

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# Something Borrowed, Something New: Honors College Faculty and the Staffing of Honors Courses

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Among university instructors, faculty who teach in honors colleges—including those adjuncts whom honors directors and deans as well as universities increasingly rely upon to deliver much of their instruction—are typically the most fluid group on campus. There are good reasons for this fluidity and instability given the prevailing model for providing honors instruction in the U.S., which is borrowing faculty from other academic departments to teach honors classes. As the number of honors colleges in the U.S. increases, though, this fluidity is starting to disappear. With this rise in the number of honors colleges, the question of who teaches

honors college students may well have a significant impact on what honors is and what it could and will be.

Historically, securing faculty to teach in honors colleges has been a patchwork process, one that has utilized a wide range of currencies to seal these formal and informal teaching contracts. These arrangements include but are not limited to good faith relationships with different department heads and chairs, stipends to compensate individual departments for borrowing their faculty for a semester or longer, the appointment of honors fellows for extended periods of time, the prestige and departmental benefit of faculty teaching honors students, adjunct funding to bring qualified community members into the classroom, the teaching expertise and qualifications of honors staff, and the existing culture and traditions of an individual institution. Simply put, the range of these practices suggests that the instruction of what many believe are among the most motivated, brightest students on our campuses is often left to the whims of tradition, a university's overall culture, the persuasive power of an honors director or dean, or the annual size of an honors budget. Jesse Peters calls this the "beg, borrow, or steal" (33) method of procuring faculty for honors:

When the call for next semester's schedule came from the registrar, I would email and call department chairs and request that certain general education courses be offered as honors sections and ask for faculty to cover those. We also needed faculty to teach the interdisciplinary seminars that serve as our core curriculum. Even though I knew most of the chairs fairly well . . . , the process was not always smooth. Some said they could not spare anyone; some wanted to assign faculty they did not want to deal with themselves; some wanted adjuncts to teach the courses; some wanted to teach themselves; and some wanted to talk about opening the classes up to non-honors students. . . . Though I was technically in charge of the program, I had little or no authority to request specific faculty for honors courses. Every faculty assignment was a complex negotiation, one that did not always work to the program's advantage. (33–34)

Whether or not this scenario resonates with every honors administrator, all would agree that the ways in which honors courses are staffed varies significantly among institutions.

Honors administrators and staff very often contribute to honors instruction, and in many programs and colleges, they function out of necessity as a baseline honors faculty. In cases where the honors staff is small or values this arrangement, some or all of its members, including the director or dean, may teach honors courses on top of their other duties. Programs and colleges with larger staffs may task a subset of members, such as academic advisors, to deliver the same courses. For example, programs and colleges with curricula incorporating a senior thesis may rely on their directors or deans to oversee this requirement and to deliver any associated instruction if that administrator is the only qualified faculty or staff member, whereas a dedicated faculty or staff coordinator may be responsible for this work on larger staffs. Depending upon the composition of their student bodies and their own workload, honors administrators and staff may also teach courses in their fields of specialization. For example, the director or dean who is a statistician by training might teach the occasional thematic seminar on big data. Most commonly, though, honors staff members with academic credentials across a variety of disciplines are called upon to deliver any of a series of in-house honors courses. Beyond those courses that fall under the exclusive purview of the honors program or college, faculty arrangements become ever more variable.

Certainly, the cultures and traditions of specific institutions play a role in determining how honors courses are likely to be selected and staffed. At some large institutions, honors education may be relatively decentralized with academic departments offering honors sections of their courses more or less at will, with or without input from the honors office (of which there may also be more than one), even though the National Collegiate Honors Council's "Shared Principles and Practices of Honors Education" urges institutions that possess departmental honors to assign "coordinating responsibility over those offerings" to the honors program or college because "those pathways may be difficult for

students to navigate without such central oversight” (4). In addition to the robust slate of honors seminars offered by the Hutton Honors College at Indiana University, Bloomington, for instance, “schools and departments on campus offer honors course opportunities as well as honors notations at the school, department, or major level on the transcript” (“School and Departmental Honors programs”). The extent to which faculty teaching honors sections of courses intersect with the central honors college in such situations is, of course, also variable. At other large institutions, one honors program or, more often, college might employ its own faculty members who exclusively (or almost exclusively) teach honors sections of general education courses in which honors students are required to enroll. This arrangement is the case at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where honors college students choose from “an exclusive array of advanced, thought-provoking courses—in place of UNLV’s standard general education requirements” (“Program Overview”). Alternatively, such dedicated honors faculty may teach specialized honors core courses. At Arizona State University’s Barrett, the Honors College, “the Barrett faculty are forty-six scholars across five campuses, all of whom are exclusively dedicated to honors education” (“Honors Faculty at Barrett”). A similar model is in place at the University of Utah, where a corps of a dozen or so faculty deliver the four honors college core courses (Torti).

