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Editor's Introduction

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Editor's Introduction

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For-profit education has surged in the past few years. Although for-profit organizations like DeVry University or ITT Technical Institute have been around for decades (DeVry was established in 1931), the number of such education-producing companies has ballooned in recent years, and within only the past two or three years a new kind of company has burst onto the scene offering massive open online courses (MOOCs). Patterned on edX, a nonprofit company developed by MIT and Harvard in 2011, the for-profit company Coursera was founded by Stanford faculty in 2012, the same year as Udacity, a for-profit MOOC company funded by Venture Capital. Also in 2012, American Honors, a for-profit organization providing online curricula, advising, and marketing in honors, was started by investor-backed Quad Learning, Inc.

The excitement about for-profit colleges and online education companies has generally focused on issues of accessibility, affordability, and efficiency. Such companies and their advocates have promised high-quality, low-cost education for students across the globe who have had little or no access to education before the Internet. The promised successes have experienced some setbacks in recent weeks when, for instance, “researchers at the University of Pennsylvania reported that the online classes it offered had failed miserably. Only about half of the students who registered ever viewed a lecture and only 4 percent completed a course” (“Data Mining”). Moreover, most of the long-standing for-profit colleges like DeVry and ITT are now targets of active investigations by federal and state agencies for predatory lending (Field A3), and the Obama administration is proposing that “For-profit colleges would lose all federal student aid, a fatal blow, if their students fail tests of earnings and debt default” (Pérez-Peña). For-profit educational businesses are coming under this kind of special scrutiny given the high cost that many of these companies, including American Honors, charge to students, thereby funneling publicly subsidized Pell grants and student loans to private investors.

Honors education is in the thick of these new developments, with administrations demanding and companies promising high quality at low cost. Honors education has traditionally focused on small classes, rigorous independent research, personal advising, experiential and service learning opportunities, and tightknit communities, all of which cost money either directly or through the time commitment of faculty members and administrators. The question is

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whether a for-profit company can reproduce the high quality of such educational opportunities at a low cost. The time has come to consider whether we can or should offer “Honors for Sale,” which is the subject of this volume’s Forum.

Gary Bell leads off the Forum with his essay “The Profit Motive in Honors Education.” A Call for Papers went out on the NCHC website and listserv and in the NCHC E-Newsletter, inviting members to contribute to the Forum:

The lead essay for the Forum, attached to this message and available on the NCHC website <<http://nchchonors.org/jnchc-lead-essay-the-profit-motive-in-honors-education>>, is by Gary Bell of Texas Tech University. His essay—titled “The Profit Motive in Honors Education”—sounds the alarm about creeping privatization that raises costs and reduces quality in public services, including education. Bell warns against the takeover of honors education by for-profit companies whose primary purpose is making money, not serving and educating students. Contributions to the Forum may—but need not—respond to Bell’s essay or the issues he addresses.

Questions that Forum contributors might consider include: Do for-profit companies like American Honors <<http://american-honors.org>> have value to add to honors programs, educators, and students, or are they trying to cheapen the honors experience and enrich their own coffers? Similarly, will MOOCs expand honors opportunities or depersonalize honors education and reduce faculty to teaching assistants for celebrities? Are these new developments in higher education designed to enhance education or increase cost-effectiveness, and are these two goals compatible or mutually exclusive? Is there something special about honors that will be lost if it is put on the auction block? Should honors programs be entrepreneurial to assure their survival and keep pace with the broader culture? Is the pressure for large numbers of honors students and higher graduation rates coming from a profit motive or from concern for good education? To what extent are profit motives in honors being driven by forces outside of honors and to what extent by inside forces? What are the effects of the professionalization of honors, e.g., the shift from volunteer administrators to high-paid deans and directors, the proliferation of honors administrators, the increased focus on fundraising, the transition of honors directors/deans from scholars/mentors to managers/salesmen?

Are similar changes within the NCHC, as it has shifted its focus from students to administrators, making it a more effective advocate for honors education or for self-advancement?

Forum essays should focus on ideas, concepts, and/or opinions related to “Honors for Sale.” Examples from one’s own campus can be and usually are relevant, but essays should not simply be descriptions of “what we do at our institution.”

The Forum includes eight responses to the Call for Papers in addition to Bell’s lead essay.

