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Signifying Difference: The Nontraditional Student and the Honors Program

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In their essay "Nontraditional Honors," Janice Rye Kinghorn and Whitney Womack Smith state that students who are "twenty-five-years of age and older are usually considered nontraditional." However, they first acknowledge that "traditional" and "nontraditional" are "constructed and slippery terms." One of the most important ways that we as faculty and staff can serve our students through an honors education is to deconstruct terms such as "traditional" and "nontraditional" in order to show the significant gaps between the signifiers and the signified and to expose the negative connotations of a construct that is defined as not being the other construct.

Honors faculty, students, directors, and staff members who enter the dialogue concerning these constructs need to ensure that the terms are not reduced to stereotypes and are not reinforced by those participating in an honors education. According to Paulo Freire, dialogue is a necessary part of an education since it helps people create a critical consciousness. For Freire, a critical consciousness is created by an in-depth understanding of the world that is fostered by exploration of social and political contradictions. Once people begin the process of forming a critical consciousness, they can interrogate language use in order to create new meanings upon which future actions can be based (*Education* 44). Given the nature of the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) and its educational goals, nothing is more important than becoming critically conscious of social constructs that limit our ability to reach out to students.

Because the signifier "nontraditional" is defined against the signifier "traditional," I want first to look at what "traditional" signifies in an honors student. The obvious answer seems to be a student with a range of abilities who has recently matriculated from high school and who has been accepted into an honors program at the university level.

However, I wanted to see how students themselves define "traditional," so I sent a question about the definition to the honors listserv for the Southern Polytechnic State University (SPSU) University Honors Program. Nineteen

students responded to the question. What I found is that most of the students who responded see the term “traditional” through the lens of what they deem typical of the college students they know. Rugaya Abaza, who was a joint-enrollment student at SPSU during her senior year of high school, indicated that traditional students attend high school for four years, graduate from high school during the year before attending college, and are full-time students. Ciara Hinds, who identified herself as a nontraditional student, added that traditional students either live on campus in a dorm or they live with their parents who live near the campus. Tim Sassone, who identified himself as a traditional student, feels that traditional students carry a full load and their primary role is being a student. Brady Powers, who also identified himself as a traditional student, finds that such students typically do not work to support themselves. He believes that traditional students rely on “parents, loans, scholarships, or any combination so long as they are not working their way through school.”

I believe we could as easily answer the question of who traditional students are by looking at the cultural artifacts of an honors program. Applications, recruitment materials, documents concerned with curriculum and honors activities, and lists of benefits for students tell the story of which students are targeted for honors study. We often assume that the students targeted will bring status to the university.

One way that universities and honors programs often indicate the status of their students is through Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores or American College Test (ACT) scores as one criterion for admission. My research on the usefulness of such scores in determining success in the SPSU honors program has not shown a significant correlation between success and scores. Honors students with an 1150 SAT score have done well in the program, and some have gone on to succeed in graduate school. Some students with 1300–1400 scores have been dismissed from the program with grade point averages of 1.5. Once scores have shown that students have a certain level of ability, they no longer serve as a significant predictor of success.

However, universities and the media often play up high test scores to indicate the quality of a school and its students. In fact, one of the goals of the student recruitment office at Southern Polytechnic State University in 2010–11 was to maintain SPSU’s third- or fourth-place ranking of SAT scores for entering freshman within the University System of Georgia (“Student Recruitment”).

Since the use of such scores is often a traditional means of recruiting incoming students, one item that may determine whether a student is a traditional honors student is having an SAT or ACT score to report on an application. Advanced Placement (AP) test scores and high school grade point

averages may also define an honors student as “traditional.” In other words, traditional students have used their high school years to bank measurements that they then can use to get into an honors program. Ironically, what students have banked may not demonstrate the type of thinking skills that honors programs privilege since national tests rarely ask for the type of critical and creative thinking skills necessary to develop a critical consciousness.