Midsized and smaller institutions with relatively small and/or disciplinarily diverse honors populations may prefer to contract with academic departments to offer a more restrained slate of honors courses consistent with their enrollments and enrollment management priorities. In a decentralized honors model, the degree to which the honors program or college can influence the selection of faculty for such agreed-upon courses could be limited; alternatively, in a centralized honors model—and with sufficient institutional buy-in—each term’s honors courses could be selected via a proposal process that would afford the program or college a comparatively high level of influence over faculty selection. More generally, where honors courses are to some extent predictable, relationships are likely to develop among the honors program or college, the chairs of the various academic departments, and the faculty.

At the University of Nevada, Reno, both models have been in use through the years. For many years a stable rotation of general education honors courses was aligned with the institution's core curriculum requirements, but the honors college has recently transitioned away from a fixed slate of courses to a course proposal process that allows for courses at any level to be proposed as honors sections. The former model had the advantage of predictability for the college and for the faculty involved in delivering the courses. For students, however, that predictability translated into boredom because of the lack of variety in honors course offerings. The much greater curricular variety of the new proposal-based model engages students, but the college must also devote more time to soliciting proposals from faculty to ensure that a sufficient number of proposals are submitted and that the courses proposed support its curricular priorities.

Honors programs and colleges that borrow faculty from academic departments to deliver honors courses are beholden to the chairs of the respective departments. Many honors directors and deans expend a significant amount of energy building and maintaining good faith arrangements with chairs in order to facilitate offering honors courses, despite the caution in NCHC's "Shared Principles and Practices of Honors Education" that honors should "not depend on the good will and energy of particular faculty members or administrators for survival" (6). Such arrangements may or may not involve monetary compensation to the departments either as an incentive to chairs or to offset lost instructional capacity, or to the individual faculty members in the form of in-load or overload pay. In cases where stipends of one kind or another are offered to departments, the level of compensation is equally variable; it may be calibrated based upon the instructional units or credit hours represented by the course (e.g., \$1,000 per unit) or based upon the cost of the faculty member's time according to institutional instructional buyout scales (e.g., 12% of the base salary per course) or other related metrics. At the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, the honors college compensates departments lending their faculty to teach honors seminars with both replacement funds to hire adjuncts to teach the courses the faculty would have taught for

the department as well as funds to be used at the department head's discretion.

Within academic departments, too, the ways in which faculty are commissioned to teach honors courses are legion. In some departments, the honors section(s) may be prime teaching assignments reserved for the most accomplished or the most senior professors. In others, they may be leveraged as carrots offered to junior faculty members or even advanced graduate students—instructors who can develop as teachers in the honors setting where, at a minimum, they will have fewer students to contend with and where they may also have more freedom to develop original courses. If honors sections are offered on a recurring basis, there may even be an established rotation among faculty or, perhaps less ideally, a lottery system for distributing the honors courses. These sorts of arrangements are often the only ones that are financially viable for honors programs and colleges with fewer resources, but they carry certain disadvantages for honors administrators insofar as they afford minimal influence over honors instruction and hinder assessment efforts. This situation can lead to a scenario in which a faculty member who is not particularly strong in the honors classroom is consistently assigned to an honors course. In such a situation, the only recourse available to the honors program or college may be to risk giving offense and losing the course altogether by requesting that a different instructor be assigned to the course.

At the other end of the spectrum, the development of such standing arrangements with departments, to the extent that they involve specific, effective faculty members, can result in the development of a strong *de facto* honors faculty over time. In such cases, faculty members may function as honorary honors “fellows” with the understanding on campus being that Professors X and Y teach in the honors program or college on an ongoing basis either instead of or in addition to their other teaching duties. Again, at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, such a situation exists with the English department; one creative writing professor has taught the freshman foundational honors course, Honors Humanities, for over thirty years. This work accounts for two-thirds of that faculty

member's course load, but no additional compensation has ever been provided to either the instructor or the department. At institutions where honors education is valued highly or where such customary arrangements have been in place, academic departments may collaborate with the honors program or college without the exchange of funds because the benefit to those departments of the prestige associated with participating in honors education is sufficient to ensure their continued participation. The ability for faculty members to identify themselves as, for example, honors-affiliated faculty on their CVs and departmental websites may be a powerful motivator. The inverse situation, in which well-resourced departments opt to offer honors sections of their courses at no cost to the honors program or college, is comparable, but slightly less advantageous insofar as it puts the honors program or college in the politically trickier position of either graciously accepting or refusing cost-neutral instructional support, whether or not the curriculum and pedagogy of those departmental sections are aligned with approaches in the honors program or college.

