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Faculty as Honors Problem Solvers

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Abstract: Postsecondary honors educators are adept at identifying problems and proposing solutions in honors education, but they may not disseminate their solutions effectively. This essay argues that honors administrators should familiarize themselves with the professional and scholarly resources that NCHC institutional membership affords, and then they should share what they have learned with honors teaching faculty. Rather than simply serving as advisors on administrative and programmatic issues, honors faculty also need the tools and opportunities to be effective honors problem solvers for day-to-day pedagogical issues.

Keywords: honors, administrators, faculty, problems

In his lead essay, “Shunning Complaint: A Call for Solutions from the Honors Community,” Richard Badenhausen tasks the membership of the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) to move beyond merely bemoaning existential challenges in honors education toward formulating philosophical and practical solutions. Many of the current issues he identifies, however, from AP and dual enrollment to diversity and accessibility, have been addressed at NCHC’s national conferences and in its publications, such as special forums in the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*. For instance, at the 2018 annual national conference, the issue of mental health and honors students was the topic of six separate conference sessions, including one in the Developing in Honors (DIH) pre-conference workshop. The conference also has dedicated tracks for Best Honors Administrative Practices (BHAP), Professional Staff in Honors (PSIH), and Students in Honors in which issues such as these are examined.

Perhaps the problem is not that honors professionals complain instead of solving problems but rather that they propose solutions without disseminating them effectively. Issues in honors ebb and flow—consider the

Accreditation Wars of the 2000s—and while some NCHC members are honors lifers, many more rotate in and out of the honors community within three to five years. By necessity, students graduate and move on, but administrators also move up or move out with regularity, as demonstrated by healthy registration for the annual Beginning in Honors (BIH) pre-conference workshop. With this amount of turnover, the honors community should not be surprised to feel as if conference sessions or posts to the electronic discussion list are constantly reinventing the wheel rather than moving forward.

So, in the spirit of Badenhausen's call to shun complaint, I propose that we reexamine and deploy the comparatively stable resource of honors faculty, i.e., non-administrative, boots-on-the-ground, departmental teaching faculty. Teachers have become the keepers of institutional honors memory, especially because the dire post-2009 academic job market has drastically reduced both the appeal of and opportunity for the academic gypsy lifestyle. Also, teachers work with honors students on a daily basis, and when they see a student in real crisis, they coordinate with each other as best they can—under the shadow of FERPA—to provide assistance.

Therefore, if honors administrators are concerned with the mental health issues of honors students, they should remember that teaching faculty are generally compassionate and well-meaning but that most lack the training to intervene properly. One strategy is inviting campus mental health professionals and specialists in gifted education to speak with faculty about how the cognitive, affective, and behavioral needs of honors students differ from other students, such as addressed in James T. Webb et al.'s *Misdiagnosis and Dual Diagnoses of Gifted Children and Adults: ADHD, Bipolar, OCD, Asperger's, Depression, and Other Disorders*. For example, in her 2018 NCHC conference session on "Teaching Gifted Students: Models and Methods," Jodi Meadows outlined Kazimirz Dabrowski's concept of overexcitabilities in gifted students (psychomotor, sensual, emotional, intellectual, and imaginal) and demonstrated ways that honors classroom practices can either enhance or exacerbate these traits. Administrators should share this material from NCHC conference sessions with their honors faculty or, if funding permits, take faculty to conferences to gather information from multiple conference tracks.

For dedicated faculty who see participating in the honors community as valid professional development, a faculty seminar or retreat provides the opportunity to discuss issues in honors pedagogy. Many honors colleges and programs have faculty councils, but their meetings may focus on

helping honors administrators with their administrative and programmatic issues. Faculty require the intellectual space and time to share pedagogical approaches as well, such as comparing thesis expectations from different disciplines. Faculty should help determine the focus for the teaching retreat rather than having the administrator dictate the agenda from the top down. NCHC also holds annual faculty development workshops, and NCHC publications include a variety of sample faculty development designs, such as Milton D. Cox's "Building and Enhancing Honors Programs through Faculty Learning Communities" and Hanne ten Berge and Rob van der Vaart's "Honors Components in Honors Faculty Development," both from the recent NCHC monograph *Breaking Barriers in Teaching and Learning*.

Honors administrators are also rightly concerned with issues of diversity and socioeconomic accessibility in honors student demographics, but they should similarly examine diversity among honors faculty. Badenhausen argues that "honors programs and colleges are still predominantly white" and that our practices may "ignore the monumental demographic shifts taking place in our country and universities." Faculty hiring, however, does not seem to exhibit a concurrent "monumental demographic shift" at the department level, which constitutes the pool from which honors teachers are drawn. Just as the honors community is working to overcome potential bias in honors admission and retention standards, honors administrators should also work with departments to expand the honors faculty pool in equally thoughtful ways to increase representation.

Another way to promote faculty diversity while addressing issues of sexism, racism, and LGBTQ-phobia in honors is to dismiss the sexist, racist, and LGBTQ-phobic teachers from the honors faculty pool. Faculty colleagues across campus know who makes wildly inappropriate pole dancing jokes in the Faculty Senate, who repeatedly grouses during department committee meetings about overly chatty, emotionally needy honors students, or who tells female honors STEM majors that they do not have to do well academically because they can just marry a higher-earning male classmate. Administrators can be naturally reluctant to wade into sticky issues of departmental politics, not wanting to hurt someone's feelings or upset the pecking order, and faculty opinions might be dismissed as departmental gossip and infighting, and, besides, students are going to refer to Rate My Professor to see who is a raging jerk; however, honors administrators can also be proactive in weeding out the raging jerks from the honors course schedule.

Similarly, faculty members who only teach honors classes for the perks should be rotated out. In the *JNCHC* article “Honors Teachers and Academic Identity: What to Look For When Recruiting Honors Faculty,” Rocky Dailey conducted a quantitative survey of the NCHC membership and correlated academic rank and position with factors such as job satisfaction, self-efficacy, faculty governance, and compensation, concluding that traits of potential honors faculty included “highly motivated” and “outstanding teachers.” Just as honors programs and colleges want to recruit and retain students who will work hard and grow as leaders rather than simply game the system, faculty should be politely sent on their way if they only want a smaller class size, if they deign to teach an honors section because it is slightly less onerous than teaching a regular undergraduate class, or if they subscribe to the myth that teaching an honors course significantly reduces one’s workload.

Once honors administrators have identified and prioritized the problems to tackle in their individual honors programs or colleges, then they should assemble a pool of teaching faculty who bring drive and integrity to honors. The NCHC website provides practical resources, such as conference programs and bibliographies for the monograph series and the journals, that administrators can share with teaching faculty so that they do not have to start from scratch every time when approaching specific problems. For example, if a director is concerned about the effects that AP and dual enrollment are having on her program, then she can ask faculty to read and discuss the *JNCHC* forum on “AP and Dual Enrollment Credit in Honors” for potential solutions. Other forums on “Helping Honors Students in Trouble,” “Social Class and Honors,” and “Nontraditional Students in Honors” would be good starting points for productive faculty discussion in those areas. Honors administrators should familiarize themselves with the resources that NCHC institutional membership affords, and then they should remember to pass on what they have learned to give honors teaching faculty the tools and opportunities to be effective honors problem solvers.

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