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Honors Program Leadership: The Right Stuff

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In what follows, I shall discuss six leadership roles that I think generally need to be fulfilled in an honors program. Since the leadership of most honors programs is the responsibility of a single person, the director, this can be thought of as a discussion of the various roles that my ideal honors director would play. Accordingly, the list also can be thought of as a general checklist of things that search committees should look for in candidates for a position as honors director.

Before discussing specific leadership roles, a caveat is needed. The leadership needed for a particular program will be affected by the nature of the program and the nature of the college or university. A new program has different leadership needs than an ongoing one; a program of 100 students may need leadership somewhat different than that for a program of 1,100, etc. Moreover, the sort of leadership required will be very much institution-specific. The leadership needs will depend on the view people have of the role of the honors program and may even be, in part, a response to some particular weakness or strength of the previous director. As a result, the “right stuff” for leading one honors program may not be particularly well suited for another program. Given all this, it is risky—some may think it is folly—to try to make generalizations about honors program leadership. Yet, I am convinced that one can make useful generalizations; the roles described below are ones that I think need to be played to at least some degree in virtually all honors programs. Although the discussion below intentionally ignores the myriad of variables that make honors programs different, it should not be forgotten that all these differences would have to be taken into account if one were analyzing the leadership needs of a particular program. With that caveat, I want to turn to the general discussion of honors program leadership.

It used to be fashionable to believe that the chair of an academic department should always be the department’s best senior scholar. The job of the department chair, it was thought, was basically to serve as a role model for

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significant scholarly productivity. By and large, that view has become obsolete. Like it or not—and many in the academy do not like it one bit—chairing an academic department has become increasingly an administrative and managerial job. In very small institutions where a typical department has only two or three members, the role of the chair may not have changed very much. Yet, for the vast majority of institutions, it is viewed as increasingly important that those chairing departments have some expertise in administrative matters such as budgeting, planning, and personnel management. There are now workshops, articles, and books devoted to the skills one needs in order to effectively chair an academic department. Although the idea remains that the chair should be an academic leader and a role model for teaching and scholarship, there is an increasing emphasis on administrative ability in choosing department chairs. Indeed, many have noticed that the attributes that make people distinguished scholars and teachers are not necessarily those of the successful department chair.

And what about honors directors? Though I am amazed at the wide and impressive array of talents of many honors directors I have met through NCHC, I am nonetheless convinced that not enough attention has been given to what seems to me to be a set of remarkably varied abilities and aptitudes that are needed to build and maintain a first-rate honors program. In what follows, I will list and discuss the qualities that I think are the most important. The resemblance between these qualities of the ideal honors director and qualities needed in other academic administrators is in no way coincidental.

THE ACADEMIC LEADER AS LOVER OF WISDOM

The successful director of an honors program must be different from the director of campus security or the director of a bank. Indeed, perhaps no feature is more important in an honors program director than that the person be able to provide academic leadership. Though this is probably the most obvious quality to list, I want to say a bit about the characteristics my ideal academic leader would have.

My ideal academic leader is one whose life exemplifies knowledge as lifelong learning. I do not mean simply that the person is an active scholar; I mean someone who exemplifies the Greek notion of a philosopher—one who loves wisdom. My ideal honors director is a person who is genuinely interested in ideas and the pursuit of knowledge, a person who is a role model for students and faculty alike because that love of pursuing ideas is constantly exemplified. The person seems somehow to be at every lecture and concert, is always reading important new books, and is regularly engaged in conversations with students and faculty about the great books, the great ideas, and the great issues of the times. This enthusiasm about learning is contagious. It

makes students and faculty more excited about learning and more enthusiastic about the pursuit of knowledge. What better way to provide academic leadership than by getting people truly excited about the pursuit of knowledge? It would not bother me if someone were to say that what I have just described is (in part) the ideal teacher; for my ideal honors director would be an ideal teacher.