Having defined what we might mean by “traditional,” we can now consider what the construct “nontraditional” might signify. We can assume that “nontraditional” defines students who in high school have not banked test scores, AP and honors coursework, and high grades. However, if we define nontraditional students by what they lack, we define the term quite differently from the way many of the SPSU honors students defined it in my survey, many of whom identified positive differences from traditional students.

The student responses below indicate that the social construct “nontraditional” is indeed a very slippery construct. All humans negotiate how their own identity is shaped through social constructs and their own knowledge of themselves. Several students who answered my electronic survey indicated that, no matter their age, they could be considered nontraditional depending on how they defined the term, which was similar and not so similar to the ways Kinghorn and Smith’s students defined the term.

Meredith Shaddix, who finds herself often defined as a traditional student due to her age, said that she would like to create her own definition of “nontraditional” so that it includes any student “who does not fit into the traditional category.” Thus, it would include her since she was homeschooled, took a year off after graduation, was part of a leadership program, went to a community college, and is now at SPSU.

William Forsyth expanded on this view since he finds an “almost unlimited number of interpretations” depending on one’s point of view. He believes the term could be applied to any student whose style of learning is different from an assumed norm or who seems to deviate from social norms in the community.

Three honors students who began their schooling at SPSU as joint-enrollment students answered the survey, all indicating that they could be seen as nontraditional students. Michael Hallock found that his going to two schools at once as a joint-enrollment student was not “very traditional.” He also considered international students to be nontraditional since “they’re going out of their way to come to the university,” and this is not a traditional way to get educated in America.

Britney Mason, who also began taking classes at SPSU her senior year in high school, had already racked up a number of AP hours before entering the honors program. She is now in the second semester of her first year, but she

is a junior due to the number of course credit hours she has accumulated. She said that she considers herself more of a traditional student than a nontraditional student, but stated, "I have approached college in a less traditional way than most." Britney finds the term "nontraditional" problematic because its use is similar to the use of labels that occurs in high school cliques: a person becomes known for a "title" based on "only a part of a person."

Kenneth Gagne's second definition of "nontraditional" shows how slippery this construct can be. He states that a nontraditional student can be deemed one who considers several "educational options." That is, "he or she is not satisfied with only obtaining the skills necessary to become employed in his or her 'dream' job." In other words what Kenneth sees as nontraditional today was (and maybe still is) the traditional model of a liberal arts education when I was in college.

If Kenneth's definition is not enough to show how slippery this construct can be, the definitions from two Chinese students who answered the survey show the wide range of definitions. Ailing Cui said that the term might apply to students who need to take on a part-time job, who need financial aid, or who lack an educational background. Jingyu Rao understands that a nontraditional student in the United States might be a person who is married and has children, but she also said that in China a nontraditional student might be someone who does not attend classes regularly, who submits homework after the deadline, and who disturbs order in the classroom.

Finally Teyanna Henry understands that she is a "poster child" of the "nontraditional student." She stated that a nontraditional student cannot follow the typical class schedule of a student just out of high school. Obligations and concerns such as a family, job, and health issues have to take first priority.

What complicates the picture quite a bit for me is that SPSU, like the satellite campuses for Miami University of Ohio, would probably be considered a nontraditional school in which to house an honors program. SPSU is a polytechnic state university located north of the Technical Institute of Georgia and was once a two-year feeder school for Tech. Most SPSU students study in engineering, engineering technology, or architecture programs. Nearly half of SPSU students live off campus. A survey I took of entering honors freshmen in 2012 indicated that most were from families of low to middle class status. If we use the ages suggested in Kinghorn and Smith's essay for "nontraditional," 44% of SPSU's undergraduate student body in 2010 would be considered nontraditional (SPSU Factbook). The current enrollment at SPSU is just over 6,200 students, 800 of whom are graduate students; men make up 79% of this population; 54% are Caucasian, 24% African American, 8% Hispanic, 10% Asian American, and the rest either unknown, American Indian, or Pacific Island Americans; and 5% are non-U.S. citizens.