More formalized affiliate honors faculty or faculty fellow arrangements are also increasingly prevalent. In such instances, honors faculty may be appointed for a set period—say, two years—to deliver a specific number of honors courses, potentially in addition to honors service commitments such as sitting on an admissions or scholarship committee. At Florida Gulf Coast University, for example, honors faculty fellows “teach the equivalent of six credits for the Honors College per academic year as part of their assigned annual teaching duties [and . . .] are appointed for three-year terms” (“Honors Fellows”); these appointees also have a service expectation and may serve as research mentors, recruiters, or in other participatory honors roles. At Ball State University, the Ball Brothers Foundation Honors College Faculty Fellows are supported by an endowment. The two-year fellowships “provide a means by which successful and creative faculty can partner with the Honors College for a fixed term to benefit the Fellow’s professional agenda, to benefit the students directly impacted by the Fellow, and to further the greater work of the Honors College” (“2021–2023

Ball Brothers Foundation”). This program incorporates a strong focus on student and faculty research as “the Fellow benefits by having the opportunity to pursue interdisciplinary scholarship and research opportunities possible only in partnership with [the] Honors College” and “the students benefit by access to a novel partnership” (“2021–2023 Ball Brothers Foundation”). In general, faculty affiliate initiatives help the honors program or college build relationships with other academic units while providing additional instructional stability. Fellows returning to their home units are uniquely positioned to be liaisons to honors and to bring additional faculty into the fold.

An advantage of the affiliate faculty model is that it can help programs and colleges skirt some of the definitional issues associated with the creation of an honors faculty. Temporary, or at least not permanent, honors faculty arrangements can offer a high level of consistency to the honors program or college without stirring up territorial or logistical disputes over faculty within other academic units. Depending upon the specific compensation mechanism in place, such arrangements may also be advantageous to the departments loaning their faculty. If an honors program or college has the means to offset the lost instructional capacity and funding for a department or to compensate faculty members either by paying a portion of their salary or providing overload pay, then the situation is a win-win. If the honors budget is leaner, however, the faculty member may still enjoy the perks of delivering honors courses, but the department chair may view the arrangement as unsustainable or, worse, unfair.

One way for honors colleges to sidestep the minor departmental squabbles that come with the territory in borrowing faculty is to hire qualified community members as adjunct instructors. Although such hires are not without their own administrative hurdles, on many campuses they are significantly less complicated and/or less closely monitored, providing maximum flexibility. Additionally, because honors curricula typically embrace both interdisciplinarity and inclusivity of diverse populations, engaging local artists or community and business leaders to deliver courses



tailored to honors students' unique interests enables the program or college to provide a boutique experience and expose its students to a more diverse faculty group at a minimal cost. Of course, while some community members may appreciate the opportunity to work with the best and brightest young students and be relatively unconcerned with the compensation involved, it remains important for honors directors and deans to carefully consider their reliance—or overreliance, as the case may be—on contingent faculty. Although honors education is nimble by comparison with many other disciplines, its positive capacity for flexibility can sometimes be used as a justification for preserving disadvantageous temporary faculty arrangements. That is, to the extent that an honors college wishes to advocate for dedicated honors faculty, the ease with which it can recruit temporary instructors may be taken as an indication that depending on contingent labor is a sustainable practice over the long term.

Making the jump from an honors faculty characterized by many arrangements of varying stability to a permanent one—a process that is often a corollary to the move from honors program to college—presents its own unique challenges. Perhaps most notable among these is the lack of understanding among some faculty and administrators of how an honors college might support its own faculty or, indeed, why it would need or wish to do so. Questions raised along these lines often focus on how a dedicated honors faculty would fit into the institution as a whole (i.e., if we hire a composition professor for honors, how will the English department react?) and navigate the vagaries of tenure and promotion in honors. One of the great strengths of honors education is its capacity for interdisciplinarity, and yet, in the realm of institutionalizing a set cadre of honors faculty, this asset can become the square peg that does not quite fit in the round hole of university histories, policies, and practices.

