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Academically Adept

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Scott Carnicom's essay on "Honors Education: Innovation or Conservation?" asks the question in its title in part because, as he says, "the time is ripe" to probe the impact honors programs and curricula have had and continue to have on our college campuses today. He couldn't be more right about that, and yet I am amazed at how little attention honors typically garners in the larger ongoing conversations about the quality of education today's college students receive, both high and low. In the distressing and much-deliberated *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, published this year, the index contains no entry for honors education. Nevertheless, almost every discussion in the book resonated with me in terms of what I know about honors pedagogy, honors faculty, and honors students.

Carnicom asks whether honors education preserves history or spurs innovation, both ideas in service to a larger one regarding honors' impact on the larger institutions that house them. After reading *Academically Adrift*, I wondered if one of those impacts might, in fact, be devastating. Might the on-campus sequestering of honors academic culture—particularly those honors pedagogical tools that Carnicom refers to as residing in honors' "time capsule" of the "best educational practices of the past"—discourage the university's "general population" (to borrow prison lingo) from breaking out of a consumer-based, occupationally-centered, sub-standard version of college learning? Perhaps the mere presence of an honors program suggests that its educational practice is appropriate *only* for honors students, leaving the rest of the campus in the dust. More problematically still, the maintenance of an honors curriculum might exonerate a university community from demanding an honors-level rigor from everyone else. In light of what *Academically Adrift* demonstrates, I wonder if it is really true that honors—as I so often tell myself and my faculty—is really just different and not more difficult.

When Carnicom talks about the preserved pedagogies of honors, he focuses, as a self-confessed scientist, mostly on the sciences' mentor/mentee model of education, one that fosters small class size and one-on-one instruction. This kind of intimate college classroom experience has become a signature pedagogical marker of honors, and it is clearly a benefit to student learning. But the researchers of *Academically Adrift* claim that several other

pedagogical features, features familiar to those of us in honors, are decisive in students' ability to learn to think critically. Two of these strike me as basic to the honors programs with which I have been associated as a student, teacher, and now director: first, the amount of reading and writing required in college classes and, second, the expectations faculty members have of their students' abilities. As a director and recruiter, I work hard to attract excellent students, many if not most of whom are afraid of the workload for which honors on my campus is notorious, but, as an educator and teacher, I cannot ignore the obvious educational benefit of doing a lot of academic writing and reading. Moreover, I can no longer repeat the mantra that honors is not more difficult but just different: it is both, and, as *Academically Adrift* makes clear, that is not a bad thing.

Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, the primary authors of *Academically Adrift*, claim that higher education in the United States has begun to suffer from a range of problems, including what Ernest Boyer thirty years ago termed the shifting "priorities of the professoriate" (6). The current context of this shift is largely economic. Our increasingly ill-funded higher education system attempts to enroll more students than ever, keeping higher education an obtainable goal for the masses *and* tuition revenues rolling in. University staffers now treat students like clients, which means doing everything they can to give these clients what they want; of course, what students want, as we all know, is not necessarily what they need. The observation of one of the students cited in the study says it best:

I hate classes with a lot of reading that is tested on. Any class where a teacher is just gonna give us notes and worksheets or something like that is better. Something that I can study and just learn from in five [minutes] I'll usually do pretty good in. Whereas, if I'm expected to read, you know, a hundred-and-fifty-page book and then write a three-page essay on it, you know, on a test let's say, I'll probably do worse on the test because I'll probably wouldn't have read the book. . . . I rarely actually do reading assignments or stuff like that, which is a mistake I'm sure, but it saves me a lot of time. (4)

Undoubtedly it does.

Given the clear desires of this student/client and the over-emphasized role of the student evaluation in tenure, promotion, and merit pay reviews, it is not particularly shocking what Arum and Roksa found regarding the assignments the 2,322 college students surveyed in their study said they were given in their courses:

Fifty percent of students in our sample reported that they had not taken a single course during the prior semester that required more than twenty pages of writing, and one-third had not taken one that required even forty pages of reading per week. Combining these two indicators, we found that a quarter of the students in the sample had not taken any courses that required either of these two requirements, and that only 42 percent had experienced *both* a reading and writing requirement of this character during the prior semester. (71)

As Arum and Roksa say, in an effort to state the obvious, “if students are taking courses without significant reading and writing requirements, it is probably unreasonable to expect them to develop skills to improve on performance tasks that require critical thinking, complex reasoning, and written communication” (73). Nevertheless, as the two also note, teaching undergraduates how to “think critically” remains one of the most often cited goals of college faculty today; 99% of college faculty “say that developing students’ ability to think critically is a ‘very important’ or ‘essential’ goal of undergraduate education” (Arum and Roksa, 35).

