

Fall 2005

A Student like Me

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Irwin, Bonnie D., "A Student like Me" (2005). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive*. 176.
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Jay Freyman suggests that we often define “honors” (and, I suspect, many other things) based on our own experiences and observations as undergraduates. He then provides us with a valuable means of uncovering those diamonds in the rough and shading our eyes from those sparkling cubic zirconia who may have the resumés but lack the drive to take full advantage of the honors experience. This selection process has become even more complicated by the intrusion of parents who act as brokers for their students and who, despite our best efforts to thwart them, sometimes overshadow the stellar qualifications of their students with their unabashed boosterism. We’ve all had the experience, moreover, of regretting an admission or scholarship decision and finding ourselves trying to turn the zirconium into a diamond. Can honors be the alchemy that inspires these students to work up to the potential of their high school grades and test scores?

As a product of one of the premier public universities in the country, but an honors program dropout, I cannot help but reflect back on my own experience as precisely the type of student that Dr. Freyman encourages us to avoid: smart but unmotivated, creative but not curious, and, more than anything else, bored by the typical undergraduate curriculum but unwilling to do anything about it. I write not only of myself but of the dozens of reflections of this profile I have seen in my classes, and I wonder how to engage these students who have potential but have not shown evidence of appreciating it.

I have learned to pay special attention to those students with ACT scores over 30 and GPAs considerably less than a 4.0. My gut tells me not to admit them, that they lack the work ethic and discipline needed to truly excel in college. Yet their opposite, the 26 ACTs with perfect grades, are often students who excel at “playing school” but who likewise will not be the ones who get their research published or garner prestigious scholarships. Like Dr. Freyman, I look for those students who show that something extra, but I also realize that, as the dean of honors at a state comprehensive university, I am competing against many other deans and directors who covet this same pool of students who will be a joy to teach and will do our program and university proud.

One of our former university presidents was fond of saying that it was easy to teach at Harvard. Similarly, if my college were populated solely by the students that Jay Freyman identifies, I would have a considerably easier time of it. What I have, however, is a lot of students such as I was—having high scores and grades but lacking ambition—and many students like the two groups described above. In addition, we do have a respectable number of students who present the ideal honors profile: smart, curious, searching, ambitious. Within a total honors population of some 600 students, identifying which students are which type and which need what kind of academic challenge and inspiration is a difficult task, yet this undertaking is what constitutes “honors” at a public comprehensive university.

A STUDENT LIKE ME

Teaching and advising lie at the center of a truly successful honors program. The small classes we work so hard to protect allow teachers truly to get to know their students. I would argue that those teachers, and additionally honors advisors, require the same values Jay Freyman outlines for the honors student.

- Honors faculty must be able to relish the success of others over their own. If the teacher has an ambitious research agenda, he or she must also be willing to take the time to research those students he or she teaches. Rather than letting research encroach upon teaching, effective honors faculty help students find their own passions and include the students in their own research where appropriate.
- Honors faculty should exhibit patience, listening to student concerns and hearing what the student is saying, even if the message is not contained in the words the student utters. Patience is even more important for the honors advisor, who should look beyond the expressed interests of the student and into those activities which will truly energize and enlighten even the most recalcitrant of advisees.
- Honors faculty need to recognize the diversity among their students. Ethnic, gender, and cultural diversity are often recognizable, but diversity in learning styles, background, motivations, and goals are not always so clear. Not every student will find our disciplines as fascinating as we do, so we must try hard to make them relevant and engaging.
- Dr. Freyman's point about means and ends is particularly apt when reflected back upon faculty. Do we relish teaching or do we just want our students to reach a certain level of performance? Our success as honors faculty should be measured not by the grades we give but by whether students discuss the subject matter of our classes in the residence halls or even in the bars. How many of our students tell their parents about what they are studying in their class or bring a book home to share with Mom?
- Do our faculty recognize that teaching in honors is a privilege and do they relish the challenge of inspiring the sullen 32 ACT student as much as they enjoy the student who willingly revises a paper until it is truly a masterpiece?

The student is ultimately responsible for what she or he learns, and as Dean I tell the students to make their classes relevant, even if their teachers do not do them the favor of making this connection easy. The true honors experience is transformative, regardless of the raw material we start with. We may not be able to make the cubic zirconium into a diamond, but we should be proud to wear it nonetheless.

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