Nevertheless, the rise and maturation of the honors college movement in the U.S. does seem to be having a clear effect on the stability of honors faculty. According to a census completed in 2016, over two thirds of all honors programs and colleges at that time

utilized a “borrowing” model; four in five honors colleges borrowed faculty from other units to which the faculty reported (Scott et al. 202). Only 14% of all honors faculty reported to the head of honors, and only two in five honors colleges participating in that survey had faculty who reported to the head of their honors college (Scott et al. 202). In a more recent survey of honors colleges conducted in 2021, 42 out of 158 or 26.6% of the colleges surveyed indicated that they had their own dedicated faculty lines, although despite this increase, dedicated staff lines are still much more prevalent—141 out of 158 universities with honors colleges—or 89.2% of the total honors colleges participating (Cognard-Black and Smith 64). The number of honors colleges offering tenure to faculty within honors has also increased: only 8.3% of the participating colleges offered tenure in 2016 versus 9.4% or 15 out of 159 honors colleges in 2021 (Scott et al. 205; Cognard-Black and Smith 64). Given that tenure for faculty is a sign of additional job security, honors colleges do seem to be gradually increasing the stability of the ranks of honors faculty.

It is possible that simply by increasing the number of dedicated honors faculty within a university’s honors unit, honors administrators are redefining our work on the most basic level, solidifying what has often been fluid in our classrooms. In the fourth edition of *Beginning in Honors*, Samuel Schuman argues for increased stability among honors course staffing:

Sometimes the first faculty hired wholly within an honors program or college are part-time, non-tenure-track appointments, sometimes spousal hires. The quality of instruction provided by such individuals can be very high. Over time, however, if the honors college is to have an equivalent status to other collegiate units within the university, it needs to be hiring faculty on the same contractual basis as those units, if it is to hire them at all. That means evolving towards full-time, tenurable positions. (27)

But Schuman concedes on this point moments later when he notes: “It is always important, too, not to give the appearance of developing some sort of elite and closed cadre of honors instruction. *New*

*instructors should regularly be urged to consider joining the program; rotation, rather than permanence, should be the staffing rule*" (29; our emphasis). Whether honors courses should be staffed by set faculty who reliably and ably teach them semester after semester, or whether those courses should offer existing faculty across campus the opportunity to experiment in the honors classrooms while exposing more of them to honors students is a quandary worthy of discussion. As Richard Badenhausem has noted, hiring dedicated honors faculty is "one way to protect" an honors entity's economy given that these employees offer stability to the college's ability to offer its curriculum as well as putting "a human face on potential budget cut-backs" (21). While the argument about whether instructor stability is better or worse for any given honors college will undoubtedly continue, if the move to hire more faculty specifically in honors and to provide more of them with a path to tenure in those honors colleges continues to gain momentum, then certainly that development will play a large part in the kinds of colleges honors administrators create.

In addition to the inevitable administrative hurdles to hiring faculty, the challenge of promoting an esprit de corps among the members of an honors faculty remains. Just as any faculty member might identify primarily with an academic discipline ("I'm a professor of theater") or with the institution ("I teach at a small liberal arts college"), it is possible to imagine several potential identifications among honors faculty. While one honors faculty member might feel the greatest allegiance to honors ("I'm an honors chemistry professor"), another might feel a greater affinity to a discipline ("I'm a chemistry professor who primarily teaches honors courses"). Honors faculty identity, owing to the influence of some of the customary currencies and institutional practices discussed above, is likely to be idiosyncratic.

Faculty members whose appointments are split, for example, will necessarily identify with the units that claim a share of their time, but the ways in which they do so may be more or less predictable. At the University of New Mexico, professors hired jointly with academic units beyond the honors college have sometimes

elected to join those other units full-time following promotion and tenure (Donovan).<sup>1</sup> Intriguingly, these faculty departures have not always conformed to disciplinary stereotypes. Whereas a hire from a humanities or social science field might seem like the safe bet given the preponderance of honors administrators hailing from those disciplines, at New Mexico, hires from natural science fields have sometimes shown great dedication to honors, even in the face of such temptations as lab space that another unit might have been better positioned to provide (Donovan). Hiring committees may be able to sniff out and pass on candidates who are attracted to honors primarily as a stepping stone to tenure. In fact, this concern will likely be an important aspect of their deliberations, but they will not be able to do so categorically. Moreover, individual faculty members' professional priorities may shift over time and be absent of any nefarious intentions. No matter where the allegiances of a faculty in a shared line may fall, those professors inevitably get caught up in the service demands of two units; honors deans need to be prepared to address any questions of equity that arise.

