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The Body of Honors: Certification as an Expression of Disciplinary Power

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Abstract: Using Michel Foucault's writing on discipline and training, the author suggests that processes like certification ultimately serve as covert normalizing activities that run counter to the spirit and practice of honors education. The author argues for an open, fluid, generative approach to honors program review.

Keywords: Foucault, Michel, 1926–1984; niche evaluation; organizational ideology; learned institutions and societies; standardization

Patricia J. Smith has done excellent work over the years gathering useful data about honors education and exploring our collective history. Smith's latest contribution positions the evolution of honors education over the past century as one of professionalization marked by increasing specialization, a development she suggests may resurface discussions about certification of honors programs and colleges. I would like to complicate this narrative by using the lens of Michel Foucault's writing on discipline and training to suggest that processes like certification ultimately serve as covert "normalizing" activities that may run counter to the spirit and practice of honors education, the roots of which are grounded in experimentation, diversity, interdisciplinarity, disruption, and catholicity, all of which operate as strong and positive counters to what have often passed for norms in higher education over the years. Given these historical underpinnings of honors education, I believe a more fluid, flexible, formative approach to program review makes much more sense than the standardization implicit in certification, especially in light of the troubling Foucauldian context.

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault charts the progress of penal activity from early versions of ritualistic and public torture of the criminal body as an expression of the sovereign's power in the mid-eighteenth century to the later, more covert practices of control that use strict training and new technologies to bring the massive weight of disciplining activities upon non-bodily entities like the soul, a shift that results in "permanent coercions" of large populaces into "automatic docility" (169). Over time, juridical powers conceal the technologies and bureaucracies of penal practices while concentrating their attention toward "the heart, the thoughts, the will, the inclinations" (16), for that approach is ultimately most effective in framing "proper" ways of knowing and seeing the world.

The three essential "instruments" from which this new disciplining power derives its success are hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and examination (170). While Foucault investigates these practices and their effect on subjects like those of soldiers and students, I see them as well aligned with the aims of a process like certification, in which honors programs or colleges become positioned as "docile bodies" upon which those in positions of power—"technicians of discipline" (169)—inscribe their wishes. Rather than institutions with agency and independence, honors programs subject to certification become, in this light, "target(s) for new mechanisms of power" (155), power that is exercised through the adherence to a set of normalizing standards that turn primarily on "correct" resources, processes, and practices.

The key to hierarchical observation, Foucault's first instrument, is that it "coerces by means of observation" (170). The subject exists under a constant threat of surveillance—via a "disciplinary gaze" (174)—whose goal is to shape behavior but do so even in the physical absence of a disciplinary power, for surveilling eyes "must see without being seen" (171). This hidden coercion is the wicked brilliance of activities like accreditation and certification: they loom heavily over an institution and its procedures from afar by cultivating a body of outside experts whose power rests in the ability to verify the university as a going concern. That threat of extinction (and promise of approval) gives weight to the externally established standards and ensures that an entire administrative structure will be set up to manage the surveilling activities. While accreditors spend very little time on campus, their gaze is ever-present in the operations of the institution. In this model, educational spaces end up being organized so that they fall "under the scrupulously 'classificatory' eye of the master" (147). Given where higher education has found itself in 2020 with a massive accreditation/assessment infrastructure firmly

in place, I wonder if the honors community really wants to go down this same path. I know for the hundreds of under-resourced honors programs that struggle even to secure funds to attend our annual conference, they will be in no position to manage the demands and expenses of such a procedure—they simply lack the capacity and resources to bring it about. Likewise, our very modest-sized national office staff and dedicated collection of volunteers seem in no position to ramp up the administrative machine that would be required to manage certification of almost 900 member institutions, given that NCHC facilitated a grand total of nine program reviews during the 2019 calendar year (and seven during the previous year).

