

Spring 2004

The *Forum for Honors*: An Expanded View

Robert Roemer
Loyola University Chicago

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nhcjournal>



Part of the [Higher Education Administration Commons](#)

Roemer, Robert, "The *Forum for Honors*: An Expanded View" (2004). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive*.
145.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nhcjournal/145>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the National Collegiate Honors Council at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

ROBERT E. ROEMER

The *Forum for Honors*: An Expanded View

ROBERT E. ROEMER

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ORLEANS (1984)

LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO (2004)

Even though Schuman and Estess disagree on what is appropriate for publication in the *Forum for Honors*, they are both correct. Schuman offers an orthodox view, describing marks of good scholarship and suggesting topics on Honors education suitable for scholarly work. Estess, perhaps because he writes in response to Schuman, is more mischievous and proposes that the *Forum for Honors* should for a while accept no articles on Honors education and in this interim should become a journal of interest to the liberally educated reader. In my opinion, both these opinions should be incorporated in the editorial policy of this journal.

Exercising a form of editorial license, I wish to comment on selected points made by Schuman and Estess, underscoring some and elaborating others.

In distinguishing between the abstract and the particular, Schuman touches the pivotal difference between the *NCHC Report* and the *Forum for Honors*. While the particularities of an Honors Program may well be described in an article prepared for the *Forum*, they need be instrumental to establishing a general, abstract conclusion. This is to say that an article in the *Forum* should have a theoretical moment. In the thicket of the particular an issue needs to appear, an argument develop, a conclusion come forth. The appropriate response to a list of particulars is, What else do you do? The appropriate response to an article in the *Forum* is, You are right/wrong for the following reasons.

Schuman also rightly points out that the literature on Honors education is still sparse. The seminal works on Honors education for the most part still need to be written. Beyond the handbooks published by NCHC, a standard corpus of literature on Honors education is difficult to assemble. And yet I agree with Schuman that, even though the terrain of Honors education is substantially undescribed, exploratory expeditions seem to head for features already familiar. Hackneyed accounts in a movement as young as Honors education are, at the very least, surprising.

This leads me to emphasize a final point from Schuman's article, his invitation that we study certain aspects of Honors education. Even though necessarily limited, Schuman's list of topics is evocative. Let me complement it with my own additions. Some fairly standard philosophical questions bear upon the practices of Honors education: questions of distributive justice since Honors programs allocate more of limited educational resources to a selected group; questions of the organization of knowledge since Honors programs typically select some subjects as basic to

THE FORUM FOR HONORS: AN EXPANDED VIEW

intellectual formation; questions of the morally good since Honors programs implicitly or explicitly advocate a version of human excellence. But the specific contents of Schuman's list of topics and these additions to it are not the important point. Rather the fundamental claim is that the scope of subjects related to Honors education is broader than might be suggested by the extant literature on Honors education or the previous contents of the *Forum*.

A point of contact between Schuman and Estess is the question of what kind of articles should be published in the *Forum*. Schuman asks for important articles on Honors education. Estess replies that important articles on Honors education are, first of all, not likely to be written by the members of NCHC and, second, when written such articles are likely to be forwarded to more established journals. At the risk of being cute, let me try to accommodate both these positions with the following claim: articles about Honors education that appear in well-established journals are likely not to be important. If for no other reason, the *Forum for Honors* is by default the location for significant thoughts about Honors education.

Rather than cute, my point here may well be cantankerous. There is a problem with scholarship in American higher education, namely too much of it is expected. For various reasons,¹ faculty in American higher education are judged by their record of scholarly publication. As faculty in higher education we are all expected to publish scholarly work annually, in fact several times a year. This pressure motivates American faculty to produce a tremendous quantity of scholarly publication, much of little consequence. In all honesty, how many of us who are successful in publishing scholarly work have written anything of importance? Even worse, how many of us who have published in the most highly regarded journals in our fields can even discuss this scholarship with our students?

The current pressure in higher education to publish and the publishing apparatus that has developed to vent this pressure puts into the public realm a great amount of trivial, normal, albeit competent scholarship. Those who need to publish learn quickly that the surest path to that goal is to choose a very specific subject, sometimes called a manageable project, and treat it in the standard manner. A work of substantial scope, the work of a lifetime, is not fostered by the current terms of academic employment. Nor is the bold claim, the controversial conclusion, the inchoate theory likely to be approved by boards of review who are more comfortable with research that fits the received wisdom. Hence the content of the established journals seems largely unimportant.