THE ACADEMIC LEADER AS CURRICULUM REFORMER

My ideal academic leader not only is a lover of wisdom, but is one who constantly strives to find better ways of teaching, better curricula, and other ways to improve the educational process. The honors director as academic leader is able to convince students to be more daring in their curricular choices and to participate in independent study projects, study abroad, tutorials, senior theses, etc. Additionally, the academic leader is able to convince faculty of the virtues of trying new pedagogical approaches. In short, he or she is a constant source of exciting educational ideas for faculty and students. I have purposely avoided using the term “innovative” here, since it conjures up a notion of gimmickery in the minds of some. My ideal academic leader is not interested in innovation just for innovation’s sake; he or she is one who maintains the highest academic standards and the strongest commitment to academic tradition. Still, he or she is not afraid of trying new things in an attempt to provide better educational opportunities for students. After all, the successful honors director must realize that to provide the best educational opportunities that we can to our most outstanding students, we must do more than simply accelerate our standard courses. We must come up with curricular ideas and teaching methods that are specially suited for the honors students that we serve.

Put another way, my ideal honors director maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and excellence, is committed to academic tradition, and yet still has a great deal of curricular imagination. Whether it be through interdisciplinary team-taught courses, special research opportunities, special seminars, or whatever, the honors program serves its institution best when it provides a model for curricular enhancement. By promoting these ideals, the honors director can be—like the honors program itself—an exemplar of academic excellence.

THE GENERAL ADMINISTRATOR

Being an honors program director, like being a department chair, requires at most institutions a good bit of administrative work which includes not only the things which are intrinsically interesting to academics—e.g., designing

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the honors curriculum—but also a good bit of budgeting, attending meetings, writing academic plans, attending meetings, negotiating, responding to numerous requests for information, attending meetings, and doing a myriad of organizing, managing, and monitoring. For most honors directors, this is a big (and sometimes an overwhelming) part of the job. If you cannot do these things well, you generally cannot be an excellent honors director; and if you cannot stand doing this kind of “menial” stuff, then being an honors director (or any other administrator in today’s academic world) is not your ideal job choice.

NCHC has led the way in recognizing the need for special expertise. For many years, there have been sessions at its national meetings designed specifically for new directors. These sessions give the new director a great deal of useful information on what happens in other programs, plus the advice of experienced directors on how to get a program started, on good ideas for extracurricular activities, on curricular ideas that have worked particularly well (or been dismal failures), and even on how to talk the central administration into that much needed Honors Center, scholarship, or travel money. Many an honors program director (me, for one!) has found such sessions to be enormously valuable when starting out. The usefulness of such sessions provides further evidence that one must have certain administrative expertise to direct an honors program.

While some may lament the fact that such skills are now a part of the life of the administration of the academy, the fact remains that they are. The honors director must have these abilities to succeed.

But if you think this is distasteful and that the honors director need only be a good teacher and scholar, please stop reading now. If you do not like talk about an honors director’s needing to be good at budgeting and other paperwork, then you will undoubtedly detest virtually everything else that I say in what follows.

THE ENTREPRENEUR

While it is important to recognize the need for administrative expertise, I think that it is even more important to have the right attitude toward administrative work—an attitude that most academics do not have and do not want to have. Many academics have pursued the academic life in part because they thought they could pursue their teaching and research without having to worry about management, strategic planning, time-schedules, budgets, the infamous “bottom line,” and all those other dreaded things that go on in the business world. Yet when I think of the honors program directors who are “famous” around NCHC, they all seem to have an incredible ability at being—please pardon the expression—entrepreneurial. This is not to say that

they have built empires or made profits, but they have managed to weave their honors program deeply into the fabric of their colleges and universities; the result is an honors program that is not just one of many academic programs, but an absolutely critical part of many aspects of the schools. To do this, one must have a keen “business” sense, one must be imaginative in finding or inventing opportunities to promote the honors program, and must be able to take full advantage of such opportunities.

A related characteristic that marks the successful honors director is the ability to get the system to work to the advantage of the students and faculty in the program. The outstanding honors director develops excellent working relationships with members of the university community and is so persuasive that somehow he or she always seems to convince the provost that his or her latest new idea is worth funding, get the registrar to make a special arrangement so honors program students do not have to stand in line, talk the director of financial aid into increasing a scholarship, get special faculty development funds, etc. The interest in and ability to—again, pardon the expression—manipulate the system for the benefit of the program and its participants is often the difference between a fantastic program and a very good one.

