with emotion about honors faculty members or scholarships or the friends they have made in and out of their honors classes. I am not a hugger, but they make me want to hug them—a distinctive feature that does not, alas, have a place on our website.

Perhaps the most useful fact I have learned as I pursued Badenhausen's suggestion to wrestle with the distinctiveness of the honors learning experience is that it seems to have more to do with student dispositions and their connectedness to the institution and each other than with specific class assignments. While a solid curriculum, high expectations, and a good assessment plan are indispensable, they are not what students remember. They remember human moments, events, achievements, and interactions, positive and sometimes negative, within the honors program itself. While a website can neither distill nor capture these distinctive features, the act of revamping the site, in a quest to answer Badenhausen's challenge, has yielded a great many possibilities for our program's future.

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