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An Agenda for the Future of Research in Honors

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Research in honors has become a priority for the National Collegiate Honors Council, and the phrase presents the honors community with an interesting ambiguity about the appropriate focus for future studies. Potential topics might include the progress of honors students in comparison to their non-honors cohorts; the criteria for selecting honors faculty; and the relationship between honors and its institutional context. The best methodologies might include statistical studies, qualitative analyses, or both. Future research in honors might reflect past practices or set a new trend in both topics and methodologies. As the NCHC launches its next fifty years, the time is right to take a careful look at where research in honors should be heading and to note that the horizon contains much that is promising.

A humanist by training who specializes in European history, I know that my research program colors my ideas about research more generally. In my discipline and at my institution, what counts as research in tenure and promotion decisions involves publication in professionally recognized outlets, e.g., refereed journals, books, and proceedings. Scholarly publications include specific elements: establishing the historiography of a topic, i.e., “reading it

up,” laboring in archives, and analyzing texts. To research competently in my field may also require specialized training in disciplines such as paleography, diplomatics, languages, and any number of other fields. What counts as research among my colleagues is specific to their fields: for those in the natural sciences, research and publication might require experience on a rock face, in a lab, or in a rainforest. Social scientists might work with field surveys and data sets. Research in any field, including mine, requires convincing specialists in other fields, as well as one’s own, to recognize the work as worthy of tenure and/or promotion.

Research in honors is another species altogether: it has more nebulous standards of worthiness, and there are no archives, bodies of scientific knowledge, established procedures, or information-rich data sets. Publications in honors abound nevertheless, and the *JNCHC* consolidated bibliography suggests that virtually any topic that appears in that journal might qualify, in one way or another, as research in honors. Pieces range from what constitutes an honors student to the effects of the digital revolution on honors education, from the campus-wide benefits of honors programs to global perspectives on what constitutes honors. Much of the work published in *JNCHC* is excellent and points the way to future research; three examples are Richard England’s preliminary survey of honors programs in the Northeast, which may lead to a national inventory of honors curricula, recruitment practices, and student characteristics; Marsha Driscoll’s work on assessment protocols, which is national in scope; and Margaret Lamb’s comparative work on honors in the United States and Great Britain. Yet *JNCHC* is only half the story.

Ours is a data-driven age, and in keeping with its spirit NCHC has begun aggressively to collect data on honors programs and colleges nationwide. More than fifty percent of the 890 member institutions responded to NCHC’s recent request for information, an impressive figure. Data are now easily available on many aspects of honors education, including gender distribution, program size, number of staff, and information on deans and directors such as longevity and percentage of appointment in honors. In the near future NCHC will extend the reach of its surveys, and more information will become available on, for instance, standardized test scores and grade point averages for entering students. Data will also be available on first-generation and non-traditional students as well as class, race, and ethnicity. For the present, data are available regarding the characteristics of honors faculty and administrators, and we can annually update the kind of survey information, based on much smaller samples, collected by Gordon and Gary Shepherd in 1991, showing

that 79% of honors administrators were in the humanities and social sciences (307), or by Ada Long in 1992, showing that 51% were from the traditional humanities, including 29% in English (92).

Now, with the availability of broad ranges of data based on large survey populations, honors administrators will be able to argue with hard evidence for statistically demonstrable advantages of honors: alumni contribute with greater frequency and in greater amounts than non-honors alumni; honors students are retained in their institutions at a higher rate than their non-honors counterparts; and their four-year graduation rate is better, often much better, than that of non-honors students. These data will support arguments for more sections, additional faculty, enhanced facilities, and support for student activities. For the longer term, accessing and studying much more detailed information on honors curricula nationwide will be possible, producing the kind of research that has seldom been undertaken in honors and that is potentially of enormous importance, i.e., comparisons across programs and institutions.

Research in honors is rich with promise, but as Cyril Connolly once observed, “whom the gods wish to destroy, they first call promising” (109).

Although to a casual observer, it may appear that the world of honors is swimming in research, reality may be otherwise. Both narrative and statistical accounts of honors are so far inadequate to yield useful conclusions. In the early days of the honors journals, the scope of research on and in honors was often narrow, chronicling a particular program’s practices at a particular university. These singular examples may have been illustrative and useful in themselves but were often unique to an institution or program and not necessarily replicable in other settings, or they might have been so exceptional to a particular moment that they were destined to retain the status of anecdote. Such articles are now routinely rejected for publication, and *JNCHC* has primarily published research essays based on statistical analysis in the past several years, but the focus of the studies often remains local and narrow.

