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Editor's introduction

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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The topic of this issue's Forum, "The Professionalization of Honors," has a history in the National Collegiate Honors Council that probably goes back to its origins and that has evoked turbulent controversy within the past three or four decades. In the mid-1990s, the proposal to establish a document titled "The Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program" arose from a perceived vagueness about the meaning of "honors education." Proponents of the document claimed that they were simply trying to create clarity out of chaos in defining the profession of honors while opponents feared the prospect of standardization. Heated objections arose during conference sessions and panel discussions, with many members insisting that the NCHC had no authority or right to dictate the nature of honors education. What happened next was that, with the deft and diplomatic guidance of John Grady and others, a committee finally produced "the document," which immediately quelled all objections. The content, tone, and mode of suggestion reassured all parties that the document was not designed to—and did not—dictate what honors programs had to look like. The document provided guidelines that virtually everyone found reasonable, and, above all, it did not enforce or advocate standardization.

The next eruption of the professionalization controversy in 2012–14 resurrected some of the same issues of two decades earlier but with increased acrimony and a different outcome. The issue this time was certification: an argument by some of the NCHC leadership that the NCHC should become an accrediting agency with the power to grant or deny the legitimacy of individual honors programs and colleges. Again, the underlying issue was standardization, but now the proponents advocated a professional prerogative for the NCHC to enforce regulatory standards for honors education and for membership in the organization, in a manner akin to the American Bar Association or American Medical Association. The rebellion against this proposal was swift, passionate, and widespread. The controversy created a rift in the organization that disrupted its celebrated unity, cordiality, and mutual support. Ultimately, the opposition succeeded in shutting down the movement toward certification, and the issue of standardization faded away . . . until Patricia J. Smith bravely raised it again in her lead essay for the current Forum on "The Professionalization of Honors."

Smith's lead essay was posted on the NCHC website in the fall of 2019, and a call for responses went out to the NCHC membership:

In her essay, "The Professionalization of Honors Education," [Patricia J. Smith] cites the theory of how an occupation becomes a profession advanced by sociologist Theodore Caplow in 1954: "Caplow identifies four stages whereby a developing profession transitions to a professional association: organizing membership, changing the name of occupation from its previous status, developing a code of ethics, and after a period of political agitation, beginning a process by which to enforce occupational barriers." Synchronizing the evolution of the NCHC with Caplow's stages of professionalization, Smith argues that the issue of certification, which has been controversial and disruptive in NCHC's past, is likely to arise again as a matter for serious attention.

Questions for Forum contributors to consider might include the following:

- Is certification—the establishment and enforcement of “occupational barriers” (Caplow) or the use of “a nationally accepted instrument to be used in a process of certifying honors colleges” (Smith)—a necessary next step in the professionalization of honors?
- Is the professionalization of honors inevitable? Is it necessary? Is it desirable?
- Is standardization a necessary consequence of professionalization?
- What values does certification add to or subtract from honors education?
- If the NCHC were to “establish and sustain its jurisdictional authority” over honors education, what might be the responses of various interest groups such as two-year colleges and research universities? Would they accept this authority or withdraw from it? What would be the effect on the internationalization of honors, given the different structures and values of honors education in other countries?

- What characteristics of honors education might (or might not) distinguish the NCHC from the kind of professional organizations that Caplow describes?
- If honors develops as a discipline rather than a profession, is Caplow's argument for the inevitability of "occupational barriers" or certification irrelevant to honors?

We are pleased to publish six of the responses to Smith's essay with the first four written by key opponents of certification in 2012–14 and the last two by newcomers to the debate. None of the submissions to the Forum advocated certification.

A wag on the Publications Board quipped about the first four contributors that John Zubizarreta writes from the heart, Richard Badenhausen from the head, Jeffrey A. Portnoy from the spleen, and Joan Digby from the soul. All are part of the same body of thought, however, in contending that the issue of certification temporarily unhinged a strong, united, and already professional community of honors educators.

In "Honors, Professionalism, and Teaching and Learning: A Response to Certification," John Zubizarreta of Columbia College takes umbrage at Smith's suggestion "that neither she nor I nor any of us in honors is a legitimate professional if we take Caplow's theory seriously, and neither are our programs and colleges." He counters that "honors is already a full-fledged professional endeavor; our community of faculty, directors, and deans are already acknowledged professionals; and our institutional units are already professional operations." He contrasts the entrepreneurial language that characterizes Caplow's framework—"power, hierarchy, management, control, clientele, transaction, efficiency, accountability, certification"—with the language of education: "knowledge, competence, respect, collaboration, risk, ethics, reflection, experimentation, responsibility, review, integrity, freedom." He similarly contrasts Caplow's theory with "contemporary models of the 'scholarship of teaching and learning' (SOTL)," concluding that what we do in honors and in the NCHC should "reflect our commitment to the lexicon that sustains our special community and not its opposite, the divisive language of certification."