THE ADMISSIONS OFFICER

There are a number of honors programs throughout the country that have been established mainly as devices for recruiting superior students. Though most programs were not initiated primarily for recruiting purposes, the fact remains that honors programs are clearly designed to offer attractive educational opportunities to outstanding students. And in these days of demographic declines, each school is interested in making sure potential students are aware of all the attractive educational opportunities the school offers. As a result, many schools use their honors programs to recruit students, and many honors programs are engaged in recruiting activities of one sort or another. On one end of the spectrum, there are programs that do their own brochures and where the director writes recruiting letters, visits high schools, organizes campus visitation days, and organizes activities with current honors program students to recruit prospective students. At some institutions, there is a person specifically hired to plan programs for recruiting students for the honors program (sometimes such people are employees of the honors programs; sometimes they are part of the staff of the admissions office). On the other end of the spectrum are honors programs that have no recruiting programs of any kind. Yet, even in these programs, the director may have occasional meetings with prospective students (and parents). Although I have not done any survey research, my discussions with other directors convince me that more and more honors program directors are engaged in more and more recruiting activity. I think if you had done a survey six years ago asking

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honors directors about their activities, you would have found that (1) the vast majority of honors directors would not have even listed recruiting as one of their activities, and (2) only a handful would have said that recruiting occupied a significant amount of their time. Now, however, I think such a survey would reveal a dramatic change: virtually all would say that recruiting was among their activities and many would say that they are spending more and more time on recruiting-related activities. It used to be that honors directors and other faculty members saw recruiting as a process that was beneath them; demographics have forced an increasing number of people to give up that view.

The point of all this is that insofar as one participates in admissions work, success at one's job will depend on having the qualities of the successful admissions officer. One has to be part salesman, one has to recognize that like it or not appearances and first impressions make a difference, etc. Moreover, if one takes some responsibility for planning recruiting activities, then the entrepreneurial abilities mentioned above will be very, very useful, as will be some keen marketing instincts. Here, again, these are ideas that the academic community has traditionally found distasteful and demeaning. Yet, I think that these are things that honors directors and those choosing honors directors cannot ignore.

THE STUDENT ACTIVITIES COORDINATOR

Every honors program that I know of—well, at least every good one—aims to give its students special attention both in and out of the classroom. To do this, someone in the honors program needs to be sensitive to the intellectual, cultural, and social needs of honors program students, must exhibit a caring attitude toward the students, and must be genuinely concerned with their welfare. Optimally, someone exhibits this sensitivity and concern by showing that he or she truly enjoys spending time with the honors program students. I am convinced that many honors programs fail to flourish because of this failure in the administration of the programs. By the same token, some of our most well-known “old hands” clearly owe a great deal of their success to their enthusiasm for working with the students in their honors program. That enthusiasm is wonderfully contagious.

I am convinced that many people underestimate the value of student activities to an honors program. Students can, of course, learn a great deal at various intellectual and cultural events. Such events can also “train” students to attend lectures and concerts. These are all worthwhile accomplishments for an honors program. In addition, though, such activities provide a very important benefit for honors programs—they build an esprit de corps, a community of scholars that can make the honors program much more interesting and

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attractive to students. In other words, building a sense of community through extra-curricular activities can be of tremendous value in both the recruiting and the retention of students. Pragmatic benefits aside, though, these things can add a great deal of vitality and fun to honors program life. It seems to me that those who understand this make better honors directors.

CONCLUSION

It should be re-emphasized that the above are only generalizations. Each program has different needs; in different programs the factors will have varying degrees of importance. Yet, if I am right, then the most successful honors program will generally have someone filling roles very much like all of the above. When I think of a scholar, an academic leader, an administrator/manager, a shrewd business entrepreneur, an admissions officer, and a student activities coordinator, I have rather distinct and different images of each. It seems as though different characteristics are needed to do each. And, if there is but one person with administrative responsibilities, as is usually the case, then that director should, at least to some extent, have all the qualities of all these sorts of people. No wonder it is such a hard job; it requires as many diverse skills as almost any other job on campus. Indeed, for me the variability of tasks is what makes being an honors director such a terrific job. While the diversity makes the job interesting and enjoyable, it also makes it difficult. Though it certainly is not the hardest job at a college or university, I think that an excellent honors director needs to have an extraordinary range of skills.

I know that the above list of characteristics is helpful to me as I try to narrow the large gap between the honors director I would like to be and the honors director that I actually am. My hope, though, is that the above might help others to see what an honors director who has these skills can bring to the honors programs at their colleges and universities. Indeed, I would be especially gratified to find the above list useful to some of those who participate in either selecting or evaluating honors program directors.

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