Then, too, statistical analyses present their own kinds of problems. Honors education provides many advantages to its students in gaining admission to medical school and graduate programs, competing for highly prestigious fellowships, and attaining desirable employment. The figures *NCHC* is collecting, which allow for documentation of this information and much more, are invaluable in validating the claims programs make about their achievements and their value to their students and institutions. These numbers are relevant and useful, but as Michel de Montaigne reminds us in “On the

Education of Children,” they are limited, and the true measure of any education is “not of the lad’s memory but of his life” (qtd. by Ketcham 32). Data do not reveal much about the deeper effects that honors education may have on students involved in the process or the quality of life it confers on those who pass through it. Quantification here is either difficult or meaningless. For instance, rating an education or an achievement, much less a life, as a 7 rather than 7.5 is beyond meaningless. As the late Samuel Schuman reminded the honors community in *If Honors Students Were People: Holistic Honors Education*, the experience of honors students requires not only figures but consideration of their fundamental humanity.

Data analysis is thus not adequate per se in the move toward research that is deeper, better, and more revealing about honors, its students, the processes of honors education, and the faculty involved in it. If data are to serve as one of the sources for future honors research, they must meet at least two criteria: they must be longitudinal, i.e., they must be collected over a period of time sufficient to look at lives beyond the years in which a student is in formal schooling, and they must be comparative to a degree not envisioned by current NCHC data collection initiatives. Research would need to address how honors students compare to their fellows not merely in terms of gaining admission to graduate programs and medical school but in the quality of their learning and the quality of their lives. Designing survey instruments to measure these qualities, determining how to collect the data, and identifying representative survey subjects would be beyond challenging.

Undertaking a narrative and descriptive approach to honors programs is even more problematic as it attempts to go beyond local phenomena and suggest widespread or global characteristics of honors. As an historian, I might suggest national or international archives of honors, but even if such archives were necessary or feasible, physically or digitally, one can hardly imagine them as an equivalent of the Folger Shakespeare Library or the Beinecke Library at Yale. Other problems with this kind of portfolio approach to honors research would be where records would be physically or digitally housed, what they would contain, and how they would be funded; these are not trivial matters.

Another important issue that would seem to call more for a qualitative than a statistical approach is the effect of honors teaching on faculty, which remains virtually unexplored territory even though any honors director or dean knows that faculty compete vigorously for the privilege of teaching in honors because it benefits them both personally and professionally. Some

means for documenting the benefits of honors teaching should exist, but I have trouble envisioning what that means is.

Another difficult issue is whether or how honors counts in tenure and promotion. The editors now receive regular requests for the acceptance rates of both *JNCHC* and *Honors in Practice (HIP)*, which in both cases is about 60%. The editors also receive regular requests for letters of recommendation for promotion and tenure. No documentation exists, however, for how much honors research counts in promotion and tenure cases. Common sense would indicate that it might count more heavily in honors colleges and programs that grant tenure in honors; it might also count more heavily in institutions where teaching is a preeminent criterion for promotion and tenure; and it is likely to count less in doctoral-level research institutions. No data exist to support common sense on these matters, however. Perhaps honors can and should aspire to more and better research conducted according to high standards and carrying appropriate weight in tenure and promotion. Some proof would have to be offered of the high level of these standards, however. Inclusion of the journals and monographs in indexes such as ERIC, EBSCO, and CENGAGE, as well as the UNL Digital Commons, offers some evidence in that direction, as does the fact that, in 2014, NCHC publications had 43,483 downloads, with 20% of these coming from outside the United States. NCHC publications are nevertheless relatively new and unknown compared to the kinds of journals that command respect in tenure and promotion cases at research universities.

While many questions remain about research in honors, some immediate actions would be beneficial. More critical questioning and analytical bite would improve the quality of honors publication, as would research that is less self-referential, less caught inside a closed loop. Book reviews might be one strategy for widening the range of *JNCHC*, which has called for book reviews in the past but received almost none. Essays on such current works as Stephen Greenblatt's *The Swerve*, John Brockman's *What Should We Be Worried About*, and, Alexa Clay's *The Misfit Economy* would be particularly appropriate. In both notable and paradoxical ways, especially in their willingness to confront major contemporary issues and to stay current with the latest developments in the world of academia, honors curricula all over the country are far ahead of research in honors in respect to dealing with the latest books relevant to honors education.

In a brilliant analysis of the nineteenth century in Britain, Lytton Strachey noted that "the history of the Victorian Age will never be written: we

know too much about it” (vii). Research in honors has yet to reach that stage, but there is promise that it will. Of course, promise brings its own dangers, but devoting some serious attention to setting an agenda for honors research might guide it toward usefulness, accuracy, relevance, and depth.

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