In cases where honors faculty are appointed solely within the honors college, the question of their standing (if any) with regard to their "home" discipline remains a potentially thorny one. Many prospective faculty members may wish to maintain those ties, especially if candidates have training, for example, in a field in which an institution is well respected. Others may be itching to cut them: the well-pedigreed physicist who, at the end of a postdoctoral fellowship, realizes that they have no further desire to conduct research but are passionate about teaching may be attracted by a teaching-focused, tenure-track position in an honors college. Honors colleges should be prepared to provide candidates with specific information on how closely (or how distantly) related they should expect to be with units outside of honors. In the interest of being good stewards of honors faculty, deans might need to consider whether a siloed honors college puts honors faculty who later leave the college at a disadvantage in finding employment elsewhere. Apart from those faculty members who might depart to take up an honors director or dean position that carries tenure, would tenure in honors translate to tenure in another discipline at another institution?

Faculty identity in honors is the focus of two published discussions of the development of an honors faculty culture within an honors college. In “Implementing Honors Faculty Status: An Adventure in Academic Politics,” Jesse Peters details how both visibility and viability for teaching in honors increased shortly after he assumed the deanship of the University of North Carolina Pembroke Honors College in 2005. Utilizing the prevailing culture at his institution, Peters worked to establish an honors faculty status for those interested in teaching honors that paralleled the institution’s practice for graduate faculty status. At that time, the results were promising:

The new process of achieving honors faculty status established public and formal recognition for the faculty who were already interested in working with honors students and teaching honors courses. It has also aided in the recruiting of highly motivated and skilled faculty to teach honors courses. I have noticed a marked increase in faculty participation in honors social and co-curricular activities, helping us to forge an even stronger honors community on campus. Since the faculty are formally and officially linked with the program, I also see more energy dedicated to curriculum development and teaching innovation. I have a much easier time recruiting faculty mentors for honors projects, and the honors faculty seem to have a much keener interest in the academic progress of honors students in general. (Peters 37)

“Establishing an honors faculty,” Peters contends, “is one step towards addressing the academic marginalization which can be common for honors programs” (38). This is exactly the kind of impact that an honors college may well have on any given campus.

Utilizing the model of the preceptor—a faculty member who guides discussion and interacts with students in a generally smaller setting than an entire class—Charlie Slavin collaborated with the dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and the provost at the University of Maine to hire four such positions and begin to create a defined teaching community for its honors college. The published account, written jointly by the two existing preceptors,

the four new preceptors hired that year, and the dean, provides a 360° view of this transformation of the college via the creation of an honors faculty body and identity (Glover et al.). Focused on the value of interdisciplinarity in honors and in these positions, the authors hold that “various perspectives illustrate the difficulties and possibilities endemic to this faculty formation and collectively belie the assumption that faculty members necessarily best cohere around a single discipline and familiar professional constructs” (Glover et al. 193). Developing a discrete group of honors faculty members, however it is achieved, has the potential to more visibly seat honors within the center of a university and to further the growth of interdisciplinary work and teaching on a campus, growth that is often very difficult given the siloed nature of many, if not most, academic units in U.S. universities and colleges today.

Of course, the question of who is best suited to teach honors students is one that has appeared numerous times in the literature. In “Defining Honors Culture,” Slavin distills the essence of instructors in honors to two key components: faculty who are willing to take intellectual risks and faculty who are self-selective in joining the honors community—who are there, in other words, because they *want* to be (16–18). For Slavin, these traits are not relegated to either students or faculty but pertain to both groups:

Students choose to accept our invitations or apply for admission to honors; they aren’t forced to do so. . . . Likewise, faculty choose to teach honors courses or to be part of an honors faculty. An honors culture that was not based on this idea of self-selection—among qualified candidates, of course—would not foster the intellectual risk-taking that I perceive to be at the heart of honors. (17)