Information about the SPSU population is important because all these students must succeed in difficult coursework in order to graduate. Most graduates from SPSU have studied Calculus I and II and Principles of Physics I and II as base courses for their major fields. Nontraditional honors students, by any definition, not only do well in such classes at SPSU but also are often at the top of their classes in their grade point averages.

Like Kinghorn and Smith, I find that nontraditional students need to be measured by what they bring to an honors program instead of by what they lack. If “nontraditional” means that the student’s background is different from the backgrounds of typical students, then we need to have application materials and programs that offer students a variety of ways to indicate these different abilities. (For more information on what SPSU does to create equal opportunities for nontraditional students, see Appendix A. Appendix B provides student feedback about what we could do better.) Nontraditional students in the honors program at SPSU have served as peer mentors, served on the Student Honors Council, run workshops, written blogs aimed at helping traditional students, and established a presence on the honors webpage as a group known as “Guides on Your Side.” The website <<http://www.spsu.edu/guides>> contains contact information for the students as well as helpful tips for students and a blog by Shannon Hames. Traditional students such as Delbert Wan had nontraditional honors students from the “Guides on Your Side” come to the class he took on Introduction to Honors. He stated in his definition of nontraditional students that they bring experience and networking skills from the real world, so they are more prepared than traditional students to face college life. In many ways, the word “nontraditional” at SPSU identifies students who bring more skills and capabilities to college than the typical student.

Since nontraditional students are key to the SPSU honors program, last spring we encouraged those working in the “Guides on Your Side” program to make a presentation at the NCHC conference the following fall. I worked with three nontraditional students to write the proposal, and we presented at the 2012 conference in Boston. What soon became apparent to our students was that several people attending the presentation assumed we would focus only on how honors programs can help nontraditional students instead of how nontraditional students in honors act as mentors to help traditional and nontraditional students alike. We were interrupted by questions early on asking if we would soon get to the part where we discussed helping nontraditional students. Even the final question for the panel concerned what extra benefits we provide nontraditional students. While at least one of the members of our audience was a nontraditional student from another school, the SPSU nontraditional students noticed that they were a small minority of students at the conference.

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Given the student definitions for “nontraditional” as well as the strong academic abilities of SPSU students who fit the age-defined term “nontraditional,” we need to examine closely how we understand this construct, which determines how we see the students to whom we apply the term and which can affect their future opportunities. Honors programs award credentials that often boost access to jobs after graduation. Graduation with honors can not only determine later income but also create class identity in a society such as America’s. Clearly a lot is on the line.

With so much at stake, we need to interrogate the terms we use, the cultural artifacts we create, and what it means to get an honors education. A number of the practices at SPSU would not be considered within the norm at other schools, but then SPSU is not a traditional school, and we continue to attempt to be more inclusionary. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire indicates that antidialogical action is a “concomitant of the real, concrete situation of oppression” and that “dialogical action is indispensable to the revolutionary supersedence of the situation” (134). What I appreciate about this NCHC Forum on “Nontraditional Honors Students” is that the dialogue opened here might lead to change.

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APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT FOR NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS

(We have tried to create inclusionary measures that work with the term “nontraditional” no matter how it is defined.)

- Created a Departmental Honors Scholar Program which asks student to complete only the upper-level hours of the honors curriculum. This allows current SPSU students and transfer students to become part of the program.
- Created GPA standards that allow entrance to the honors program that are based only on college GPA whether at SPSU or at the college from which the students have transferred.
- Created an essay section in the application that allows students to explain past issues and to discuss current avenues for academic success.
- Recruit students through the following means: an open house or meeting, asking for recommendations from current students and SPSU faculty and department chairs, and speaking at SPSU open houses for incoming transfer students.