Bell’s essay provides examples of “the privatization mantra and the single-minded pursuit of the dollar” that have taken over our economy and institutions, including medical care and higher education, with distressing consequences for all but the wealthy. Bell writes that “profitization” has now reached into honors education with the start-up of for-profit companies that make promises to two-year colleges of superior online lectures, high-quality mentoring, high-tech support materials, and guaranteed articulation with four-year institutions. These seductive promises, according to Bell, downplay the significant additional costs that community-college students will have to pay as well as the hidden costs to the colleges, the public that supports these colleges, and the exploited faculty who provide their expertise without commensurate compensation. Another consequence of the for-profit model is standardization, which is antithetical to the ideals of honors education. In short, Bell argues, “Over-promising to patrons, under-delivering on services, de-personalizing the recipients of their services, relying on publicly provided resources, and maximizing profit over time are all, in my judgment, inevitable concomitants of what they are offering.”

Two advocates of American Honors—one from the company and one from an original community college partner of American Honors—have provided essays in defense of a business model for honors. Benjamin Moritz, Director of Academic Affairs and the Teaching and Learning Center at American Honors (AH), describes the company’s goals and services in “Mission-Driven and For-Profit: Not Mutually Exclusive.” Moritz describes the mission of AH as enabling thousands of low-income, high-achieving, and often first-generation students to get a two-year honors education in preparation for transferring to a four-year school. The company achieves this goal, he writes by providing design professionals and a “state-of-the-art technology platform” for faculty, online advising for students, and marketing and recruitment for honors programs. These services are paid for by the participating students, who each pay \$2,800 per year on top of their regular tuition.

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Lisa Avery echoes the points that Moritz has made about American Honors in her essay “Public-Private Honors Success at Community Colleges of Spokane [CCS].” Avery provides data showing that the Community Colleges of Spokane honors program, which is in the middle of its second year of partnership with AH, has already seen significant increases in enrollment, in the number of courses offered, in the academic achievement and completion rates of its students, in the advising services provided, and in the transfer successes of its students. While not all faculty approve of the partnership and thus choose not to participate in the honors program, Avery argues that the 40% increased tuition that honors students pay for the program is cost-effective in terms of their success in college and beyond.

Leading the critique of the business model for honors education is Sam Schuman in his essay “Profit, Productivity, and Honors.” Schuman argues that the key issue centers on the definition of “productivity.” If this word means cost effectiveness—cheap credit-hour production or the average cost to the institution of producing a degree—then honors by definition cannot be productive. Schuman argues that, in the context of higher education and certainly of honors education, we should be focused on producing not dollars but wisdom, and that is precisely what honors programs and colleges are designed to do in their approach to education within and outside the classroom. In producing wisdom, honors education counters the pressure to make education cheaper by insisting on making it better, and this insistence is the essence of what honors is all about.

While Schuman contrasts the definitions of productivity in the worlds of business and honors, Jeffrey A. Portnoy contrasts their ethical practices. In “For Whom the Business Bell Tolls: Honors in America,” Portnoy describes the often unsavory practices he witnessed as an employee in the world of business and finance, then describes the educational results of unfortunate business practices at his college, and finally zeroes in on specific interactions he has had with American Honors as examples of the conflict he sees between business and honors. Portnoy suggests that, while the tactics that American Honors has used with members of the NCHC and with Georgia Perimeter College may be business as usual, they are incompatible with ethical behavior in honors and do not bode well for public-private partnerships.

A variety of perspectives on the question of for-profit honors are offered in “Honors Privatization: A Professor's and Three Students' Responses” by Destenie Nock, Justice Plummer, Ashleigh R. Wilson, and Michael K. Cundall Jr. of North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University. Cundall, an honors director and faculty member, argues that “a market-based agenda can easily result in reduced quality control,” pressuring faculty to lower their standards in order to graduate more students and pressuring students to pad their

résumé with special distinctions like honors. Providing student perspectives on for-profit educational companies, Destenie Nock argues that the added cost of an organization like American Honors and its lack of in-person interaction are serious deficits to an honors education; Justice Plummer argues that “the American Honors fee would serve [students] better in a savings account”; and Ashleigh Wilson questions whether a for-profit institution provides value or simply a line on a résumé. Cundall concludes that “A program like American Honors, which sits far away from both the educators that provide the coursework and the students taking it, cannot easily ascertain the value added” and that “lack of value will cost the university or college in the future.”

In “Honors Sells . . . But Who’s Paying?” Annmarie Guzy of the University of South Alabama argues that honors programs are complicit with companies like American Honors in the move toward selling honors as a commodity. In admissions policies that focus on SAT, ACT, AP, and IB success among applicants, honors programs promote the proliferation of programs that are costly to students, parents, high schools, and taxpayers. Honors programs are attaching a high price, albeit it indirect and hidden, on admissions and thus participating in the market mentality that leads to for-profit companies edging their way into the world of honors. Guzy’s implicit message is that we may need to clean our own houses before rejecting the newcomers in the neighborhood.

