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Cultivating Honors Excellence in the Other Garden

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Sam Schuman's observations in "Cultivating: Some Thoughts on SNCHC's Future" about the weakening of excellence in the academy and our culture are shrewd and accurate. The proliferation of award shows on the television screen and in magazines, for example, with their increasingly specialized and arcane constituencies, underscores his point. This bounty leaves a tacky, deadening glaze across the eyes that is tousled only slightly when an award show crops up that offers, if not the ring of merit, at least the jingle of familiarity. If something more than marketing, the dearth of good programming, or self-promotion is operating here, then I suspect the culprit is, as Schuman asserts, "that the assumption of *excellence* has been weakened, if not lost." Everything is wonderful, miraculous, the gift of the gods, and befitting of highest honors. I suspect that we want our palates to be more discriminating than that, than Dante's Cerberus, a creature satisfied by eating mudpies, and that we encourage the students in our Honors Programs to practice the analytical skills to make discriminations more tenable than that of Cerberus.

If Schuman's proposal that the National Collegiate Honors Council and individual Honors Programs take on the task of awarding excellence across the "landscape of national higher education" is to fly, it must first surmount the perception that this endeavor is not part and parcel of the celebratory morass described above. Perhaps more problematic than this task is avoiding the lack of authenticity that taints too many awards in the academy. For all the marvelous colleagues whose commitment to students and inspiring classroom efforts are acknowledged by teaching awards and bring a warm smile to our faces, we unfortunately remember the faculty member bragging in his promotion portfolio about the teaching award he garnered while forgetting to mention how he dismissed his classes early to march them in lockstep to the student polling booth. Or perhaps we

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remember the Chair of the Awards Committee who not only extends the application deadline but also rewrites the materials themselves so that her golden child, the candidate from her department, will prevail. The scenarios are the same; all of us have seen them in one distressing incarnation or another.

That the awards process is subject to human weakness or that the most deserving do not always win should not necessarily derail the effort to cultivate and acknowledge excellence. I worry, however, that institutionalizing yet more awards through Honor Programs is risky business because the burden to keep them genuine and authentic requires more work and resources than it warrants. If Schuman is “an aging child of the 60’s” subject to the occasional “equalitarian fantasy,” I lay claim to being an aging product/victim of the sixties ever suspicious of institutions (even when I am one) and of the mechanisms for institutionalizing processes (even when I write them). I would prefer to promote a culture of excellence within the academy by having NCHC and the Honors Programs comprising it challenge the educational meta-structures and our home institutions with the characteristics underpinning most Honors Programs: the best teachers, small classes, and a nurturing and innovative environment.

Unfortunately, small classes and good faculty are expensive; they require resources. While an institution may be willing to spring for an Honors Program with X number of students, providing such an experience for all students remains unfathomable to too many administrators, especially those who purport that colleges and universities should follow business models. Certainly no one would encourage fiscal irresponsibility on the part of a college, but operating a college like a business is to misapprehend both the nature of educational institutions and the *raison d’être* of businesses. Students are not customers; thanks to government subsidies, taxpayers, alumni, and endowments, they do not pay for their educations as they do a television or cellular telephone. The product, if it is one beyond an embossed certificate, is, at its best, intangible, amorphous, mysterious.

Paying for faculty and providing small classes appear staid and old-fashioned and certainly not marketable. Such practices are unfathomable, especially to the growing number of administrators who have never taught students or were not adept enough to make it in the competitive business world and have sought refuge in ours. Buying computers or implementing the technology *du jour* is sexier than paying for more and better faculty members to teach small groups of students, not just superior students.

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The task is to convince them and perhaps remind ourselves that access is not the same as education. Pre-packaged courses and electronic delivery that mitigate against a rich and personal interplay are not good enough for the students in our Honors Programs, and they should not be good enough for other students. Here is the fertile ground for cultivating the potential excellence in all students, an excellence they can transport to the landscape beyond the doors of the academy.

The enterprise then for the National Collegiate Honors Council is to challenge the educational values and financial priorities of the very institutions that support its membership and its existence. That venture is risky, and perhaps riskier yet if the success of this project were to erase the differences between non-Honors and Honors, them and us. If successful, this revolutionary enterprise would certainly cultivate student excellence throughout the academy's garden.

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