CREATING INVOLVEMENT FOR NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS

- Nontraditional students on campus during the day are members of our Student Honors Council, lead committees such as the International Mentor Committee, and hold workshops on topics such as organization and time management.
- Nontraditional students on campus during the day and evening are used as peer mentors for traditional students.
- Involving Nontraditional students who are here in the evening only is our greatest weakness, but partaking in electronic roles such as “Guides on Your Side” is available.
- Use of electronic sources for communication: Facebook page, listserv/email, as well as phone calls and mailings.

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE STUDENT FEEDBACK CONCERNING THE PROGRAM'S ABILITY TO INVOLVE ALL STUDENTS

(pulled from the honors listserv survey)

I think the honors program does serve those who are not traditional students because I know of multiple other joint enrollment students that are in the honors program along with people who took a break from school for several years for work and are coming back to school. I also think that the service to them is just as good as to those traditional students. From what I've seen the honors program is trying to get them involved in the program and is trying to use their experiences to the advantage of the other students which helps them feel welcomed and appreciated for what they are as opposed to assimilating them into this group of traditional students.

—Rugaya Abaza

I feel that the honors program does, somewhat take care of its non-traditional students. I don't feel like they serve nontraditional students as well as traditional students, though. I work a full time, salary job. I can't make it to campus with one day notice in the middle of the day, I simply just can't! Calendars, deadlines, and due dates are all in the mix. More than a few days' notice of events will help so many nontraditional students.

—Ciara Hinds

(We do have honors events posted in several different places usually at least one week in advance; however, university events are sometimes communicated close to the dates because that is when we get them.)

I do not believe the Honors Program serves nontraditional students as well as the traditional. The main reason for this is time. From my personal experience, there are many things that I would have liked to taken advantage of, but I do not have the time. In my opinion, one of the main benefits of being in the honors program is being able to socialize with future tops of the industries. Of the few honor students I know, I see them putting too much time and effort, going above and beyond, to just settle for being another employee.

I see the program aimed mostly at students who live on campus. It gives them the most opportunities, but I also believe that they have the most time to take advantage.

I do not feel there is much that could be done to change the program for the nontraditional student. Instead to take full advantage of the program, the nontraditional student needs to change to become more like the traditional student.

—Tim Dow

Nontraditional students probably don't get as much out of the program as traditional students (though, since I've never been one, this is just a guess), just as I doubt they get as much out of the other programs. Because they're not on campus as much, or as regularly, they tend to be less aware of the on-campus resources. Even when they are, such resources are noticeably less convenient to use (I could walk over to the ATTIC for tutoring any time I'm not in class, a non-traditional student might have to make an extra trip to the school at an inconvenient time).

—Timothy Sassone

I believe that the honors program does serves all students the same as a way to further our higher education and show others later that we will go the extra mile.

—Nigel Bradley

We're educated to become hard working individuals who are respectable in our work places, but I feel as if the honors program is guilt tripping me to step away from my 30 hour/week job in order to complete tasks that it deems necessary for us to later obtain good jobs. In my eyes, working experiences that display key qualities will carry over on a resume better than a signed off sheet showing that we were part of such-and-such organization and helped with such-and-such events.

For the traditional students living on campus, I see no reason why they should be neglecting to help out and take part. But for the non-traditional students, I feel as if they deserve more time to adapt to our country and/or their busier schedules without feeling obligate to add more to their already full plate.

—Michael Hallock

While I think that the university as well as the honors program is trying to accommodate the schedules and complexities of nontraditional students, there are some things that could use improvement. Most importantly for me is the timing of events. There are always events that are planned in the evening throughout the week which are pretty

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tough for me to return to school to attend. Many of them I have actually had a vested interest in attending. Not to mention that these events go towards honors volunteering hours as well. But my evenings already have to be split between getting all of my homework done along with my children's homework/projects, dinner, sports practices, etc. I do like the fact that I can get credit for the tons of volunteering that I have always done at the kids' school and within the non-SPSU community. These things are equally as important to me!

—Teyanna Henry