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Navigating the Kokosing: A Comparison between Honors and Private Liberal Arts Colleges

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The Kokosing is a small river, barely a stream after a storm, which meanders its way through the gently undulating hills and farmland of central Ohio. The Kokosing takes its name from a Native American word meaning “place of owls.” Like an owl, Kenyon College is nestled among the trees atop a hill near the Kokosing. Kenyon is a private, selective, liberal arts college of about 1600 undergraduate students founded by an Episcopal bishop named Philander (yes, Philander) Chase in 1824. During the 2011–12 academic year, I had the good fortune to complete an American Council on Education Fellowship at Kenyon under the guidance of S. Georgia Nugent, president of the institution.

During my year at Kenyon, I served in an anthropological role, observing the culture of the community and the leadership of Kenyon’s senior staff. From this vantage point, I immersed myself in the life of the college and became a participant observer able to compare Kenyon with my home institution, Middle Tennessee State University, where I served as associate dean of the Honors College from 2006 to 2014. One reason I chose Kenyon was that in honors we often say that we provide a liberal arts education but with the resources and price tag of a public institution. I wanted to test the veracity of this truism by living “abroad” for a year, examining not only Kenyon but also the bevy of other liberal arts institutions in Ohio.

Consequently, I have been able to posit a few key similarities and differences between small select liberal arts colleges and honors programs or colleges at larger public universities. The differences are important because they reveal subtle but very important flaws in the claim that honors provides the same experience for less money, and they shine a light on areas of improvement for those dedicated to honors. Although I am drawing conclusions from a small sample size, my year abroad coupled with a dozen years of involvement in honors provides what I hope is an informed platform from which to observe and report.

As at most liberal arts colleges, the hallmark of most honors programs is small class size, which is one of the greatest strengths of honors education and culture. The current efforts within higher education to devise pedagogies that train more and more students with less and less public support strike me as sad and futile. While the forces of evolution never cease, the human brain and inseparable

mind have not changed significantly in the last few millennia. During this time, humankind has recurrently figured out that learning occurs optimally in small groups, where students and teachers intensely discuss, defend, and revise ideas. In other words, we got this approach right thousands of years ago, and we rightly preserve it as a tried and true educational model that consistently engages and challenges students, raises the intellectual bar, pushes students to improve their thinking, and encourages the tempered, civil, convincing expression of these thoughts.

In addition to this personal and speaking-intensive approach, classes at liberal arts colleges and honors programs stress writing. Small classes afford faculty the opportunity not only to assign major writing projects but, more importantly, to provide extensive, systematic feedback on multiple iterations of student work. Furthermore, writing projects at both types of institutions typically get successively more challenging across four years of study, usually culminating in an undergraduate thesis or major independent project.

We should be proud in honors of championing and maintaining this traditional approach and of providing what we all know is the best education—even if it does not lend itself perfectly to quantitative assessment—to a diverse swath of highly motivated and talented students. This educational approach is what defines honors and what drives many of us professionally. Even if we stop here and merely maintain current practices, we are providing a valuable service to a society that sorely needs it but usually fails to recognize the importance of labor-intensive education focused on the power of great ideas, wisdom, and service rather than transient knowledge, skills, and monetary gain.

During my year at Kenyon, however, I began to understand some of the more tacit qualities of liberal arts colleges, qualities that perhaps honors programs possess to a lesser extent, qualities to which we can aspire. Academically, most liberal arts colleges are a remnant of the agrarian nineteenth century. They stand in contrast to the university, a largely twentieth-century invention dedicated to the ideals of research and specialization. American universities are admirable for driving innovation and creativity, but at many liberal arts colleges, academic breadth and synthesis are valued the same as, if not more than, depth of specialization. While faculty at liberal arts colleges often serve as public intellectuals, contributing to new knowledge and insight, liberal arts colleges on the whole stress undergraduate teaching and the links between different areas and ideas.

A key strength of colleges like Kenyon, a strength that we in honors should further explore, is an understanding of the essential academic experience, e.g., of what uniquely defines a Kenyon education. Rather than retreating to only the narrow end of the microscope, students at many liberal arts colleges wrestle with the big and enduring questions that transcend the fuzzy lines separating our disciplinary silos. At universities, our loyalties are bought and reinforced by our departments; we are granted tenure and promotion by vetting ourselves both internally and, more importantly, externally within our fields. The same can be true at colleges, but higher value is placed on teaching and interdisciplinarity.

