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Editor's Introduction

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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The past two decades have seen a rapid professionalization of national scholarship advising at colleges and universities. Concurrently, the number of national scholarships has increased from the few that everybody recognized—the Rhodes, Marshall, Truman, Goldwater, and Fulbright—to hundreds that target different kinds of potential applicants. While scholarship advising used to be a volunteer activity performed by a few faculty members working with a small number of students, it is now usually a distinct administrative and structural unit with its own staff, often positioned within an honors college or program and in any case working in close collaboration with honors administrators and faculty. Identifying, recruiting, coaching, and coddling scholarship applicants is now a career track eyed closely by presidents and provosts eager for “wins”—perhaps not as coveted as wins in football or basketball but providing significant status and visibility that enhance the institution's reputation.

Given the central role that scholarship advising has come to play in honors administration, a Forum on “National Scholarships and Honors” is timely, if not overdue. A Call for Papers on this topic went out via the NCHC website, listserv, and e-newsletter inviting members to contribute to the Forum. The Call included a list of questions that Forum contributors might consider:

Has the expanded focus on competition for national scholarships enhanced or diminished the quality of honors education? Should potential candidates for national scholarships be identified as incoming freshmen or as students who have already proven successful in college? Should national scholarship advisors, whose numbers have proliferated rapidly in the past two decades, be housed in and associated with honors or operate independently of honors? What ethical complexities arise from the amount of help available to national scholarship applicants? Do national scholarship candidates take on a role similar to athletes in boosting an institution's reputation and rankings, and what are the consequences for the students? Does the competition for national scholarships help focus students' interests in scholarship, extracurricular commitments, study abroad, and/or service activities? Does the competition broaden or narrow students'

interests? Does the competition enhance or disrupt the sense of community often associated with honors?

The lead essay for the Forum, which was distributed along with the Call, is by Lia Rushton, formerly National Scholarship Advisor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB). The Call indicated that “Contributions to the Forum may—but need not—respond to Rushton’s essay.”

Based on her experience at UAB, Rushton provides thoughtful and nuanced perspectives on the role of scholarship advisors in her essay “First, Do No Harm.” In the late 1990s and early 2000s, she was relatively early in the rise of fellowships advising as a professional position within universities, and she could see, in contrast to the previous informal advising system, how important the position was not just in winning scholarships but in helping students benefit from the experience. She considers the pitfalls as well as opportunities of the application process for successful and unsuccessful students in what can be a life-changing experience, for better or worse. From her experience in helping students win Truman, Marshall, Rhodes, Fulbright, and Goldwater scholarships among many others, Rushton distills both general and particular suggestions for the advisors, faculty, and staff who support these students.

The first two responses to Rushton’s essays are from an honors administrator and former honors student who were directly involved in the scholarship application process at UAB. The former student is John A. Knox, a Rhodes applicant of the pre-Rushton era whom she mentions in her essay as “still haunted by his Rhodes interview.” Knox, now a full professor at the University of Georgia who has advised numerous fellowship applicants at two universities, describes the dark side of both the process and outcomes in “The Strange Game of Prestige Scholarships.” He particularly targets the Rhodes as a “big business, with money and power riding on the decisions,” fostering a culture of ruthlessness. He cites examples, including his own, of demeaning interviews and damaged winners as well as losers. Universities often compound the damage through the pressures they place on candidates and by “blaming nominees when they don’t bring home the bacon.” Honors programs are also complicitous when they “become assembly lines for prestige-scholarship applications and their dangling appendages, the applicants themselves.” He concludes that the winning move in this game is not to play.

While Knox presents the dark side of national scholarships, Linda Frost presents the ideal in “Open Letter to Lia Rushton.” Frost—now Dean of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga Honors College but formerly

Associate Director of the UAB Honors Program—worked with Rushton in advising scholarship applicants and learned from her that the key virtue of a good advisor is listening. Focusing on the benefits to the advisors as well as the candidates, Frost writes that Rushton taught her the value of “focusing first and last on creating relationships with the students and understanding who they were before you decided how to steer them in the advising that came later.” While scholarship candidates can be “little nasty stink bombs of privilege,” Frost has had only pleasant experiences with students who “spend hours clarifying who they are and what they imagine they might become in the form of thirteen separate short personal narratives.” She sees this kind of writing as a “powerful path to intimacy,” creating a “precious space, one full of the trust that exists in real and rare teaching, the trust and the surprise, the wonder and the love.”

