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LEN ZANE

Reminiscences on the Evolution of Honors Leadership

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Las Vegas, Nevada. It was a hot and sultry Friday night in August. Pardon the redundancy—if it is Las Vegas in August, nights are hot and sultry. Though many diversions beckoned, I decided to check my email before heading to bed for the evening. Sitting in front of the computer with a bowl of ice cream and a glass of cognac, I downloaded Rew A. (“Skip”) Godow Jr.’s 1986 article from the *Forum for Honors* that was attached to an email from our journal’s enterprising editor, Ada Long. The essay was there as part of Ada’s call for journal submissions spawned by or somehow connected to Skip’s article.

Whether it was the weather, the ice cream, the cognac, or Skip’s insights, I found the article fascinating. In 1986, the year the article appeared, the Honors Program at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) was in its first year of operation. So I was in the infancy of my fifteen-year stint in honors and was probably too immersed in getting things up and running at UNLV to have paid much attention to Godow’s article when it first appeared. Therefore, at least some of my fascination with the article was because Skip did such a wonderful job of articulating much of what I found most enjoyable about starting and nurturing an honors program, which evolved into an honors college in 1997.

As I read the article, the potential existed for a slight attack of second guessing about my decision in 2000 to step down as Dean of Honors and resume my career as a mere professor. But, *au contraire*, Skip also unwittingly presaged the changes in the responsibilities of honors directors that slowly but surely led to my decision to return to the classroom. During the past twenty years there has been tremendous growth in the number and types of institutions that have honors programs or colleges. This has led, almost by default, to a major evolution of the leadership qualities required to be a successful practitioner of honors today.

Although I may be romanticizing, my anecdotal sense is that in the early part of the modern honors movement, 1960s through 1980s, many honors programs began almost surreptitiously under the radar of the central administration and were guided by a small number of dedicated faculty who

possessed one or both of the first two qualities listed by Godow, namely **The Academic Leader as Lover of Wisdom** and as **Curriculum Reformer**. Few if any of these early honors practitioners saw themselves as **Administrators** (quality 3) though some were also talented **Entrepreneurs** (quality 4). Almost by necessity people beginning an honors program during that early period were **Admissions Officers** (quality 5) since programs began with some vision, clearly articulated or implied, of the type of student who ought to be involved in honors. Hence these honors practitioners had some vested interest in rounding up the type of student who could benefit the most from their particular incarnation of honors. The last quality Skip lists is **The Student Activity Coordinator**. Of the six, this quality resonated less with me than the others. Consequently it will play no further role in this essay.

Some of the most talented honors people who were involved during the last few decades of the twentieth century not only used their skills to build wonderful robust programs on their home campuses but also worked to “professionalize” honors as a career path within academia. During this same time, and possibly not coincidentally, institutions began to recognize the value of honors as an institutional image enhancer. Both of these movements had the natural effect of changing honors leadership from an informal sort of campus position with a myriad of institution-centric reporting lines to a position more central to the mission of the university. An obvious consequence of these trends was the rise of honors colleges led by deans who sit on deans councils and report to the chief academic officer of their campuses.

These changes have not fundamentally altered the role of an honors leader on campus, but they have drastically changed the institution’s perception of the role of the honors director/dean. For much of the early history of honors, the honors director labored rather anonymously on campus. Now the position is much more visible and is often seen as part of the central administration. Consequently, many honors directors/deans have a much more visible and important role as **Skilled Operatives in External Relations**, a quality that Godow did not list in 1986 and one that most of us who were involved in honors back then did not foresee. But with the advantage of hindsight, the trends that were beginning in the 80’s and 90’s, the professionalization of honors leadership as an accepted academic career path and the movement from programs to colleges had the unsurprising result of morphing the student-centered professor turned amateur administrator into a professional administrator with a primary or at least major role in promoting honors to potential donors and other off-campus personages.

So as I finished off Rew Godow’s article and my ice cream and cognac, I was fondly reminded of the good times in honors, working with talented students and dedicated faculty from across campus and enjoying their diverse

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interests. I was also reminded of the fact that the skill set that I brought to honors worked better when honors was less professional and more informal. In fact, my evolution out of honors and back to the classroom was probably foreordained when I first took Henry David Thoreau's advice "Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes" as a guiding principle for my modest academic career. After all, the normal garb for a physics professor does not meet the sartorial standards of a twenty-first-century dean!

So, though fascinated by the article, I lost no sleep over it that night.

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