A second practice, normalizing judgment, functions as what Foucault calls a “small penal mechanism . . . [that] enjoys a kind of judicial privilege, with its own laws, its specific offences, its particular forms of judgement” (177–78). The objective of the reviewer’s gaze in realizing a normalizing goal is ultimately “reducing gaps” between programs, thus the process becomes “*corrective*” (179). The purpose of certification ends up being not formative and the method not collaborative but rather summative and antagonistic, all in service of standardization. For Foucault, “The power of the Norm” is that the “Normal is established as a principle of coercion” (184) due to the gravitational weight of gathering together those who follow similar standards and the threat of punishment of those who fall outside such standards. Foucault views the normalizing impetus as perhaps the most insidious feature of these kinds of disciplinary activities, for he returns again and again to that element and concludes his study by emphasizing the omnipresence of the “judges of normality” (304), the “carceral network” as the “greatest support . . . of the normalizing power” (304), the effect of prison to “exercise a power of normalization” (308), and in the book’s final sentence, the role of normalization in the “formation of knowledge in modern society” (308).

Given the grand diversity within honors education—the many different types of institutions that house our programs, the assorted approaches to learning that inform what passes for honors on campuses, the varied financial commitments individual institutions have made to honors, and the wide-ranging experiences, abilities, identities, and backgrounds of the individuals who make up our community—setting up procedures that seek to standardize our practices seems contrary to the essence of honors. After all, it is possible to have high standards (like the “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program”) without standardization. The diversity of institutions, approaches, and practices is one of the great sources of power

for NCHC; it's institutionalized in the way we select our leadership, how we staff committees, and even by what method we charge annual dues, not to mention in the NCHC board-approved statement on diversity, which notes, "We make inclusive excellence possible by understanding that differences between and among us are strengths." The results of certification would be standardization around a norm, a consequence that would shift the attention of those leading programs toward establishing homogeneity so as not to suffer the consequences of penal judgment.

Finally, the examination—Foucault's third disciplinary method—brings together the "techniques" of the previous two practices in order "to classify and to punish" (184). Entry into the club of certified programs ensures an acknowledged relation to power while exclusion serves to punish. Wielding a rubric whose underpinnings are disciplinary at their core, the reviewer-certifier engages in what Foucault calls a "highly ritualized" examination, one that combines "the ceremony of power and the form of the experiment, the deployment of force and the establishment of truth" (184). Much like Foucault's presentation of the doctor engaged in rounds—"coming from outside, add[ing] his inspection to many other controls" (185)—program certifiers approach the program's "case" so that it may be "described, judged, measured, compared with others" and thus "trained or corrected, classified, normalized, excluded" (191). Ultimately, certification is an exercise of power that seeks to create a network of relations among honors programs that turns on the simple factor of approval.

When we have discussed certification as a community over these past few years, I have tried to be a generous reader in seeking to understand the motivations behind this effort. Most of the arguments seem to turn on a concern about status; certification, the claim goes, could support programs and colleges looking to an outside body to assign them chosen status, which then might act as a bulwark against intrusion or attack by hostile administrators or meddling legislators. Yet given that NCHC has no standing with these bodies, I don't see how the imprimatur of certification is going to stop or even slow down hostile actors from behaving poorly, and other tactics to fight administrative battles are more effective. Another status-related motivator resembles what spawned the college ranking industry, the idea that external evaluators are able to make judgments about "quality" that in turn help consumers make more informed choices. On the sellers' end, positive rankings thus might assist an honors program or college in its admissions efforts. Of course, what rankings like those produced in *U. S. News & World Report* have really

accomplished is sifting out well-resourced universities from under-resourced ones under the guise of evaluating quality. For example, of the “top” six national universities in the 2019 edition of *U. S News’s* “Best Colleges,” five contain the five largest endowments in the country. Rankings can be understood on one level as simple measures of wealth, and their consequences include forcing those institutions lower on the food chain to ape the behavior of their betters. The ranking industry has taken these practices to their ridiculous logical extreme: in Niche’s 2020 rankings, for example, Clemson University has the 196th best history program in the country while Ithaca comes in at 245. A quick look at the methodology behind these ratings shows that over half the score is based on the college’s overall Niche evaluation, the percentage of students who major in history, and the interest expressed in a particular college’s history program on Niche’s website (Niche), none of which have anything to do with excellence. A more crucial question is whether a membership organization like NCHC—with a mission “to support and enhance the community of educational institutions, professionals, and students who participate in collegiate honors education around the world”—should engage in a practice that would disrupt that community by creating two tiers of membership, those on the inside and those on the outside.