Additionally, some colleges have a greater sense of the whole, of how the individual pieces of the core curriculum fit together to create an education larger than the sum of the parts. This approach is possible at smaller institutions with limited numbers of liberal arts majors, where teachers and students from disparate fields live and work together in close proximity and continue a dialogue about what defines the institution across centuries.

This focus on the big picture is, I think, a crucial next step for honors. Each program needs to engage in self-reflection, understanding the big picture of who we are and who we want to be. If we say that we emulate liberal arts colleges, then we must think about where we stand on the breadth–depth continuum so that our curricula are not like a Brooklyn diner menu, going on for pages and pages offering all things to all people, when instead we should be striving to build a cohesive academic experience that uniquely defines our program. In creating such curricula, we need to avoid various political pitfalls, such as an exclusive focus on the Western canon that was common in the past. Learning from the diverse array of perspectives introduced in recent decades, we have the opportunity to create exciting new curricula that define each of our programs as unique.

Honors programs and colleges should at the same time reexamine their goals in relation to specialization. Many programs, mine included, explicitly state that we strive to place students into the graduate field and program of their choice. However, this focus begs the question whether we are only training future professionals highly specialized in a single sub-discipline or, like liberal arts colleges, providing a common core curriculum that cuts across fields and attempts to tackle big questions and thorny global issues from many different angles. I think that most of us in honors would proudly and rightly claim that we are firmly grounded in the liberal arts, eschewing education limited to vocational preparation. In order to incorporate the broader focus on liberal arts into the entirety of an honors students' undergraduate experience, we need to model ourselves more fully on liberal arts colleges. If we are going to call ourselves colleges, we should model ourselves on them throughout the four-year experience of our students.

In addition to academic differences, liberal arts colleges differ from some honors programs when it comes to community. In honors, we attempt to create a scholarly community supportive of our highest educational ideals, principles, and practices. At MTSU, we are fortunate to have an entire building dedicated to honors, indicating to students and the community the value the institution seems to place on undergraduate excellence. Across campus, we also have a wing in a dormitory reserved for approximately a hundred honors students. As fortunate as we are, though, we still exist in a larger ecosystem that is overwhelmingly focused on non-honors students and that does not promulgate this sense of community. At places like Kenyon, on the other hand, the entire institution, from the board chair to the person who cleans the whiteboards at night, is dedicated to a small group of highly talented students twenty-four hours a day.

NAVIGATING THE KOKOSING

Unlike most honors programs, liberal arts colleges have a complete infrastructure that is solely dedicated to excellence in undergraduate education from admission to graduation and beyond.

At many liberal arts colleges, the mission, the *raison d'être*, is specific; everyone understands the primary purpose of the place is to educate undergraduates. Imagine that every single person and office on your campus shared similar educational values and was dedicated to your honors program alone. Imagine that the admissions office truly understood the type of diverse, curious, and intellectually offbeat students you sought, students who would thrive in a rigorous, perspective-altering academic environment and likely graduate with distinction four years later. Imagine an athletic department that touched the lives of almost half the students while understanding that their own primary responsibility as teachers and mentors was to promote excellence off the field first and foremost. Similarly, imagine a division of student affairs that also sought to support the academic mission of the institution, that often worked with students more hours per week than the faculty, and that took responsibility for undergirding and complementing lessons learned in the classroom.

These examples illustrate a few of the strengths of small liberal arts colleges. In honors at a large public institution, we often have very little influence or control over these operations, and, until we can fully address these issues, we have miles to travel before honestly claiming that we provide the same experience as a liberal arts college. While not every honors program uses the same approach, many, including MTSU, claim to provide a liberal arts college experience for less money. Honors provides an excellent education for the price and is a major strength of the American university system, but not every program provides the kind of interconnected curriculum or community that a small liberal arts college can provide.

My year at Kenyon made me take a fresh look at my own honors program, and my hope in this essay is to encourage others to examine their programs carefully, honestly, and critically in the broader context of higher education in order to clarify the program's goals, improve the student experience, and define what makes the program unique. Despite our many admirable qualities in honors, my experience in another educational context has shown me that we have room for growth and improvement. A thorough soul searching might instead lead some of us to realize that we offer something different from a liberal arts education and to highlight our unique strengths rather than claiming to be something we are not.

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