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Can the Elitism of Honors Help Students at Non-Elite Schools?

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In Scott Carnicom's insightful and informative article "Honors Education: Innovation or Conservation?" he adroitly discusses the unusual challenge of maintaining the tried and true pedagogical methods of centuries past in a rapidly changing pedagogical present. The quick succession of teaching philosophies in American higher education over the past few decades creates a certain educational myopia in which any pedagogical principle more than three decades old falls outside the realm of consideration, and its reintroduction becomes an "innovation." Among his many excellent points is the observation that while these honors innovations have received criticisms for being elitist, they have

... historically been an antidote for elitism, democratically leveling the playing field and providing a top-notch education to students outside the hallowed halls of the oldest and/or most prestigious institutions.

Much has been made of the elitist argument, and much in the honors literature goes a long way to countering arguments that attempt to equate honors education with elitism, but I would argue that the case for honors can be strengthened by building on Carnicom's observation that the innovative/traditional pedagogical methods associated with honors education can level the playing field.

In a 2011 *New York Times* article, David Leonhardt explores the persistent socio-economic disparities in the nation's leading colleges and universities. Despite claims to a meritocratic process, the students filling the classrooms of elite institutions are disproportionately affluent. While this observation is hardly shocking given the preparatory educational benefits inherent in an upper-class upbringing, some of the specific observations made by Leonhardt point to an opportunity for honors programs to implement their centuries-old "innovations" to democratize the attainment of higher education success. Only 44% of low-income students with high standardized test scores attend four-year colleges, opting instead for community colleges or no

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college at all. Furthermore, of those high-testing, low-income students who do attend a four-year school right out of high school, their completion rate is significantly lower than similar-scoring students from the top earning brackets (“Top Colleges” 1).

In another article by Leonhardt, he explores the wide discrepancy in completion rates between elite colleges and open-enrollment four-year colleges and community colleges. Most striking was the frequency with which low-income students “undermatch,” i.e., choose a school less selective or elite than they would be qualified to attend. Statistically, students who undermatch are less likely to obtain a bachelor’s degree, and the likelihood of undermatching is far greater among low-income students than middle- or high-income students. In fact, about half of low-income students with high academic indicators (GPA and standardized tests) do not attend the best college for which they could have qualified (“Colleges are Failing” 2). Furthermore, students who undermatch are of particular importance for those of us whose honors programs attract students who are underserved in the general curriculum and who represent the top percentage of the institution’s undergraduate population.

Possible explanations for this discrepancy include work/school conflicts, lower levels of family support (both financial and emotional), and reduced access to support services such as paid tutors and preparatory courses. The most important difference, however, might be in the expectation of success. Even among the general population (non-honors) of elite schools such as University of Michigan, University of Colorado, or University of Texas, completion rates are high, and student expectations for success are correspondingly high. At Metropolitan State College of Denver, where I am honors director, the situation is markedly different. Metro State is essentially an open-enrollment, urban institution that has a high percentage of part-time, working, and returning students. Student expectations across the campus vary widely, and no de facto expectation of prompt graduation exists. Therefore, if a low-income, high-achieving student undermatches and attends Metro State instead of CU-Boulder, she will be surrounded by students with lower expectations of success than she would encounter had she attended the more prestigious institution. Because many low-income students are also first-generation students, they are especially susceptible to self-doubt and correspondingly more affected by peer groups and expectations (Striplin 2).

To counter the problem of low expectations, Paul Thayer writes that colleges must focus on facilitating positive student-to-student interactions, especially among low-income and first-generation college students (Thayer 4). Here the small class sizes, increased one-on-one interactions with instructors, and—yes—elitism of honors programs serve to democratize higher

education. Many honors programs boast of their sense of community, and it is precisely that community—that “small liberal arts feel”—that can help rectify the disadvantages low-income but high-achieving students experience. I have seen many bright but tentative students shyly enter the honors office with high grades but uncertain graduation prospects. A year or two later, after meeting their fellow honors students through classes and activities and the honors community, they evolve into confident individuals with high academic and professional expectations. In small, discussion-based colloquia, first-generation college students learn the joys of critical thinking, the power of their mind, and the acceptance and respect garnered from fulfilling their potential. In this setting, rather than the large introductory courses where half of the students might be absent from class and then from graduation, honors students are surrounded by high expectations—expectations that, through the wonders of peer pressure, can be absorbed and instilled in students at high risk for dropping out of college.

As higher education falls under increasingly frequent attacks for low retention and graduation rates among the bottom half of the income distribution, academic and political leaders alike are looking for innovative approaches to better serve these students. Ironically, the elitist approach of honors programs, with their throwback pedagogies of small class discussion, mentor-guided independent projects, and focus on critical thinking and problem solving, provides an important tool in addressing this educational need. Honors education is not just innovative or conservationist; luckily for our students, it is both.

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