Similarly, in the Netherlands, Marca V. C. Wolfensberger focuses on the qualities that honors students look for in faculty and honors courses and distills these to three: “autonomy, competence, and relatedness” (“Qualities” 57). A follow-up study highlights again that “honours students’ evaluation of their academic environment indicates a high level of intrinsic motivation” and that, compared with non-honors students, “honours students place higher value

on having teachers who are demanding, challenging, and inspiring than non-honors students” (Wolfensberger and Offringa 180, 177). Wolfensberger’s “Six Habits of Highly Inspiring Honors Teachers” further emphasizes what she and her team have found are the key elements in successful honors instruction: being authentic as a teacher, having the courage to go against the grain in the honors classroom, being challenging, investing in relationships with students, showing intellectual passion to their students, and “living the dream” or realizing all these traits in the honors classroom. As Wolfensberger notes, “Honors education is an excellent way to help faculty sharpen their interests in pedagogical innovation, reorient themselves to a refreshing student-centered philosophy of outstanding teaching and learning, and achieve the best education for everybody” (“Six Habits” 111). Other researchers have also found that a high level of engagement with their students among honors faculty members is desirable (Miller et al. 13).

Honors faculty still must be found, though, and according to Rocky Dailey, this means finding those instructors whose identity most closely matches what is valued in honors: “Academic identity can combine teaching and non-teaching activities into one identity, and honors teaching is a special subset where this combined identity is perhaps especially important in attracting the right students” (152). Dailey found that faculty teaching in honors most prized their ability to work with these students and create interesting experiences in the classroom for them; they also indicated that they had a great deal of autonomy in the classroom and that they largely saw themselves as mentors in the classroom (170, 182). Faculty with less experience in the classroom often had the most teaching experience in honors, “indicating that teaching quality is valued over quantity and that an experienced educator might not be a good fit for an honors program” (Dailey 184). Dailey encourages directors of honors programs to be wary of faculty who look to honors for an “easier” teaching gig and to focus on faculty development when recruiting honors faculty. Indeed, one of the things Cheryl Achterberg notes was added to their overall programmatic activities when the honors program at Pennsylvania State University converted to an honors college in 2004 was a slate of faculty

development seminars (89). In keeping with this idea, Hanne ten Berge and Rob van der Vaart recount the details of an honors teaching course developed by the Center of Excellence in University Teaching at Utrecht University in 2011, a course based on the three key principals of honors pedagogy articulated elsewhere by Wolfensberger and Offringa: “creation of a learning community, substantial freedom for the learners within a structured context, and academic challenge” (Berge and Vaart 62). Noting that faculty who have finished the course realize that honors “is largely about moving ‘out of your comfort zone,’” Ten Berge and Van der Vaart emphasize again that what seems to be true for the honors student is also true for the honors faculty member. Milton Cox also focuses on the theme of community among faculty in honors in his description of a faculty learning community focused on honors. It is interesting, if not revealing, that the traits of an honors student are mirrored in a good honors faculty member and that the existence and health of a community of honors faculty may well be as significant a factor in the success of that college as the health of the community of its students.

Perhaps the single largest cultural and institutional shift prompted by the growth of the honors college movement and its faculty is the institution of tenure within honors itself rather than within a conventional disciplinary area or department. Although tenure is currently under threat in some quarters, since 1995 when Rosalie Otero was the first faculty member in the United States to be tenured in honors, tenure in honors has become more prevalent. And as honors colleges craft their own bylaws and populate their own promotion and tenure committees, the question of *how* to promote and tenure faculty in honors colleges—a path that looks quite different from campus to campus, if not different at different times on the *same* campus—becomes a relevant one for what it means to *be* a college in the first place.

An essay based on Otero’s own experience, “Tenure and Promotion in Honors” is the first and perhaps still the most comprehensive public document detailing the process of and necessary assumptions underlying the granting of tenure in an honors college.



Relying most emphatically on the interdisciplinary nature of the University of New Mexico's then-honors program (now an honors college), Otero stakes out the territory of and tenets beneath this process as it was instituted and as it has been carried forward at that institution. Central to her argument is the idea that joint appointments for faculty, particularly honors faculty, are deeply problematic for the faculty members themselves and do not ensure professional success for those professors.<sup>2</sup> The greatest significance of Otero's case, though, is in the answers it provides to two key and persistent questions regarding offering tenure to faculty in honors: Should tenure exist within an honors college, and, if so, what should the criteria be for achieving it?