Like Frost, Leslie Bickford of Winthrop University describes the pleasure and value of working with scholarship applicants on their writing. In “Of Groomers and Tour Guides: The Role of Writing in the Fellowships Office,” she first distinguishes between grooming students as if they were “in a dog show, making sure the fur is pruned and coiffed just right,” and serving as a tour guide by “helping students orchestrate their own journey of self-discovery, often through dialogue but even more through the writing process.” As a first step, she encourages students to “wallow in their ideas, to get messy with their writing instead of just anticipating what the reader or teacher wants them to say” in order to “peel back the layers and get to the heart of what makes a student unique.” Like Rushton, Bickford defines the role of the fellowships advisor as holding up a mirror to show applicants what is special about them and then helping them express in writing what they have discovered in the mirror.

Frost and Bickford have portrayed the joys of working with students on their writing, and now Anton Vander Zee of the College of Charleston provides a counterpoint to their essays by focusing on the audience for the writing and providing some nuts-and-bolts advice. “Becoming Legible: Helping Students Navigate Promotional Genres of Self-Narration” is a practical and also delightful treatment of how to write personal statements and statements of intent. Both these forms of writing, Vander Zee says, bear a resemblance to the oft-maligned five-paragraph essay and include generic expectations that “must be strategically adapted rather than merely applied.” Stressing the importance of genre, Vander Zee provides precise suggestions about how to help students navigate the formal conventions of these statements, which are

required for not only national fellowships but also graduate and professional schools. Genre, Vander Zee argues, centers on an audience: “Our students have remarkable stories to tell, but unless that telling anticipates how their stories will be received, they might as well be talking to themselves. Genre is, fundamentally, a way of talking to others in earnest.”

In the final Forum essay, “Lessons from Honors: National Scholarships, High-Impact Practices, and Student Success,” Craig T. Cobane and Audra Jennings take a different approach from the other Forum contributors, focusing on “helping students to develop the skills and experiences necessary to compete for prestigious scholarships.” They describe Western Kentucky University’s four-year “scholar development plans (SDPs),” through which students use high-impact practices (HIPS) strategically to “draw on their interests, refine their skills, and advance their future trajectory.” Using this strategy, a student “begins to understand each class and co-curricular activity as another brick in the road toward his ever-clarifying goal of using his studies and language skills” to achieve his goals. About the collaboration between honors and fellowships advising, Cobane and Jennings write: “Not all honors students end up applying for national scholarships, but all are advised and mentored as if they will. The goal is not winning or even applying; the goal is students who have developed the skills necessary to think strategically about their future and position themselves for success well beyond graduation.”

As an example of the exceptional accomplishments of honors students nationwide, *JNCHC* sometimes includes one of the winning essays in NCHC’s annual Portz Prize competition. We are proud this year to publish “Slaves, *Coloni*, and Status Confusion in the Late Roman Empire” by Hannah Basta of Georgia State University. Basta’s essay is a fascinating study of labor practices during the decline of slavery and the ensuing confusion about class status within the full range of Roman society. She describes the increasingly blurred distinction between free and slave that affected Roman social and family life as well as law and that led to a new labor class of *coloni*, a form of tenancy that included “the poorest of the free persons in the lower classes as well as freed slaves who remained a part of the lower class.” Basta shows that, as a result, “the legal and social distinction between slave and free became muddled,” creating “new social interactions among both the upper and lower classes.” Her meticulous research and careful argument provide an example of undergraduate scholarship at its best.

In addition to the Forum and the Portz essay, this issue of *JNCHC* includes seven research articles about honors. The first three focus on African

American students in honors, starting with a historical study focused on the University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin) titled “Resilience, Reconciliation, and Redemption: An Initial Historical Sketch of Pioneering Black Students in the Plan II Honors Program” by Richard J. Reddick, Emily A. Johnson, Ashley Jones, Tracie A. J. Lowe, Ashley N. Stone, and James Thomas. The centerpiece of the study is interviews with the first four graduates of the Plan II Honors Program in the late 1970s and early 1980s, almost two decades after the first Black students graduated from UT Austin. The authors examine the benefits of the Plan II Honors Program, the barriers that kept Black students from participating until late in the program’s history, the struggles they faced once they joined, the coping strategies they used, and the values they received from their honors education. The authors conclude that the first Black students in the Plan II Honors Program encountered the same “tokenism, racism, [and] pressure to prove their worth” and that they felt the same “desire for kinship” that Black students experience now. Their recommendations for addressing these special problems and needs include on-campus housing, role models, and alumni mentoring. Black students then and now, they emphasize, also need “individuals of any/all races who are willing and ready to help them in a way that demonstrates connection rather than paternalism.”

