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The Myth of an Honors Education

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It is my nature to come at the question of honors from an idealistic perspective. I willingly admit that from the outset. However, as a student affairs professional I strive for balance in thought and in practice. I intend, through this manuscript, to provide a comprehensive, thoughtful look at the institutional commitment to honors tracks in higher education. Hence I explore, first, the controversial questions surrounding honors admissions policies. In addition, I look at the discrepancies that exist between the privileges afforded to honors students versus non-honors students. I believe these two issues challenge all honors administrators to remain vigilant in regard to the idea of honor and the oftentimes questionable barriers set in place that confer honors privileges. My graduate assistantship in the Provost's Office at The University of Vermont has provided me with an administrative angle on honors which has pressed me to construct my own unique view of what honors *is* and *can be*. In turn, I hope to challenge honors administrators to continue to actively reconstruct the notion of honors education in the Academy.

I believe it is to our detriment as educators to remain static in our view of any pedagogy. The ultimate success of an educational program will emerge as a direct reflection of the energy that is invested into its creation and implementation. I seek a transformative view of honors education in this country, a view that can be accomplished through a corresponding commitment to what excellence in honors can mean. I believe honors needs to be defined more broadly to include diverse cultural and philosophical perspectives in recruitment, curricular construction, and overall practice. I also believe honors needs to expand its commonly held conception of selectivity. Finally I see, hidden in the word honors, the word "honor" which should stand as the driving factor behind the subsistence and ongoing development of honors pedagogy in the Academy. For, without honorable energy infused throughout the mission of honors education, the reflection of its intent will appear murky.

This murkiness brings me to what I term the *myth* of honors education. A myth is a widely-held notion that is partially or wholly false. In the words of Judith Renyi (1993), "Myth... is not the same as fiction. Myth is narrative we believe in as truth." (p. 37). If we in the academy are to believe that honors programs produce the honorable benefits they claim to, a closer look may be in order. I fear that the questions of access and privilege call the underlying crux of honor into question. If institutions of higher education are serious about challenging the trends of social inequalities at the doors of the Academy, then the doors of honors should be open as well.

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the old French word “onorer”, and the Latin word “honarare,” mean “official repute,” “esteem,” or “dignity.” The early Greek root of the word “honor,” out of which the later Latin and French was derived, was “honos,” meaning “honest.” It seems reasonable to assume, therefore, that any honors program would necessarily have at its root the aim of conferring honor and thus exemplifying what it means to be honorable. In an age where college administrators are plagued by a culture of consumerism and faced with an ever-growing population of college-aged students, I wonder whether the advent of honors is truly living up to the connotation of its name. I tend to echo the sentiment of Sam Schuman (1993):

So what can these abstract, albeit honorable, characteristics—conviction, courage, compassion, honesty—have to do with actual classroom, honors teaching and learning? Well, if “honors” actually has to do with “honor,” *everything*. (Emphasis added, p. 7)

Honors programs, historically, have developed in much the same way as remedial education programs in colleges and universities. Different students have different needs, and students who have an accelerated passion for learning are best served by a curriculum that offers a heightened academic challenge. The pedagogical intent of honors programs and honors colleges is to provide intellectually motivated students with increased opportunities to challenge themselves and each other. Oftentimes, the impetus for such students to question and explore on a heightened level is atypical of the majority of the student body.

However, there is a flip side to the pursuit and development of honors programs in the Academy. The attention to honors represents an intentional effort on behalf of university administrators to advance their universities’ academic reputations. The inherent benefits of honors programs include attracting and retaining more intellectually motivated students to the university, raising the overall intellectual level and reputation of the campus, providing an interdisciplinary honors curriculum that offers special seminars and independent study opportunities, and encouraging an innovative and experimental interaction between faculty and students. Selingo (2002, para 4) notes:

Since 1994, the number of honors colleges at both public and private institutions across the country has doubled, to more than 50, according to the National Collegiate Honors Council. Its membership rolls have risen 50 percent in the same period as hundreds of other institutions have established more narrowly tailored honors programs... By drawing a solid core of high-achieving students, the colleges hope to improve their standing with the public and with state lawmakers, as well as to raise the academic bar for all their students.

Does a conflict of interests surface amidst the chasm between the institutional mission toward recruitment and retention of high-achieving students, and the dedication to providing a premiere undergraduate education for all students?

HONORS ADMISSIONS: ELITIST OR NOT?

My initial struggle with the University of Vermont's interest in creating and implementing an honors college revolved around the issue of selectivity of admissions standards. Oftentimes elitism is equated with selectivity. Godow (1990) asserts:

Many seem to believe that elitism and selectivity are the same thing, and so they find it difficult to figure out how to be against elitism and still introduce some selectivity into honors programs. The result is some confusing talk which makes a lot of people who, in their desire to be against elitism, sound as if they also think that selectivity is a bad thing. (p. 64)

While the two words do not confer the same meaning in literal terms, they can, indeed, become intimately intertwined when it comes to issues of equity and diversity.