In “Teaching Honors Online at a Public College,” Barbra Nightingale of Broward College, Ft. Lauderdale, advocates online teaching in honors but only if the courses are taught by local, full-time faculty members. Nightingale argues that quality and accessibility depend on students’ being able to have personal contact with their teachers, and she argues further that such contact is one way—perhaps the only way—to discover and discourage cheating. She suggests that online classes provide an important service to students who cannot travel to campus regularly and that such courses need not sacrifice service learning or collaborative projects. Nightingale’s focus is not on the issue of profit, although her college no doubt benefits financially from online courses, but on the benefits of online honors courses.

In the final essay of the Forum, “Misplaced Modifier: Honors Students and Honors Education” Brian C. Etheridge of the University of Baltimore argues that higher education is vulnerable right now because of its rising costs and a public perception of its decreasing effectiveness, so a company like American Honors can take advantage of this vulnerability: “their offer to community colleges to outsource honors offers a way out for colleges that want to keep honors but do not want to pay for it.” What honors programs need to do, he suggests, is “to wrap ourselves in the mission of our institutions, to situate ourselves so deeply in the institution’s DNA that it would be almost

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impossible to remove us,” and the way to do this is to place the focus not on honors as a thing apart but as a service provider for the whole campus. He argues that honors programs need to foreground the thirteenth of the NCHC Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program, providing laboratories of teaching and learning that are replicated campus-wide and thus “would be almost impossible to outsource.”

The first of four research essays in this issue of *JNCHC* directly addresses Brian Etheridge's point that honors should benefit an entire campus. In “Who Benefits from Honors: An Empirical Analysis of Honors and Non-Honors Students' Backgrounds, Academic Attitudes, and Behaviors,” Ted M. Brimeyer, April M. Schueths, and William L. Smith report on their study of honors and non-honors students at Georgia Southern University and conclude that “honors programs bring benefits to the entire educational system rather than simply creating a privileged class of students and that honors programs are thus worthy of the financial resources that institutions commit to them.” Based on 513 in-class survey responses from non-honors students in 2010 and 230 online responses to the same survey from honors students in 2012, the authors found that the honors program was producing racial but not economic stratification. Their results also suggested, though not conclusively, that honors students are less easily distracted, less concerned with grades, more concerned with learning, and more curious about their teachers than non-honors students, thus potentially serving as role models for non-honors students.

In another essay comparing honors and non-honors students, Gordon Shepherd of the University of Central Arkansas and Gary Shepherd of Oakland University present the results of their research on “Civic Tolerance among Honors Students” at their universities. Their findings suggest that honors students tend to be more open to the idea of certain groups—especially gays and lesbians, transgender individuals, Shiite Muslims, and atheists—as classroom teachers than non-honors students are at both universities, exhibiting this tolerance both when they are admitted to the program and increasingly as they proceed from freshmen to seniors. Accounting for such variables as race, gender, academic discipline, and church attendance, the authors found that tolerance at all levels was more pronounced among the Arkansas students than among those in Michigan, a difference that contradicts stereotypes about the South and that may result from the more fully developed structure, curriculum, and community at the University of Central Arkansas. The mixture of expected and unexpected results of the study suggests the need for broader-based national and perhaps international research on this topic.

“An Empirical Analysis of Factors Affecting Honors Program Completion Rates”—co-authored by Hallie Savage of Clarion University of Pennsylvania

and the National Collegiate Honor Council, Rod D. Raehsler of Clarion University of Pennsylvania, and Joseph Fiedor of Indiana University of Pennsylvania—presents research on factors correlated with successful completion of an honors program. Based on a sample of 449 students who were admitted to the Clarion University Honors Program for the years 2003 through 2013, the study examines academic major, gender, high school GPA, and SAT verbal and math scores in relation to honors program completion rates using both logit and probit models of statistical analysis. Among the interesting findings of this study are the significant correlations of completion with high school GPA and with majoring in business along with the lack of significant correlation with SAT scores.

This issue of *JNCHC* concludes with a humanities-based research essay titled “The Intrinsic Value of Liberal Arts: Cicero’s Example.” Kate Wintrol of the University of Nevada Las Vegas argues that the liberal arts are essential to most honors programs as well as to the history of higher education in Western culture. Powerful advocacy of the liberal arts is crucial in these times when the governor of North Carolina, for instance, is endorsing “legislation to base funding for state higher education on post-graduate employment rather than enrollment.” Wintrol finds a powerful advocate in Cicero, for whom writing became a survival tactic after he lost his daughter. Wintrol suggests that one value of the liberal arts is “to prepare students for their future and for the suffering that they, like Cicero, will inevitably experience in their lives.” Cicero also affirms the civic as well as personal importance of the liberal arts as vital to “the health and continuation of the Republic.” As supporters and protectors of the liberal arts, honors programs have an essential role to play in the future of democracy.

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