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Cross-Cultural Connections: How Traditional and Preprofessional Honors Programs Can Survive and Thrive Together

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Abstract: Traditional and preprofessional honors programs have historically been at odds with each other due to the prevailing wisdom that the latter do not reflect the values espoused by the liberal arts. The truth is that both kinds of programs serve engaged scholars of various types in different ways. The values of care, mentorship, and concentrated studies are at the heart of honors programs and the people who administer them, and the national honors organization (NCHC) should be inclusive in developing outlets for both traditional and professional curricula in order to strengthen what is offered and optimally serve the most promising students in higher education.

Keywords: higher education—honors programs & colleges; transdisciplinary education; educational change; learned institutions & societies; Loyola University Maryland (MD)—Honors Program

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Preprofessional honors programs are populated with inquisitive minds, whether in business, nursing, engineering, or any other non-liberal-arts-based discipline. Traditional honors programs also comprise students beset with curiosity about the past, present, and future. Both groups tend to question the status quo, reveal deep interests in transforming the world, and relish the opportunities that higher education affords. One could even say that both types of honors programs contain all the personalities that we find in our students. Even if preprofessional honors programs are not focusing on traditional texts in disciplines like history, English, and drama, instructors in

these programs find they are faced with the same types of students as populate general honors programs; this is reason enough to fold preprofessional honors programs into the NCHC's traditional, liberal-arts-based framework.

There are four types of students who gravitate toward honors programs and drive evolving pedagogy. All are entitled to the shared values that honors programs offer. We have the bright, inquisitive type; the precocious, somewhat aloof type; the quiet, observant type; and the one who has so many questions they don't know even where to start.

The bright, inquisitive type asks us to explain all the symbols, the rules, everything to the last piece of punctuation. The precocious, aloof type states that they know everything and wonders why they have to follow the rules. The quiet, observant type is awestruck and excited to expand their knowledge but wonders where it will lead them. The one with so many questions that they are stymied from the get-go laments that they can't handle the pressure of peers and professors to keep up and withdraws to study on their own.

A fifth type is the student who doesn't show up, who may be even more innately intelligent than all the rest combined but hides it from the world. This fifth type of student may not even know that honors programs exist and would benefit from honors education most of all.

All these students desire exactly what honors programs have been offering for decades: a deep dive into learning surrounded and supported by a like-minded cohort; mentoring and guidance from faculty and administrators that underscore student success in the face of challenges; and, simply, the opportunity to enjoy learning for learning's sake. One might argue that preprofessional students are preparing for a specific vocation and therefore are not interested in the learning process, but only the outcome. I would posit the opposite; in their focus on a particular future profession, these students are looking to be challenged beyond the basics, to be immersed in the related disciplines, to give back to their communities, and most of all, to be inspired to think, read, and write critically.

How can both traditional and preprofessional honors programs honor the diverse group of learners that land on our academic doorsteps? How can both types of programs continue to recruit from a shrinking pool of college-bound high school students? These outcomes can be achieved by encouraging honors faculty and administrators to provide both opportunities for the variety of honors students outlined above and to give them chances to thrive while adhering to the shared values that drive the best in higher education.

The values espoused by preprofessional honors programs do not vary greatly from those found in traditional honors programs. Critical and

independent thinking is the foundation for the educated mind, and this ability can be taught in disciplines outside the liberal arts. In fact, as an honors economics professor, I frequently include literature and primary source material to provide historical context for current events. I also insist on well-written, reflective essays on the intersection of specific business topics. These types of assignments are not just the realm of the liberal arts side of the quad.

More overarching values that honors programs share include caring for our students' physical and mental health; maintaining academic rigor; bolstering student self-confidence by providing leadership opportunities; and designing innovative curricula. At Loyola University Maryland, my home institution, we add the value derived from a servant leadership model, which promotes the intersection of academically talented young people with communities in need. That is, we encourage service to community. The mission statement I composed for our business honors program, Sellinger Scholars, states that the program

is a cohort-based, leadership development honors curriculum in business administration which integrates a servant leadership model. The Program provides academic rigor along with a supportive learning environment for outstanding business students utilizing exceptional faculty as teachers, advisors, and mentors. Students will emerge from the program with an understanding of leadership, social responsibility, and reflection upon personal and professional choices. The Program partners with Baltimore's non-profit and corporate sectors to create a positive impact for a more just and equitable world. Scholars will emerge from this Honors program with the skills and desire to think critically, to evaluate holistically, and to be leaders of transformative change.

As demonstrated above, the goals of traditional and preprofessional honors programs are more alike than at first glance. Both have deep roots and support an insatiable thirst for knowledge and lifelong learning, which are integral values that all honors programs can acknowledge as critical to their mission.

What distinguishes preprofessional honors programs is their common commitment to the development of industry-specific skills required or desired by the workplace. This deep dive into disciplines and course material, usually accompanied by internships and/or field work, parallels in many ways the depth of study found in traditional honors programs. While seemingly different, the real-world application of acquired skills is just another method of bringing the result of effective higher education to communities.

In training our most enthusiastic learners in any discipline, I believe we are demonstrating the value of higher education to a world that frequently doubts its integrity and application.

No matter the type of student we encounter, from the aloof to the quiet, we owe it to this rising generation of scholars to invest in their future and to expose them to all manners of thought and all applications of studies as the future of our society rests on their shoulders. Now is not the time to segregate students even more by what type of studies they choose; both traditional and preprofessional students have much to learn from each other, with no loss of academic rank. Now is the time to put aside the artificial barriers that have been erected between the disciplines and to celebrate honors education from every angle. The NCHC has the infrastructure in place to make such “cross-cultural” opportunities possible.

To bolster higher education at its roots, the NCHC should be inclusive in its development of opportunities for both traditional and preprofessional honors programs, their students, and their administrators. Our differences underscore our strengths. Combining honors programs of all types can successfully serve the increasingly diverse array of students coming in the doors of our colleges and universities.

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