In my research of honors programs and colleges across the country, I found it to be generally true that standards for admission in honors programs and colleges were based on the following criteria: a minimum high school GPA of 3.5 and an average minimum SAT score of 1300. Heavy reliance on standardized testing has been linked with problematic ethics of access for students of color and students from low-income, disadvantaged backgrounds. If there is an institutional commitment to diversify the undergraduate population as a whole, do honors admissions stand as an exception to the rule?

Honors administrators and educators argue for the plus-side of selectivity in a manner that can be convincing on the surface. Honors programs, by nature, offer an otherwise unavailable intellectual opportunity to an elite group of students who display and seek an above-average level of academic challenge. This type of opportunity can positively influence an incoming student at the outset of college decision time, and further, can offer a more intimate, focused, intellectually demanding experience throughout the college years. For this reason, honors programs serve the dual purpose of drawing a higher-achieving student body and, correspondingly, igniting the academic climate of a campus. The honors experience is one of great value to honors students. They receive privileged individualized attention and an enhanced educational experience that they may not have otherwise. For this reason, the advent of honors is backed by a plethora of supporters from all corners of the university system.

However, the question I am asking is, doesn't the status of honors education imply an additional responsibility to provide access to a diverse body of students? If extensive research has shown that standardized testing is ethically and socially unjust, why are so many honors programs insistent on using standardized tests as an entrance requirement? DiFelicianantonio (2001, para 3) argues:

The time-honored myth is that the most intellectually curious among us are the ones chosen by the selective admissions process... It is not so much that the intellectually curious are selected, as that the selection process confers intellectual status.

If some honors administrators insist on using primarily unjust means to admit incoming students into honors programs across the country, I would argue that honors is not

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living up to its name. It is not enough to imbue an entering honors class with high-achieving students, determined largely by standardized testing and class rank, and then proceed to fill the remaining spots with diverse students from a wider array of socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. That does not reflect honor. Administrators need to actively seek out diverse representation in the honors student body and faculty. This needs to be one of the foremost tasks of the honors commitment.

An additional response to the cry of elitism in honors is often the development of a dual entry-point means of admission. Many honors programs and colleges admit a certain percentage of their students immediately out of high school, while another percentage is admitted after the first year of college. This method allows for students to enter into honors if their high school academic record did not open the door for them initially. Many students have shown that they do not reach their full academic potential until after they enter college. Expectations are often woven into the picture, and students who were not expected to succeed in high school begin to push themselves beyond their own and others' expectations in college. In many honors programs, students are admitted after the first year based on first-year GPA, but some programs allow for faculty recommendations and individual interviews to accompany the admissions process. This multi-tiered method of honors admissions has allowed for increased representation and a diversity of life experiences in the honors student body. However, it is not enough.

For a time, I suspected I might have been overanalyzing my stance on honors. Perhaps I was making assumptions that weren't truly playing out in reality as they appeared in my mind. I became more and more discouraged as I watched my own institution enact admissions criteria that reflected a fill-in-the-blank approach to ALANA (African, Latino/a, Asian, and Native American) representation. However, as I researched other programs and spoke with various honors directors, I came to acknowledge that I wasn't being unreasonable in asking more of an honors pedagogy. Ada Long (2003), the editor for the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* (NCHC) and the Director of the University Honors Program at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, had the following to say in an informational interview:

The ONLY way to accomplish genuine diversity in honors is by not using minimum SAT or ACT scores. Our program is, by design, small, and we interview every applicant. I know of no other honors program in the country that follows such a pattern. Having done so for 20 years, I now KNOW that ACT and SAT have no value as predictors of individual success, and I also know *that nobody really believes me...* I'm obviously biased, but the majority of honors faculty I know claim they want diversity while at the same time using admissions standards that make diversity impossible. I find that the subject of diversity in honors has become an invitation to egregious hypocrisy.

I was encouraged to discover that there are, in fact, a number of honors programs around the country that take the time and the resources to implement alternative standards of admission. There are even a few large programs that truly consider applicants as individuals rather than a composite of numbers. For example, the honors pro-

gram at the University of Minnesota reviews individual applications for upwards of 800 prospective first-year honors students. The program itself is one of the largest in the country, possessing over 2000 honors students. (Godow, p. 64) I believe this example challenges the notion that a more thorough admissions process would require an exorbitant amount of additional staff and application processing. Even if it did, institutional priorities that outwardly recognize a commitment to diversifying the undergraduate population should translate that commitment to honors, as well.

