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Grades, Scores, and Honors Education

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RYAN BROWN

Grades, Scores, and Honors Education

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A while ago, I had a conversation with a fellow who was, shall we say, “quantitatively disinclined.” He complained vehemently about the use of numbers and grades as a sorting mechanism in higher education, and, given my affiliation with honors, he decided to focus his attacks in that direction. “It’s all about SATs, ACTs, and GPAs,” he claimed, “but education is so much more than that!” After quickly agreeing with him, I asked him to describe honors without referencing any grade or scoring system at all. Within minutes, he had a beautiful description of honors as a learning environment where a community of diverse students and teachers alike were challenged to expand their minds and exceed their potential. “Great,” I replied, “You’ve almost sold John Q. Student, but he has one question for you: Can he join?”

The point of my remark was to underscore the importance of selection criteria to honors programs. In determining whom honors serves, such criteria become integral (though not necessarily central) to what honors does, for without a good fit between the program population and its activities, failure will swiftly follow. Of course, as my conversational partner argued, selection criteria need not be quantitatively based; but, I would reply, grades are not limited to quantitative means either. Portfolios, writing samples, interviews, standardized tests, transcripts—all have their strengths and their weaknesses when used as assessments or selection criteria.

Obviously, this discussion is nothing new—one need only peruse the *Chronicle of Higher Education* or pedagogical journals to find similar opinions gaining in frequency, intensity, and legitimacy. The lead essay of this issue of *JNCHC*, Larry Andrews’ “Grades, Scores, and Honors,” does an excellent job of analyzing ways to encourage a connection between selection criteria and the purpose of your honors program. What these essays and articles often gloss over or omit entirely, however, is a consideration of the university educational context.

THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

Presumably, the central goal of every institution of higher education is to facilitate learning for its students; similarly, the presumed goal of every

GRADES, SCORES, AND HONORS EDUCATION

student is to go to a university for that learning. In order to demonstrate that the learning is occurring, the university applies multiple assessment criteria, otherwise known as grades and scores. Using these criteria, we in higher education then help decide which learners get scholarships, which are making satisfactory academic progress, and which have earned a certificate or degree. If we are doing our jobs well, we will have a clear set of learning outcomes for students to achieve, a means of assessing students that accurately determines whether they have met the desired outcomes, and a system of recognitions and awards that acknowledge the individuals meeting our desired outcomes. In honors, as throughout the university, our central goal is to facilitate learning; grades and scores are an important means of assessing this outcome, but they are not why we do what we do.

Since assessment criteria are so important, we should examine them in more detail. I submit that they all begin with the following premise: *teachers can't teach everything, and learners can't learn everything*. It seems so self-evident and obvious: knowing that perfection is impossible, we are forced to decide how much learning is enough, whether the issue is what percentage results in an A or a C on an assignment or in a course, or how many and which courses are needed to graduate with a certain degree. As a result of the choices we make, certain knowledge claims and skill sets are privileged and rewarded while others are discouraged and dismissed. This doesn't mean that we need have all-or-nothing, either-or dichotomies in the classroom or at the university, but at some point decisions about which skills are more important will be made. For instance, we might be flexible about whether our students learn French, Latin, Spanish, or Chinese, but we insist that they learn a foreign language; we might use a research paper to determine part of a course grade to help students who don't test well, but the syllabus still states that *X percent* of a student's grade is derived from test scores.

As responsible educators, we need to be aware of these decisions and their ramifications; they don't matter just when a student is a point or two away from the next grade or admittance into the program. They tell students, TAs, and even ourselves what skills are needed, where efforts should be directed, and what information is important. From day one, these values affect how students and teachers act, react, and interact to each other, to the university, and to learning.

EDUCATION, NOT HONORS

Honors is a part of this university environment; we are not above or beyond its influence. At the same time, however, many people in honors have borne the burden of justifying the educational system's values. Consider the following rationale for honors from my own institution: many, though not all,

RYAN BROWN

view honors as an opportunity for students who have demonstrated excellence in a traditional learning environment to expand their experiences through such means as experiential classrooms and individualized honors contracts. A standard for excellence in a traditional learning environment has been set (the program's minimum GPA, SAT, etc.), and those who do not meet the standard are encouraged to gain a higher proficiency in those settings before attempting to do more through honors—to put it in terms parents might use, “Clean your plate before you take more food.” Just as the food on your plate is your focus, the expanded experiences are central to honors education; grades and scores are simply a means of determining what learning opportunities are available to you and when.

This mentality is common throughout all of higher education: we have class prerequisites, minimum academic progress indicators, minimum passing grades, and other similar measures to gauge students' readiness for the next step in their education. We also have positive aides—including awards, honors societies, and advanced placement options—to recognize and challenge students who have demonstrated excellence with our existing standards. Despite the similarities to other areas of academia, the people in honors are constantly asked to justify their system of values and rewards; I have lost count of the number of times I have had to answer charges of “honors elitism” or “unfair requirements,” but I have rarely heard anyone question *summa cum laude* designations or minimum passing grade regulations.

Like these other mechanisms, honors works within the educational context; it offers new opportunities for those who excel in the university system. As with the educational system as a whole, grades and scores are integral (though not necessarily central) to what we do; our central focus is on student learning, not the ways that we assess those learning outcomes. For our part, we in honors need to be cognizant of all the choices that we make and their consequences for our constituents; we should always be ready with an answer for why we have made the choices we did, especially about grades and scores. We need to make abundantly clear, however, that this issue is not left primarily for honors to wrestle with; grades and scores are an educational issue that affects all of academia.

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