Stephen C. Scott, an alumnus of the West Virginia University Honors College, echoes many of the values and obstacles that Reddick et al. found in their study. In “Black Excellence: Fostering Intellectual Curiosity in Minority Honors Students at a Predominantly White Research Institution,” he describes his experience as the only Black student in his graduating class of honors students. Despite being misperceived, he was comfortable in honors until a study abroad trip in his senior year, which opened his eyes to the “importance of correcting my White friends’ sense of privilege, representing and advocating for my community in this elite academic space of honors, and paving the way for other Black students to succeed in higher education.” After providing historical and demographic background, Scott describes the “internal, intercultural struggles” that have been “created from societal Eurocentrism and are reinforced in higher education, which continues to pressure Black students into disassembling their cultural identity and assimilating to the majority, thus constraining their intellectual freedom.” He provides a vocabulary that should enable honors administrators to better understand their Black students and stresses the importance of study abroad, prestigious scholarships, methods of recruitment and retention, academic programming, and—above all—talking and listening to Black students.

Addressing some of the same issues studied by Scott and by Reddick et al., David M. Rhea examines data on honors admissions criteria at Governors State University (GSU) in “A Regression Model Approach to First-Year Honors Program Admissions Serving a High-Minority Population.” Rhea used “stepwise regression analyses to find high school student and institution variables that predict college-level success in honors program admissions.” After analyzing thirteen different variables, Rhea found, among other results, that three of them accounted for 47% of the variance in first-semester grades: the weighted GPA used by the GSU Honors Program, the English score on the ACT, and the college readiness of the high school. He also found that college readiness had no predictive significance for Black students and that the English ACT score had none for White (Caucasian and Hispanic) students. This sliding-scale approach, Rhea argues, can make admissions “more personalized to individual students and their high school educational experiences” and can help eliminate barriers to participation by minority students. He also concludes that administrators “can use this regression model with minimal risk of admitting students who would not be well-served by an honors program experience.”

While Rhea and many other researchers have focused considerable attention on predictive factors of success in honors, Tom Mould and Stephen B. DeLoach argue that attention needs to focus also on the definition of success. In “Moving Beyond GPA: Alternative Measures of Success and Predictive Factors in Honors Programs,” the authors write, “Despite the great variety in the structures, intended outcomes, expectations, criteria, and characteristics of honors programs and colleges around the country, we have an oddly anemic means for measuring success.” Mould and DeLoach examine the measures of success that honors administrators often take for granted—college GPA, participation, and retention—and argue that success should instead be measured in relation to the specific mission statement of an honors program or college. The authors describe a research study of their program at Elon University that, in line with their mission statement, includes “national, local, and campus-wide academic awards; membership in honor societies; presentations at regional, national, or international academic conferences; peer-reviewed academic publications; graduate school attendance; job placements at the time of graduation; leadership roles in extracurricular activities; and faculty mentor assessment.” Given this broader definition of success, their study led to conclusions akin to those of David Rhea: “students with similar weighted GPAs are equally likely to succeed, regardless of other factors such

as ethnic diversity, major, or quality of high school,” the only other predictive factor being the verbal SAT score.

Also measuring success in relationship to mission, Jacob Andrew Hester and Kari Lynn Besing tested the success of the University of Alabama (UA) Honors College's seminar series in achieving the goal of developing “agents of social change.” They hypothesized that “an honors education at UA corresponds to increased interest in voting,” and to test the hypothesis they studied the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) responses of 1,887 UA students during the 2010–2011 and 2011–2012 academic years. Their study shows that “a modest link exists between being an honors student and interest in voting” and that “honors students, all else held constant, are more likely to perceive that their institution has affected their interest in voting.” They also found that “the amount of reading and writing in their curriculum positively correlates with students' perception that their education has had an impact on their interest in voting.” They conclude that their data offer “cautious” support for the civic education hypothesis within the context of honors education.

The final essay in this issue is “Demography of Honors: The Census of U.S. Honors Programs and Colleges” by Richard I. Scott and Patricia J. Smith of the University of Central Arkansas and Andrew Cognard-Black of St. Mary's College, the Maryland Public Honors College and the National Collegiate Honors Council. This essay builds on four previous data analyses dating from 2013 through 2016, two of which appeared in *JNCHC* (17.1 and 17.2). The current essay, based on a survey referred to as the “2016 Census,” examines programmatic and infrastructural features of honors programs and colleges among both NCHC members and non-members. Survey respondents included 408 NCHC member institutions (48.1% response rate) and 50 non-member institutions (26.9% response). Among their interesting findings, the authors show that “in a comparison of non-NCHC members to members, the former offer their students fewer benefits in both curricular and co-curricular portions of the program.” Supporting the results of previous surveys, the 2016 Census also “shows that NCHC members in general have more human, infrastructural, and financial resources and offer a wider range of courses, co-curricular programming, honors LLCs, and honors scholarships.” In their conclusion, the authors suggest five specific research questions that could be addressed using the data now available.