On top of creating a more just selection process, additional scholarship resources could be made available to attract diverse students with distinctive talents and experiences to honors. Active and intentional recruiting takes extra resources, for certain, however the honor that is lost without the commitment to a philosophy and pedagogy of pluralism cannot possibly be sustained in an exemplary democracy. Programs such as the University of Minnesota's can stand as models for the expansion of the conception of honors and encourage other developing programs to follow in the footsteps of such an honorable commitment.

While the tension between elitism and selectivity can often emerge as insurmountable, I believe a transformative view of honors can embark upon the challenge with integrity. I recommend that administrators review the principles and notions behind the advent of honors education in this country. New honors administrators must accept the challenge of assessing the touchstone of honors and challenging the history of exclusion that clearly does not coincide with the responsibility and privilege of an honors education.

I have heard honors referred to as a form of alternative education. If it is alternative in the sense that it has the potential for affecting positive change in all facets of university life, then administrators need to accept all slices of the challenge. In addition to providing access, administrators must attend closely to the assertion that honors students raise the bar of intellectual motivation for the rest of the student body. I fear this claim can become merely lip-service, as well.

THE RIFT BETWEEN HONORS AND NON-HONORS

A similar struggle emerged in my mind with regard to the charge of curricular and pedagogical elitism. Honors colleges traditionally, by design, allow honors students to benefit from smaller and more intimate class sizes, individualized faculty mentoring, priority registration and housing, special honors events and research opportunities, and innovative curricula developed specifically for honors seminars. The question I could not set free from my mind remained, why aren't we as an institution striving to create this sort of experience for *all* students? It seemed somewhat counter-intuitive to be focusing individualized attention on students who were already naturally inclined to succeed.

As a new administrator, I possess an unyielding desire for a unique, individualized educational experience for all students. While I believe that honors students can stir a culture of heightened academic motivation when they are infused amidst the greater student body, administrators and honors faculty need to be intentional about

making this happen. I also believe that honors faculty are often re-energized by new curricular experiments with honors students, and that they are able to translate that excitement into all of their classes, honors and non-honors alike. But why are Presidents and Provosts encouraging faculty to try bold new curricular experimentation within the realm of honors? Why not translate such pedagogy to *all* students at various levels of intellectual challenge?

Again, I feel that honors administrators must create a level of expectation and accountability among their faculty members that honors holds a unique responsibility to live out the privilege of being deemed honorable. Schuman (1993) maintains:

So, if honors is real learning, it is really about honor. It is honest and hard and caring and good. To the extent to which our work partakes of these qualities, it should be a source of pride to ourselves and inspiration to others. To the extent we deviate from this vision, we should be ashamed. (p.8)

Undergraduate education as a whole cannot afford to be left to the wayside while honors students and faculty focus on advanced forms of study, innovative seminars, and individualized advising that are not typically extended to the greater student body. We need to challenge the often boxed-in opportunities for honors students and allow for a critical co-creation of the honors experience. Harte (1994) contends:

My own experience leads me to question not whether I have done justice to my honors students, but whether I have too often not served my other students as well as I could have. I suspect my teaching might be better were I to treat all my students as honors students to the extent that I want them to be active, independent learners for whom I have high expectations. (p. 57)

Cultivating critical thinking in this sense should be the responsibility of honors faculty, administrators, and students alike. Being held accountable for how honors affects the undergraduate culture as a whole is a challenge that administrators should accept with enthusiastic anticipation.

A CHALLENGE FOR HONORS ADMINISTRATORS

I am aware that issues of elitism and selectivity in honors have been a prime area of dialogue and debate within the honors community for several years. I do not, by any means, intend to imply that honors administrators are not taking these issues seriously. What I *do* intend to imply, however, is that there is always a higher ground for which to strive. And until there is institutional backing for adjusted admissions standards and institutionalized connections between honors and non-honors, that higher ground will continue to elude us.

The NCHC developed a widely-used document entitled *the Basic Characteristics of a Fully-Developed Honors Program* which is referenced by numerous honors administrators in starting new programs. Item #14 states, "The fully-developed Honors Program must be open to continuous and critical review and be prepared to change to maintain its distinctive position of offering distinguished education to the best students in the institution." I propose that honors

administrators take the challenge of “continuous and critical review of their programs,” and add an additional basic characteristic to the list:

#17. Honors programs should strive to maintain the honor by which their name holds them accountable most notably, but not exclusively, in the following areas: defining a commitment to recruiting and retaining diverse honors students and faculty, developing a pluralistic pedagogy and system of admissions that challenges the entire campus, and further institutionalizing the co-created commitment to interdisciplinary teaching and learning in higher education.

New administrators can place themselves at the forefront of implementing innovative means of selecting students and faculty, and developing programming and curricula that reach across the chasm between honors and non-honors. I believe wholeheartedly that this is an area in higher education that is at the forefront of great change. Assumptions surrounding who can succeed at a heightened level of scholarship and service are being challenged. Now is the time to offer administrators a chance to transform the honors experience. Who’s up for it?

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