The certification instrument developed to facilitate this hierarchizing exercise focuses mostly on process, practices, and resources—stuff a program has or does not have. The rubric keys off the Basic Characteristics, which themselves are heavily focused on resource issues because the document was approved in 1994 when the status of honors was a bit more uncertain and funding issues were often central to conversations tied to program review. But honors has matured significantly as a field during the subsequent quarter century. The explosive growth of honors colleges (Cognard-Black), favorable treatment in the press (Bruni; Zalaznick), and consultant reports that identify honors programs as a top retention strategy (“2015 Student Retention”) all demonstrate that the value of honors is less at issue today. I do appreciate the impetus behind the instrument, which highlights the ways that honors should be institutionalized at a college or university, and I don’t have too much of a problem with its various categories, yet its genesis in the Basic Characteristics causes it to be lacking in some crucial areas: for example, the words “diversity,” “equity,” and “inclusion” do not appear even once in the 27-page document, which is rather remarkable in 2020. As Foucault might observe, in pushes toward standardization, the highest crime is difference, a crime that the technologies of normalization seek to punish.

I also might quibble with Smith's historical account in a couple of places. For example, Smith cites Caplow's observation about professional associations playing a certifying role through the activities of "admission and final qualification" and establishing codes of ethics that result in "limiting internal competition and eliminating the unqualified," a role Smith hopes the Basics Characteristics could play. They could "serve a similar purpose," Smith writes, if they were enhanced with the teeth of certification. This is the point at which we most strongly disagree, as Smith's narrative around professionalization and certification sees assessment as a summative activity that results in winners and losers, whereas I understand that exercise as deeply generative and formative. I actually see NCHC as much less analogous to the professional associations mentioned by Smith—groups that might have very good reasons for maintaining standards around the practice of law or medicine—and much more aligned with membership organizations like AAC&U, CIC, and NACAC that advance the broad causes of a body of institutions that share numerous commonalities but are varied in size, scope, and mission. Doctors and lawyers go to school to learn a specific craft—much like plumbing—where there are measurable standards of performance around a content-based curriculum. But our business in honors involves skills-building—ways of knowing and seeing the world—rather than simple content-delivery. We are training students to think critically across a wide swath of disciplines, to develop as servant-leaders, and to amass a set of reflective capacities that will equip them to handle all that life throws their way; none of these activities is captured in certification nor could be. Think of the placed-based learning approach of *City as Text*[™], which adapts strategies from ethnography, geography, cultural studies, history, urban studies, and composition, among others, but with the primary learner-centered goals, in Walker Percy's beautiful rendering of knowledge-creation, of seeing "the thing as it is" (47) and creating "sovereignty" in the knower by positioning them as "a wanderer in the neighborhood of being who stumbles into the garden" (60).

My second gentle corrective is pointed toward Smith's account of the genesis of certified program reviewers. On its second-to-last page, Smith's article argues that in 2014 the NCHC board decided to "establish NCHC-Approved Program Reviewers who would use the proposed instrument . . . to strengthen the process of program reviews" as a kind of compromise due to the controversy that accompanied discussions around certification. Having been part of those conversations, though, I understood the driving force behind this process to be 1) the opportunity to bring the review activity "in

house” as a way of generating revenues for NCHC and 2) the chance to collate a body of research about honors programs and colleges that might be valuable to the organization and its membership. Additionally, NCHC was in the program-reviewer-training business far before the conversation about certification came to a head in 2014. For example, I attended an NCHC-sponsored training workshop to become a certified reviewer in 2006. Since Smith’s article seeks to establish an historical record of our organization’s evolution, these caveats are important.

Ultimately, my concerns about certification center on understanding it as a Foucauldian normalizing activity that runs directly counter to the catholicity of honors education with its broad and diverse tent that includes two- and four-year institutions, research universities and liberal arts colleges, faith-based and secular universities, and schools from around the world. I write from the perspective of having led my program through two self-studies that culminated in enormously useful program reviews by outside evaluators, having participated in eighteen site visits as a program reviewer or consultant in the past decade, and having co-facilitated a workshop for colleagues training to become new program reviewers. During that time, I have seen schools benefit most from an open, fluid, generative approach to program review, one not tied to the review instrument and its normalizing impulses (which reflect the desires of an external organization to certify institutions through a summative judgment) but one that is deeply flexible, supportive, and responsive to the needs of our individual member institutions.

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