In almost every case, the first priority for gaining tenure within honors is teaching. At New Mexico, "faculty are expected to focus primarily on undergraduate teaching" although "quality scholarship and/or creative work is also considered essential for tenure in the Honors College," according to the *Promotion and Tenure Handbook* (University of New Mexico Honors College). At the University of Central Arkansas, "teaching and high-quality interaction between faculty and students continue to be hallmarks of the Schedler Honors College"; it then follows that "the evaluation of teaching is the most important measure of candidates' appropriate progress toward tenure, promotion, and advancement" (Norbert O. Schedler Honors College 2–3). Excellent teaching in honors, though, does not simply equate to high course evaluations but extends into the area of pedagogical experimentation and growth. Honors teaching, for example, often involves interdisciplinary courses as well as team-taught ones. The willingness to explore beyond the boundaries of a particular academic discipline is one of the hallmarks of honors education and, indeed, is featured in many, if not most, honors colleges' curricula.

Research in honors—which covers a broader swath of intellectual engagement than is permitted in most academic units—is a vital requirement for honors faculty and one of the primary reasons to award tenure within an honors college rather than in a faculty member's disciplinary home. At the University of Maine, the

category of “research” includes work undertaken with undergraduates and the publication of that research in, say, a co-authored essay, as well as research focusing on honors education itself. According to the *Honors College Promotion and Tenure Criteria* of the University of Maine Honors College, the following activities are counted toward the area of research in the tenure process: “research and scholarship that engages undergraduate students, work aimed at enhancing Honors pedagogy, scholarship focusing on Honors education, and work within one’s own discipline” (2).

The research of faculty members in their discipline is, of course, key to the research expectations for honors tenure-track faculty, but the tenure requirements in an honors college also credit research that is often overlooked because it falls beyond the narrowly defined boundaries of a particular discipline. The Schedler Honors College offers helpful language regarding the nature of scholarship within honors. There, the interdisciplinarity of honors translates to encouraging honors faculty to explore different modes of research:

While some faculty may choose to work solely in research and others may choose to work solely on creative endeavors, some faculty may choose to work in both areas. In this instance, faculty should not be penalized for a lack of focus. Instead, the unique nature of the scholar/artist should be recognized, and appropriate credit should be given in both areas. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the Honors College, it is expected that interdisciplinary scholarship will be given the same weight in tenure considerations as discipline-specific scholarship. (Norbert O. Schedler 4)

Granting tenure to faculty members in honors allows the research efforts of professors to benefit their discipline while also directly benefiting their undergraduate students and the work of honors education on the campus at large.

Honors faculty typically engage extensively in service activities. The University of New Mexico Honors College “demands an extraordinary amount of service from assistant professors” who “normally take part in many activities related to building a strong community of scholars and active members of a broader community

of citizens” (2.3). Noting that the service of faculty there must be “respected and weighed accordingly,” the University of New Mexico Honors College *Promotion and Tenure Handbook* explains its significance in honors education:

Teaching and scholarship are augmented by a range of service responsibilities and activities orchestrated to enhance education: from lectures and events in the community to recruiting that takes place throughout the academic year to the full round of College and University committee work necessary to the functioning of the institution. The Honors College considers this range of service to be vital to the unique form and high quality of education in our community. (2.3)

The language in the University of New Mexico Honors College handbook has been adopted by other honors colleges, including the Schedler Honors College (University of Central Arkansas) and the Frederik Meijer Honors College (Grand Valley State University). Such borrowings underscore the broad relevance of its description of the role of service and leadership in honors education nationwide.

How honors colleges have been able to establish tenure within their own units, though, tells a different kind of story about definition: while a unit may be able to clearly delineate what an honors faculty member would need to do in order to earn tenure in an honors college, the explanation of why tenure should be offered in honors at that institution in the first place hits at the core of how honors is identified by that institution versus how it may be self-identified there. Indeed, if these identifications do not align, convincing a university’s or college’s executive administrators of the necessity of offering tenure in the honors college rather than in the faculty member’s disciplinary home department may be difficult. And the questions this situation can raise are significant. Does offering tenure in an honors college at a university suggest that honors is indeed its own discipline, separate and apart from that of a faculty member’s doctorate-granting disciplinary home? Does an honors college’s offering of an honors major constitute reason enough for tenure to exist there? Can offering tenure in an

honors college address the practical concerns of offering authority and permanence to a faculty member whose daily workload is strikingly different from that of a faculty member in a more traditional academic department? And if tenure is instituted within an honors college, does the tenure necessarily imply a redirection of the purpose of honors on that campus: away from a unit offering exploration and experimentation to an ever-changing faculty who choose to teach there to something more rigid, more narrowly defined? How honors college administrators answer these questions will certainly in part determine if and how the definition and institutionalization of honors will change over time.