Richard Badenhausen's rejection of certification is strikingly akin to Zubizarreta's but comes from the very different direction of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. In "The Body of Honors: Certification as an Expression of Disciplinary Power," Badenhausen, of

Westminster College, equates the standardization inherent in certification to what Foucault describes as the “disciplining power” that propagates and enforces “hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and examination.” The covert coercion of what Foucault calls “the disciplinary gaze” is, according to Badenhausen, “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.” The consequence of certification for honors would be to “shift the attention of those leading programs toward establishing homogeneity so as not to suffer the consequences of penal judgment.” Certification would be an exercise of power designed to control entry into “the club of certified programs” and to exercise punishment through exclusion from the club. Having served as a program reviewer as well as having his own program undergo an NCHC review, Badenhausen argues that this process, far from a “Foucauldian normalizing activity,” can and should be “deeply flexible, supportive, and responsive to the needs of our individual member institutions.”

Jeffrey A. Portnoy, of Georgia State University, Perimeter College, was no doubt the most impassioned opponent of certification when it became a real possibility in 2013. Any reader who wants to experience the feel of that moment in NCHC’s history will find it in his essay, “A Requiem for Certification, A Song of Honors,” which narrates a detailed account of the epic combat between the forces for and against certification. While expressing high regard for Smith and her scholarship, Portnoy takes issue with every facet of her essay, disparaging Caplow, denying the relevance of his theory to honors, impugning the motives of those who advocated certification as potentially self-serving, praising the heroism of those who thwarted the drive toward certification, lamenting the harm done to the goodwill of the NCHC during the prolonged battle, prophesying the possibility of further ill will if the issue of certification remains on the table, disputing Smith’s definition of professionalism, and laying out evidence that the NCHC has already evolved into a robustly professional organization. In foreseeing the possibility that “the issue of certification—which in this case is equivalent to accreditation—is rearing its snaky-haired head once again,” Portnoy continues to sound the alarm in his Homeric account of the previous battle for the soul of the NCHC.

Another prime mover in the resistance to certification was Joan Digby, now retired from LIU Post. Many of her comments in “Swan Song” harmonize with those of her colleagues opposing professionalization. She writes,

for instance, “I see the word ‘professionalization’—an ugly word in its own right—as a mask that gives credibility to so-called ‘strategic’ plans mostly focused on making money. I am very suspicious of professionalizing honors because I fear it will produce a hollow shell based on orders from the top down.” While Portnoy’s essay partook of the epic mode, Digby’s is more in the realm of tragedy. Having just been fired after forty years in honors and replaced by “self-styled professionals” who knew nothing about the special nature of her honors program, she says, “I present myself as an instructive example of what happens when honors education is reshaped by controlling administrative powers ruling a degree mill and wresting curriculum from the prerogative of faculty.” Digby describes many of the ways that the NCHC has, in fact, become more professional over the years—including the establishment of a national office, the accommodation of professional schools, the inclusion of professional honors staff, and the production of high-quality publications—while nevertheless insisting that the soul of honors is “the experience of teaching in honors, publishing, participating in professional conferences and honorary organizations, and showing a keen interest in mentoring students outside of [one’s] discipline.” The loss of a presence such as Joan Digby, recipient of an NCHC Founders Award, not only diminishes the soul of her program and of the NCHC, but it might well presage the consequences of professionalizing honors.

While not directly involved in the battles of 2013, Jayda Coons of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga shows in “A Different Kind of Agitation” that she has gleaned the scope of the controversy through her readings of NCHC journals. Stating her own position, she writes, “Plenty of smart speculation in the pages of *JNCHC* and elsewhere shows that various forms of homogeneity and over-structuration create an uninspired culture of rules-following.” She then moves to a corollary issue: “how the vision of professionalization offered by Caplow’s theory risks becoming another method of gatekeeping in a system rife with hyperambitious expectations.” She notes that “Smith’s essay does not mention the realities that many prospective faculty members, in honors and in other areas, already face: a never-enough culture of overwork, personal sacrifice, instability, and, much of the time, chronic unemployment.” Coons makes the practical point that “to propose additional specialization in honors education on top of what is already expected of college faculty—expertise, research, and pedagogical excellence within a teachable field—is too much to justify in the market environment as it currently stands.” Thinking of honors as “a collective—non-monolithic, but

generally committed to a robust, anti-careerist, holistic, and experiential liberal arts education—rather than as a certifiable administrative body,” Coons concludes, “Necessary work is to be done . . . to fundamentally reshape academic spaces so that they are accessible, collaborative, and diverse—a truly public good. Rather than welcome externally determined legitimacy, let us instead take notes from unions, activists, and our own students. We have something important to save.”