The above paragraph exemplifies the situation I am trying to describe. The paragraph represents a style of thinking that I could not publish in the standard journals. Or, in an attempt to publish the fully developed article suggested by that paragraph I would have to do extensive citation analysis in order to establish that a low percentage of articles published in prestigious journals are referenced more than x-number of times during an appropriate span of time. Another scholar might reply that I

¹ For an attempt to explain these reasons see: Robert E. Roemer, "Hard Times and the End of Academic Community," *The Educational Forum*, 49 (Spring 1985): 315-321.

omitted or included too many journals, that the span of time I examined was too long or short, that the x -number chosen to distinguish the important from the unimportant was either too high or low. In publishing these articles the other scholar and I would satisfy the institutional demands placed on us. But the forcefulness of my original claim that most published research is unimportant would be lost. That judgment would be sanitized into an empirical study whose impact is easily mitigated by the same canons of scholarship it employs.

Estess is right: the standard scholarship on Honors education is likely to appear in the established scholarly journals because the authors' institutional interests are better served by articles from those venues. But the *Forum* can still be the place for important statements that cannot be made elsewhere. I am not advocating that the *Forum* should publish unsupported claims, wild assertions, or insubstantial musings. The criteria of sound scholarship described by Schuman, criteria which I accept, are insurance against that. But the *Forum* should not be just another scholarly journal; it should be a journal in which the membership of NCHC can be thoughtful and scholarly in ways not possible elsewhere.

This same point can be made from another angle by examining the provocative proposal put forward by Estess that there be a two-year moratorium on publishing in the *Forum* self-reflexive honors research. But if this category of subject matter is excluded from the *Forum*, what should take its place? Estess suggests "thoughtful and thought-provoking essays on topics of interest to the liberally educated reader." I support this principle of inclusion, but will try a different phrasing: the *Forum* offers the opportunity to write as a teacher rather than simply as a scholar.

Honors programs are curious institutional entities. The usual support base for a curriculum in higher education is the department. (An alternative to the department is the program of studies, e.g., women's studies; but programs of this sort are really nascent departments and for this discussion will be subsumed under that category.) Without a proper subject matter a department would be a misnomer. But an Honors Program is different in that it has no proper subject matter. Not even those Honors Programs that require students to take certain courses can be said to have a proper subject matter. No courses can be identified which an Honors Program necessarily teaches or else loses its identity. What is necessary is that an Honors Program intensify the experience of higher education. That, however, is a matter of form or procedure, not content.

Another difference between a department and an Honors Program is that the former starts with a curriculum and seeks students; the latter starts with students and looks for a curriculum. The ethos of a department, as a function of its being rooted in a subject matter, is that of scholarship. The ethos of an Honors Program, which is essentially a collection of students, is that of teaching. When invited to join a department, a faculty member is expected to engage in the scholarship that nurtures the department's subject matter. When invited to participate in an Honors Program, a faculty member is expected to teach in a manner that sustains the role of student.

What does a teacher *qua* teacher write about? Estess' provocation is an answer to this question. Since Honors Programs often feature interdisciplinary courses, those who teach in these programs are frequently called upon to deal with subjects beyond

THE FORUM FOR HONORS: AN EXPANDED VIEW

the scope of their professional scholarship. The faculty in Honors Programs are asked to teach as liberally educated persons who can read a text rather than only as authoritative scholars. Even in an Honors version of a regular course, the teacher is expected to place the subject matter within a large and well articulated understanding of Western culture. Simply put, as teachers in Honors Programs we address a larger subject matter than we do as scholars within a discipline. But the comments we make as teachers, however excellent, may not be published in the standard scholarly journals for which we write because these comments are not supported by the required scholarly apparatus. The comments may nonetheless be significant and worthy of being written and read. Enter the *Forum for Honors*, a journal for scholars who are teachers.

Again, I am not advocating that the *Forum* become a locus for idle speculation and wild surmise. Rather I am arguing that our careful thoughts as teachers are at least sometimes, and perhaps quite often when we teach in Honors Programs, of a different genre than our thoughts as scholars. If that distinction stands, then the *Forum for Honors* is a journal in which we can speak as teachers. This publication is accordingly well-titled. *Forum*: a place in which thoughts can be tried out and sifted, a place for discussion. *For Honors*: this phrase has a double reference, honors as subject matter and honors as audience. This journal does indeed invite scholarly articles on the subject of Honors education. But this journal also invites statements by teachers who are able to enlighten and who seek honors as audience.