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## Honors: When Value-Added is Really Added Value

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JACQUELINE P. KELLEHER

# Honors: When Value-Added is Really Added Value

JACQUELINE P. KELLEHER

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Sometimes I look at the responsibilities and demands placed on me in my current position and cannot believe I haven't cracked up yet. In this era of accountability and "show me the data," institutional assessment directors like me are constantly bombarded with challenges that require quick, critical, divergent thinking, analytical reasoning, effective speaking, and, to some extent, creative writing. As both a professor and administrator at a state university, I live and breathe producing evidence that we as an institution are having an impact on student learning. When I was growing up, I never imagined I would end up being an assessment guru or an accreditation expert; however, I did feel in my bones that I was going to do something big and make a difference in this nation. There was a period in my life when I lost sight of that calling to be passionate and charged up in an effort to support the greater good. I was very close to taking a different path. What changed my course and bolstered my knowledge and skills to a level that surprised me—and surprised everyone who knew me prior to my higher education adventure—had to do with a little house that sits in the middle of Portland, Maine. The Honors House.

In 1992, I was a professional waitress. I was actually quite good. I had the natural Maine charm and hard work ethic that allowed me to care for my one-year-old, work fifty-five hours a week taking customer orders, and still smile at the end of a day with quarters in my pocket. My husband was a custodian with dreams of becoming a famous musician, some day casting aside the mop and Borax for a twelve-string and recording studio. Unfortunately, the economy for Maine was not stable and there were cutbacks and significant loss of hours. We had no insurance. We could barely afford rent. We depended on recycling cans and bottles to put fuel in our vehicle, which resembled something out of *The Flintstones*. At one point, I had to go to the local food pantry in shame when my bank notified me I was below the zero balance. I was happy to have bread and Velveeta. I remember being so cold that winter, unsure if the chill was from the Maine wind coming in through the thin walls, circulating around our ankles, or from the fright that came with the knowledge of a new baby on the way. I also remember vividly the time I sat in the kitchen, staring down gravely at two applications: one for the University of Southern Maine and one for welfare. It was humbling indeed. I was not college material. I had been told that several times or had heard often enough that "she would be so smart if she just applied herself." I was going for that latter comment, and did "apply myself" that very night.

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I started the university as a full-time student, eight months pregnant, working twelve hours a week as a work-study recipient and two night shifts waiting tables. My General Psychology 101 exam put me into labor; still, I was able to give birth and get back to class in one week, earning my first A on an exam since elementary school! I had serious motivation to succeed. I did not want the university to kick me out—not when I could earn an Associate’s degree and actually be an office assistant or substitute teacher! I had no study skills or strategies to deal with test anxiety, but I quickly learned time management, organization, and how to capitalize on my own volition in order to make it work. I had to study around the clock to deal with a math learning disability which I was embarrassed to share with people and to put information into my thick skull, but whatever I did seemed to work. At the end of my first year, I had a 3.91 grade point average. I was thrilled that the university could not make me leave at that point. One advisor suggested that I apply to the University Honors Program, which I thought was ridiculous. I would never make it. An honors student? Me? That was laughable—but this advisor kept up her encouragement, assuring that it was a program for people like me: driven, intellectually curious, hard-working . . . these were descriptors that had never been associated with me before, so I decided to humor her and apply for the USM Honors Program.

I didn’t make the first cut. I was on a waiting list for the Honors Program, which I reminded the director about several times later. I had to write an essay, go through an interview, produce transcripts, and the like. They almost didn’t let me in since admission was only open to 40 and almost 80 had applied. I never asked why I didn’t make the first cut, but I think it had to do with my interview. I was admitted for some reason and started later my sophomore year. I began to frequent the Honors House, a place seriously in need of a good paint job and scrubbing but filled with magic of biblical proportions. After getting over the initial feeling of dread that came from the increased workload, inability to write effectively, and constant anxiety that they were “going to find out that I really wasn’t smart,” I settled into working with a student cohort of twelve led by some of the most engaging, challenging seminar leaders one could ever hope for. Once I started resisting the need to prove myself (so they couldn’t kick me out of this place either) and began to open my mind to the world of Honors, interesting things began to happen. I saw the world for the first time. I experienced the complexities and striking similarities of cultures, ancient worlds, scientific reformations, postmodern ideas, theories, and governing bodies. It was one of those experiences when you try and try so hard to adjust your eyes to see the shape of something familiar within a kaleidoscope of images, like with a Dali painting . . . you try and try to separate figure from ground to see the hidden or covert image that everyone else is seeing, but you don’t get it. You just see the obvious. At first. And then suddenly, BAM! You see it! You get it! The hidden image leaps out of you, almost taking you aback with its force. And you can never look at the image the same way again, and it gets more difficult to see it in the same old way. It’s like when Plato’s character emerges from the cave into the realm of knowledge and can never go back again once he has seen the light in the *Parable of the Cave*. That’s what Honors did for me. It opened up a cortical fold of my brain in a way that made me see the world through a completely different lens. It woke up a passion and a newfound commitment within

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my heart to becoming a change agent in this world. Honors armed me with new tools and methods that would make me a warrior in my thinking, speaking, and writing.