While dictating how set an honors faculty should be in any given honors college is not our place, several best practices are apparent. Because the size and function of honors on a given campus varies so much, suggesting that all honors colleges need the same kind of faculty structure would be inappropriate. Some honors colleges may serve a campus mightily by offering honors as a place for faculty in other departments to explore new pedagogies and to create new courses they may not be able to in their home departments, with the hope they will bring those discoveries back to their home departments. Some honors operations may require a volume of coursework that can only be effectively delivered by a strong corps of dedicated honors faculty. Other campuses may be primarily and inadvertently driving undergraduate research via honors contracts in departmental courses that require no specific honors faculty whatsoever. Whatever the case, we do see three key practices regarding faculty in honors as instrumental to success.

First, honors colleges need to have steady and reliable access to faculty best suited to teaching in honors. Although specific needs will vary, these are necessarily faculty who privilege working on research with undergraduates; are willing to step out of their comfort zone and try new strategies in the classroom; and will challenge but also support their students, allowing them the opportunity to take intellectual risks with relative impunity. Faculty in honors need to be willing and interested participants in the community that honors inevitably builds and prioritizes; securing faculty from

underrepresented populations is obviously also key to this initiative given what they can uniquely offer all our honors students. For many institutions, offering tenure to full-time honors faculty within the honors college may be the best way to ensure such dedication and, in turn, guarantee honors students that they will have a committed and stable core of honors-specific mentors on whom they can depend.

Second, and related to the first practice, honors deans or directors need to have the primary say in who teaches for their colleges. This autonomy can be managed in a range of ways, including offering faculty on campus the opportunity to submit proposals for honors seminars that honors deans and directors, in consultation with their advisory committees, select; creating and selecting an identifiable and highly visible body of faculty on the campus who are approved to teach in honors; generating agreements with individual departments regarding how faculty will be selected to teach honors sections or ongoing honors foundational courses; garnering the necessary budget to compensate departments when reimbursement is advisable and possible; initiating an honors fellow or affiliate program on the campus that commits faculty members for extended periods of time to teach in honors; initiating an honors faculty status application process that essentially approves faculty to teach in honors at whatever time they are able and whenever the college needs them; running internal, regional, or national searches for honors-specific faculty to be housed in, funded by, committed to, and, ideally, tenured by the honors college in question. Again, as honors administrators strive to bolster the diversity and inclusion efforts in their own colleges, being able to attract faculty of color and other underrepresented groups is another crucial element of this endeavor.

Finally, heads of honors colleges should prioritize faculty development in their own area and by working with all relevant units on campus. Examples include offering workshops to the entire campus or mentoring new assistant professors in the honors college that hired them—and everything in between. Honors administrators must find ways to introduce faculty to one another to encourage

interdisciplinary teaching, generating opportunities for faculty to share ideas, concerns, and thoughts about educating honors students. Offering professional development sessions can help faculty better do what we want them to in honors when they do teach there: integrate undergraduate research at every course level, utilize ongoing revision practices to encourage students to learn by failing, increase the overall inclusivity of the honors community and more effectively extend that inclusion to its diverse members, travel with students, mentor students in long-term research projects such as an honors thesis, stretch beyond their own disciplinary perimeters, and experiment with innovative pedagogical practices such as various kinds of experiential education, design thinking, creative research processes, and service learning. Honors students are not born; they are made via our instruction, advisement, and overall encouragement. Surely it is no different for our faculty: instructors need the opportunity, resources, knowledge, and support to be able to carry on the ever-transforming, ever-transformative mission of honors education.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Broader considerations related to the state of the academic job market and growing inequities among academic disciplines must be considered by honors deans wishing to avoid increasing the precarity of such up-and-coming faculty.

<sup>2</sup>The significance of Otero's discussion, as well as her own experience and example of leadership, is evident in other discussions of advocacy for and from honors faculty themselves. An experienced veteran of honors composition instruction, Annmarie Guzy has written eloquently and frequently about the need to offer greater support to faculty teaching in honors ("Can Faculty Afford Honors?" and "Faculty Compensation and Course Assessment in Honors Composition"). Jayda Coons offers her own call to action in "A Different Kind of Agitation," noting that we should not spend our time advocating a certifying or credentialing process in honors; rather, she believes we need to "agitate on behalf of university faculty" (55) and to resist "the movement toward greater bureaucracy"

(54) rather than find new ways to join it. Coons continues: “While the burden is not on honors educators to fix the colossal issue of exploited and contingent labor, our ethical responsibility as participants within the educational system is to advocate, resist, imagine, and inform” (55).

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