While the earlier essay by Richard Badenhausen took a Foucauldian approach to the issue of professionalization, the final essay in the Forum adopts a Bourdieusian perspective. First, K. Patrick Fazioli of Mercy College refutes Smith’s claims that the history of the NCHC corresponds to the first three stages of Caplow’s concept of professionalization before he zeroes in on the fourth stage of certification. In “Honors in Practice (Theory): A Bourdieusian Perspective on the Professionalization of Honors,” Fazioli writes, “Setting aside the question of whether enforced certification of honors programs and colleges is a prudent idea, I believe any such efforts would prove largely ineffective since honors has not satisfied the main purpose of any of Caplow’s prior stages” and that, besides, it has no incentive to implement the fourth stage since honors educators are trained and credentialed through their disciplinary affiliations. Fazioli proposes a more appropriate theoretical framework than Caplow’s in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, which offers a far more “powerful analytical toolkit for investigating social phenomena.” Summarizing some of the basics of that toolkit, Fazioli stresses “its potential for transcending futile debates over whether honors is a discipline or profession by unpacking the social dynamics and paradoxes at the heart of this unique academic community” and by addressing serious questions such as how “honors leaders balance the goals of meritocracy and equality in their daily decision making.”

Smith concluded her lead essay for the Forum on “The Professionalization of Honors” with the following statement: “The controversy over certification has died down for now, but the issue is likely to arise again in the future since it goes to the heart of NCHC’s mission and the nature of honors education.” She fulfilled her prophecy in writing her essay, thereby eliciting a fruitful discussion of the controversy in its past manifestations and a robust reconsideration of the issue within the current culture of honors. The responses—from NCHC members who both are and are not familiar with the history of the dispute—are unanimous in arguing that certification is antithetical to “the heart of NCHC’s mission and the nature of honors education.”

The respondents also provide abundant evidence of the professional—not professionalized or standardized—values and vitality of the organization and its member institutions.

A primary mechanism for using standards as guidelines and not dictates in assessing honors programs is the option of an NCHC program review, which is available to any member institution and which is also the subject of the first research essay in this issue of *JNCHC*. “The Current Status, Perceptions, and Impact of Honors Program Review,” by Rebecca Rook of Franciscan University of Steubenville, OH, reports the results of a 2018 census of honors administrators who had undergone an NCHC program review. Rook designed and distributed a questionnaire that she distributed by email to all 813 NCHC honors program directors, of whom 121 (15%) completed the entire questionnaire. She then followed up by interviewing five of the respondents. The results indicated a high degree of satisfaction among those who had experienced an external review except for one participant from a two-year college who expressed dissatisfaction with being assigned a reviewer from a four-year university. Based on her results, she argues: “Having reputable external reviewers presents higher administrations with an objective report of program performance and enables programs to acquire the resources they need to make ongoing evaluation more feasible.” She also asserts that NCHC program reviews “promote valuable, needed reflection and generate essential stakeholder support.”

The next essay addresses the moral and educational values of the honors college at Purdue University and the development of a mentor program to introduce and acculturate new students to those values. In “Owning Honors: Outcomes for a Student Leadership Culture,” Adam Watkins first establishes “the deep connection between honors and leadership development” that is evident in the literature on honors. He then describes a way of promoting both the honors curriculum and the college’s “culture of servant leadership and community” by assigning honors mentors to teams of incoming students. While the program was developed to assist first-year students, the focus of this essay is the development of leadership skills and values among the mentors. During the fall semester, the “mentors guide their respective teams in the completion of interdisciplinary projects, help catalyze group development, and coach the first-year students on effective collaboration and leadership strategies” so that, by the second semester, first-year students will be attuned to the expectations and values of the college while, simultaneously, the mentors themselves are absorbing those values. In addition, the mentors receive

training in leadership skills within a class designed for that purpose. The effectiveness of this approach was assessed through a survey as well as focus groups, with results indicating the success of the program in attaining its goals.

The final essay takes us full circle back to the issue of what constitutes professionalism in honors. Three of the Forum respondents referred in their essays to the NCHC journals and monographs as evidence of the professional credibility and vitality of the organization and its member honors programs and colleges. Emily Walshe, a librarian at Long Island University, has provided plentiful and concrete support for the high quality of professionalism in one of the NCHC publications through an in-depth bibliometric study of *JNCHC*. In her essay “The *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council: A Bibliometric Study*,” Walshe analyzes the “summative content and citation patterns” of the journal’s first twenty volumes (2000–2019). Using both quantitative and qualitative measures, she analyzed “article types, authorship patterns, cited references, and coverage of core subjects.” She concludes that the viability and health of the journal are demonstrated in the increased size of the editorial board, the increased content of the journal, its significant degree of interdisciplinarity and collaboration, and its low rate of self-citation. Walshe asserts, “As the official journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council, *JNCHC* is one of the most widely recognized and frequently cited honors education research journals; it is one of the few honors-specific journals to be considered a core journal of the profession.” Based on her detailed statistical analysis, she draws the following conclusion: “Through the work of its Publications Board, the National Collegiate Honors Council is keeping pace, striving to achieve balance between access and ownership, collation and distribution, while maintaining the highest levels of authorial and editorial integrity.” Walshe’s essay is a convincing affirmation that the NCHC is already a well-established professional organization.