As I went through the Honors sequences and thesis with my cohort, I realized that I was no longer doing this academic endeavor for that Associate's degree, steady paycheck, or to make sure I could provide health insurance for my daughters. I discovered that now that I had entered into the "realm of knowledge," I had been given a gift. I had been given an opportunity to be active and to fight for what I believe in, to speak for those with no voice and to write for those who cannot. I had often been struck by the stark inequalities in this country, particularly in areas of wealth, education, and access to knowledge. I became active in the areas of social justice, civic engagement, democracy in education, alternative learning methods, and recognizing diverse learning styles and abilities. I had experience in all of these areas as well as being a poor kid who had received an opportunity to earn a degree thanks to loans, scholarships, grants, and a family who watched the babies while I was in class. I knew it was my mission to move forward. I recognized that an associate's was not going to do it, and I owed so many people for their investment in my sorry self that it was time to get a bachelor's and an additional license to speak my mind—a doctorate.

There were many people who did not think I could do it. Yet, my Honors cohort and teachers never doubted it for a moment. An Honors education was not about GPA, GRE scores, or getting into Harvard. An Honors education meant providing students with learning opportunities that would take them as far as they could go as social, moral, and politically engaged citizens—with the tools and motivation to do whatever they desired to do in life. This could be equally defined as pumping gas or serving as a CEO—if you were happy and satisfied with your place in life, you were successful. An Honors experience was building a community of scholars and bringing together very different people through discourse to discuss a common theme using relevant literature to ground the conversations. Honors was not about being smart or performing better than our peers. It was about connectivity—to each other, to our families, to our community, and to global society. It was about not being afraid to try new things or work with new ideas; it was about digging deeper into a concept or message even when it was uncomfortable or downright impossible to understand. It was about admitting our failures and recognizing our humanity. It was, and it is still today. It served as the building blocks for the new path I carved out for myself. It was the scaffold I needed to discover who I was as a unique contributor to this world and what talents I could bring to the table of life.

I went on to earn a master's and a doctorate. I discovered my own key to the world of social justice, and, building on my Honors thesis in engaged learning and strategic processing of information, began to work in the field of education. In my research and teaching, I have been working with pre-service and in-service educators, identifying and strengthening best practice efforts in teaching and learning. Eventually, I was fed up with high-stakes testing environments and some aspects (well, many aspects) of *No Child Left Behind*, so I saw that as the path I needed to pursue: assessment and accountability. I now practice and write about positive assessment and using data through democratic engagement to develop effective programs and experiences for students and other stakeholders. I still can't believe it's

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me. Seriously, I am that Maine girl at heart, often having those last minute thoughts of “What if they find out I’m really not smart?” just before going to give a national speech or submit a journal article. As I consult on critical state department projects that have statewide implications for all in-service and pre-service teachers, or make recommendations about how to change statewide assessments to ensure greater reliability and validity, I think back to that moment with the two applications side by side, sensitive to the fact I have a duty to support those in poverty, who do not have equitable access to the most basic needs in life or who cannot write to express their souls. I make sure my work is perfect so that I represent those people in a way they deserve. I have walked in those shoes. I know that I was lucky to have shoes.

This me, this new me, is a product of an honors education. During a time when there are significant budget cuts and penny pinching, honors programs are often on the chopping block. Honors is a luxury or a place for the elite. In my career, I know full well that there are serious pressures for honors programs to show the “value-added” nature of their curricula and to demonstrate that their programs do indeed make a difference. If one wants to keep funding or garner grants to support the honors mission, evidence of impact must be available for decision-makers. Well, I consider this short essay to be an example of some very key qualitative data that will soon be triangulated with reams of other mixed-methods data in support of the powerful impact an honors education can make. I am one person and one voice. But I do the work of an army, and my voice is strong. These two critical pieces that are essential to serving as a social change agent came from my honors preparation, and I will be the first one on board to work with honors to build a culture of evidence that shows this nation that honors makes a difference. I may be just one data point in the honors assessment system, but I am not done with my impact—not even close.

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