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Fall 2006

A View from the Shoulders

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Otero, Rosalie, "A View from the Shoulders" (2006). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council -- Online Archive*. 18.

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ROSALIE C. OTERO

A View from the Shoulders

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“If I have seen farther than others it is because I was standing on the shoulders of giants.”

—Isaac Newton

So, you have been asked to administer the honors program at your institution. You have no idea what it means since, for the past fifteen years, you have been teaching three sections of English composition and literature courses each semester. No one tells you that overnight you will have to become a public relations guru, an expert in planning and organization, a specialist in stretching a meager budget, a top-notch communicator and consensus builder, an effective fundraiser, and an authority on honors education.

Most honors administrators receive no training. They are generally thrown in to sink or swim. In some cases, administrators have served a stint as department chair, which certainly helps. The NCHC has, for many years, provided some training through Beginning in Honors© and Developing in Honors. Very often these conference workshops are the only training that honors administrators get. However, as important and valuable as these workshops may be, they are often fragmented, and folks hear important information only once. The Developing in Honors workshop makes some attempt at building a sequential accumulation of knowledge or skills, but again, much of the training depends on the topics offered at any given conference. Also, given the limitations of rooms and times, we cannot attend every session.

A further challenge to new honors administrators is that no single leadership quality accounts adequately for all of the dimensions of successful performance, and no single set of administrative or supervisory skills will solve every problem facing honors administrators today. So, why are some honors administrators more successful than others? In some cases, persistence and longevity seem to be the key to growing and strengthening honors at a given institution, but then again we have all had experience with administrators who occupy their position for years without any tangible progress or change. New Mexico had a governor once who kept getting elected, and the consensus seemed to be that, although he was not effective in making important changes for the state, at least he did not do any harm.

Once someone is appointed administrator of honors, that person will, of course, confront issues concerning admissions, curriculum, and staffing that

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require immediate attention. Building support for honors is not something an effective administrator does only when time allows. It should be at the forefront of the job. The skills required by administrators to gain support must include an understanding of the political climate of their institution and the patience to visit with various people on campus. The methods used by those successful politicians who build a support base in the community are not that different from those used by successful honors administrators: they become informed, listen carefully, and respond appropriately to the needs of the honors community.

Honors administrators build support by connecting and communicating with their constituents. The art of communication has many dimensions. Any message coming from honors is, for better or worse, a communication that can ultimately influence somebody's attitude. Although we often rely on newsletters, brochures, annual reports, flyers, and, of course, email messages, these can have only limited impact on attitudes. For one thing, producing a written document with universal appeal to all constituents is difficult. Moreover, sociological research has shown that the written word is rarely persuasive at all except to a small segment of people. Written documents do, however, reinforce seeds planted by other means. Hearsay is often very helpful, too. I had a student stop me recently to ask how he could get on the honors listserv. He had heard that I sent funny messages and felt he was missing out. I don't know how amusing my messages are, but I do know that frequently sending short but important messages helps to keep the students in the loop and engaged in honors.

Face-to-face communications are still the most effective means of getting our messages across, hence the seemingly endless meetings that we must attend. In the epigraph above by Isaac Newton, he was, of course, referring to all of the people who preceded him and whose knowledge and experience allowed him to make new discoveries. The quotation, however, can also apply to the people around us. We should involve others in the process of directing the honors program including students, faculty, staff, and alumni. Biweekly meetings with the faculty, attendance at honors students' events, and volunteering to serve on key university committees are some of the ways that we can have face-to-face contact with important constituents.

An honors student organization is an excellent way of staying in touch with the student body in the program. The students can be our best allies since they are, for the most part, assertive, bright, and serious about their education. Because they are involved in many other aspects of university life and because they are in contact with many more people than we can be, they can speak well about the honors program and about their positive experiences. They interact frequently with non-honors students and with non-honors

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faculty in their other courses and in organizations. Very often they are the leaders in these organizations and can influence a positive attitude toward the honors program. Through student efforts and recommendations I have received many proposals for Honors courses from faculty in many departments. This semester, for example, we have an outstanding mathematics professor who received the UNM Outstanding Teaching Award teaching “Math in the Modern World.”

Meeting frequently with faculty who are teaching honors courses keeps them informed and involved in honors activities. It is important to train faculty to teach honors seminars. I generally have a faculty orientation session in which we talk about issues such as ordinary housekeeping items (making copies, office hours, etc.) to expectations of both faculty and students and, of course, the mission and goals of the UNM Honors Program. During the semester, I set aside two hours on a Friday once a month to explore issues that may be of interest to faculty members. We have had sessions about liberal arts education, plagiarism and the internet, research, and service-learning. Unlike our full-time honors faculty, our adjunct faculty members come from several departments on campus and can be liaisons for honors within their departments.

Most honors programs have an advisory council. Our Council consists of faculty from a variety of units on campus and is sanctioned by the university’s faculty senate. Several years ago, I discontinued the practice of encouraging certain faculty, especially those I know well or like, to volunteer to serve on the Council. I have found that by allowing faculty to self-select, we end up with people who have little or no clue about honors but a real interest in learning and becoming involved. This strategy has given me an opportunity to educate these faculty members about the Honors Program and thereby gain allies. I can say with all honesty that the Council is not made up of only supporters of the UHP. That admixture goes a long way toward making the UNM Honors Program dynamic and legitimate in people’s eyes.

Having an advisory board composed of business people in the community and alumni of honors is also beneficial to the visibility and endorsement of the honors program. Currently we have on this committee a legislator who is an alumnus; an attorney from a prestigious law firm, who is also an alumnus; and an arts director who knows the community well. These people can speak to university administrators and others in the community the way that the director may not be able to do.

We also must not forget our alumni. They completed the program, and the majority of them had a great experience. They are in a position to speak powerfully about the value of honors in their lives. We must keep in touch

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with our alumni through newsletters or a listserv. We have a special Honors Alumni Open House event during Homecoming Week. We invite them to continue to be involved by serving on search committees or on our Board and by giving talks to individual classes or to the honors community. As a result of our ties to many of our alums, we have established an Honors Alumni Endowment. I feel confident that, should I need our alumni to support the Honors Program in a specific, important way, they will do so because they have done so in the past.

Often the most effective leaders are those who surround themselves with capable people. I cannot imagine trying to run an honors program by myself. Our staff, faculty, students, and advisors are an enormous help to our program. My job as Director has primarily been to build trust, communicate, reinforce, and encourage. These are attributes that good teachers have. So, if you have been teaching, you already have the most important skills for becoming a successful director. Most important, however, is to make the people around you know that they are at the very heart of things. Everyone should feel that they make a difference to the success of the honors program. Your responsibility becomes much easier when you realize that you have many shoulders on which to stand.

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