I find it disconcerting to read these descriptions of administrators and faculty who seem to have given up the rigor ghost. We are in the middle of a curriculum revision in my current program, and I have been working hard to convince my faculty that we must revise our requirements to keep the program attractive to those excellent students who nevertheless want to make sure they have plenty of time for play, which, according to Arum and Roksa, occupies 51% of their week while just 16% is spent either in class or studying (97). I have found myself trying to convince veteran honors instructors that honors should not necessarily be more difficult, just different. Reading Arum and Roksa, though, has made me not only rethink my administrative impulses but also look more carefully at the mantra honors directors chant for prospective honors students: *we’re not harder, we’re just more interesting*.

I think this mantra is wrong. Honors is more rigorous and also more intriguing—probably the latter because of the former. The first semester they are on campus, EKU honors students take a six-credit hour Honors Rhetoric course, team-taught by philosophy and English professors. These students write, on average, ten pages of academic prose a week. Such constant production of synthesizing discourse is hard for freshmen not accustomed to that level of rigor. Of course, the workload in Rhetoric, as we call it, is legendary at EKU: we have lost a fair number of new students to their fears of it; we have held “How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Rhetoric” support sessions in our honors residence hall; and it is the course I am most likely to hear about from alumni of the program, who spontaneously Facebook me years

later to tell me about its virtues. Whatever euphemisms I use in my recruiting junkets, Honors Rhetoric is just plain difficult—different, yes, but also difficult.

Likewise, the program in which I taught before coming to ECU had legendary nine-hour midterm and final written exams. Students in our large interdisciplinary course were expected to produce four typed academic essays that analyzed and synthesized multidisciplinary lectures, weekly films, and difficult readings. Students had to digest and combine these texts and ideas, answering both disciplinary and interdisciplinary questions on the in-class essay tests. While students hypothetically could (and did) avoid doing chunks of the reading over the course of the semester—they had choice among the essay questions they could answer—the exams were still killers. I was always thankful that I only had to grade the test and not take it.

I would like to assuage the fears of our potential ECU honors students and tell them that our courses are not more rigorous but more innovative, more original, more fun, but I would be lying or at least telling a half-truth. These courses are more difficult because of the quantity of reading and writing assigned in them and the quality of writing we expect. Because of the difficult work we assign in these courses, the students in our honors program have a much better chance of learning those clichéd but nevertheless critical thinking skills we all want them to master. I feel confident that this rigor is a shared trait in most honors curricula and that this ramping up of the typical college workload is part of what will insure that our students not only do better in college but enjoy it more.

The fact that we expect our honors students to do better work is another motif in *Academically Adrift*'s story of student failure and success. According to Arum and Roksa, those students who “reported that faculty had high expectations scored twenty-seven points higher on the CLA (Collegiate Learning Assessment test that was the primary instrument in this study) in 2007 than those who reported that professors had low expectations” (94). Faculty members naturally expect more of honors students; we see them as smarter than other students, better prepared, more likely to do the work and care about it. Whether or not these expectations are well-founded, they produce better student work. I remember working particularly hard in courses I took with our honors director in my undergraduate honors program because, although we often had no clue exactly what he was talking about, he talked to us as if we did. We had to meet him on his intellectual ground. That is powerful pedagogy and is, I think, what honors is about.

Academically Adrift has gotten tremendous attention because of the scary story it tells. There is plenty not to like about the book: the lazy, self-aggrandizing faculty members the authors blame for lack of student learning are not

typical of the faculty with whom I have worked at three universities; and the book largely ignores the connection between plummeting state-level funding for education and the consumer culture that now guides university planning and recruiting priorities. Its findings are fascinating and potentially transformative, but it has its own critical weaknesses and ungenerous assumptions. Nevertheless, its appearance has fostered both local and national conversations that are bound to lead to the resteeering of more than a few university vessels. For me, the book clarifies why what we do in honors is critical: namely, that we ask of our students what needs to be asked of them in order for them to succeed as students, as thinkers, and as future leaders and innovators in our society.

Honors has it right. But what does that mean for everyone else? I worry about faculty members who have quit demanding difficult work from their students because I know that students try to live up to the expectations of their instructors. I also worry that the existence of an honors program might contribute to the lowering of expectations across the rest of a campus. However, as Arum and Roksa say at the end of the book, “each institution can look within, as opposed to only looking across, to learn what works and what does not. High-performing students within institutions can serve as guides for thinking about and implementing meaningful change” (117). My experience has been that high-performing students have appreciated the rigor of their honors courses, and I like to think that their appreciation of hard work has an impact on their peers outside the program and throughout the university. Despite the challenge of recruiting students who are afraid of the hard work, I think it is time I herald our program’s difficulty, which is what will matter to them as they work their way through it and look back on all the ways it has moored them in their own curiosity, self-assurance, and vigor rather than sending them out to drift in caution and lost opportunity.

REFERENCES

Arum, Richard and Josipa Roksa. *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2011. Print.

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