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Class, Honors, and Eastern Kentucky: Why We Still Need to Try to Change the World

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Norm Wiener's piece "Honors Is Elitist, and What's Wrong with That?" couldn't have come at more opportune moment for me. Having recently accepted the directorship of a well-respected program founded by the legendary Dr. Bonnie Gray and seated in one of the poorest regions of the nation—Appalachia where, as Philip Cohen sang in "No Christmas in Kentucky," "the trees don't twinkle when you're hungry"—I've been thinking a lot about class and honors lately. Eastern Kentucky is a place marked by tobacco barns, mountaintop-removal coal mining, infamous mining strikes (*Harlan County U.S.A.*, Barbara Kopple's film about one of those, won the Oscar for Best Documentary in 1977), and the "persistent poverty" that more than anything else has shaped the region.

All Kentucky state institutions of higher education are assigned a service region to further the mission of "regional stewardship," an initiative to encourage socio-economic development in the state. Eastern Kentucky University's service region includes 22 counties, many of which are the poorest in Kentucky. More than a few are among the poorest in the nation. In a recent piece on the need for environmental research and amplified educational outreach, Alice Jones writes that "Eastern Kentucky is an area of persistent poverty, and 18 counties in EKU's 22-county service region meet the federal Appalachian Regional Commission's definition as 'distressed communities.' ARC-defined 'distressed communities' are those with greater than 150% of the national average poverty and/or unemployment rate; and less than 67% of the US average market income per capita. In short, they are not just the poorest communities in Appalachia; they are the poorest communities in America." According to the *EKU Factbook, 2007–2008*, over 25% of the population in our service area live in poverty.

At graduation this December, our president, long-time Richmond resident and EKU alum Dr. Doug Whitlock, asked all of the first-generation college graduates to raise their hands. More than a third of the room's robed arms flew up. A colleague of mine in English leaned over to me and whispered, "this is

the part that gets me every time.” As part of a “university of opportunity,” EKU’s faculty pride themselves on working on behalf of a marginalized population, on helping the poor get ahead.

Our admission requirements for honors are probably low by national standards—a 26 on the ACT with all kinds of flexibility for students with lower scores—but as I look at what the program here does—offering its students book scholarships, partial tuition scholarships, paid trips to NCHC, and low-cost “cultural trips” to major metropolitan areas like Chicago and New York—I have had to think carefully this year about its most compelling purpose. In fact, Norm Weiner’s observation is precisely true for EKU’s program; since we know that neither a degree nor the job or grad school acceptance that follows it inherently solidifies our students’ move up the class ladder, “another latent function of honors education may be to polish some of our students’ rough edges, however subtly.”

As I consider changes I may want to make (no longer accepting AP credit for our core honors courses, for instance, a practice that drives many of my faculty up the wall and drove eighty students out to a pizza dinner to debate its pros and cons), I need to know more about the population this program serves and what it promises those students. Broadly speaking, the EKU Honors Program is not a place where lower-middle-class students come to get a liberal arts education at a state university price and a leg up on a prestigious graduate school education. Rather, it’s a place where poor students have a very hard time leaving their homes, even when those homes may be crumbling under generations of poverty.

It is, however, still an honors program; it offers the small, discussion-based classes that characterize honors across the country as well as the opportunity to pursue independent research in the form of the students’ senior thesis projects. My faculty gets as annoyed as any by students who don’t take their work seriously enough and who may not fully appreciate the education they receive here. But EKU honors students are different from others I’ve encountered elsewhere. Take Kara, for example, whom I met in the senior thesis workshop that I taught in the fall. Kara always looked vaguely bored in class. She was quiet, smart, a little distant. I assumed Kara might have felt that the class was a waste of her time. Then I read her personal statement for law school, and here is how it begins:

My father is a delivery truck driver for Lincoln Bread Company, better known as either Hostess or Wonderbread. My brother and I were taught not to want the things my parents couldn’t afford. My wants became very centered on my needs. For Christmas I asked for either a coat or school clothes. My father’s delivery route was local and he was able to come home

at night. To this day, he wakes up at 2:30am to drive to work and arrives home at about 7:00pm.

Kara goes on to describe how the expectations for her self-support began in high school when her parents agreed to “provide a bedroom, dinner on the table, and a daily shower. To buy clothes, soap, shampoo, and even toothpaste (as well as less necessary things) I was expected to get a job. . . . It wasn’t easy, but I found a way to take an advanced college preparatory class load in high school while working thirty-six hours per week.”

It’s important to remember when we talk about it that class is about money, not simply the money in your pocket but an economic distinction nonetheless. It might be better to think about class not in terms of money itself but of what money can buy and to recognize that one’s purchasing power begins (or doesn’t) with one’s ancestors. Money bought Kara a sense of independence, maturity, and responsibility. And all of that probably left Kara as exhausted as anything else when she was in my class.

Kara discovered ECU’s award-winning Mock Trial team at a pre-college orientation. Despite the many hours of preparation that she put into Mock Trial and her classes, Kara took a new job her junior year on the night crew stocking shelves at Lowe’s: “I would go to work from 9pm to about 6am, doing a very physical job. Then I would come home, shower, and almost immediately leave for class. . . . As of now, I am waking up at 3:30 in the morning to go to work. When I get off work at 1pm, I drive to school for classes and homework. I come home at about 9pm, shower, and try to get five or six hours of sleep. . . . I am rather proud of myself for being able to manage this schedule because it reminds me of my father’s hard work.”

Kara is an excellent student. She is a major player on ECU’s Mock Trial team, and her thesis project—a case she is sending into the national organization for consideration in collegiate competition—is a culmination of everything she has cared most about in college. One might reasonably expect that Kara and her father might have experienced friction about their very different life directions; in this case, one would be dead wrong. In fact, Kara’s work, which she fully understands is leading her down a different path, has brought her closer to her father. As she puts it, “we are even almost on the same schedule, though moving toward different goals. He continues to do honest, labor work, while I am striving toward a much different career. This experience further allows me to understand my father and has brought us even closer.”

Another student in our honors program, Kristeena, is one of a set of twins, both of whom are also on ECU’s Mock Trial team. Kristeena and her sister were raised by a grandmother “after my eighteen year old mother decided she couldn’t provide for us,” a woman who “also ran a pretty good sized

tobacco farm and an upholstery shop all while studying for her GED.” Kristeena describes the surprise of her high school teachers when confronted with “two girls on free lunch making straight As and doing very well on the ACT.” At the first mock trial tournament in which Katrina competed, a judge told her that her “accent was thick” and that she was “clearly from Kentucky”—clearly not where successful attorneys are born. Kristeena describes her reaction: “My heart sunk but I knew what I had to do. Over the next four years I worked diligently at improving upon my flaws while still retaining who I was. I learned to use my accent to my advantage. In my second year of collegiate mock trial, . . . I had a judge tell me that he actually loved my accent and noted that I was very articulate and well spoken. . . . I [also] won the overall most outstanding attorney award.”

Katrina, Kristeena’s twin, describes the impact her grandmother’s heart attack had on her decision to pursue medical school. Katrina explains that “there was only one road out of our community. One direction led you to the city of Richmond; in the opposite direction the road ended in the Kentucky River and the only way across was to swim.” The road to Richmond was dangerous in winter, when “you chose your grocery trips wisely,” and consequently no ambulance carried her grandmother to the ER that night: “There were no screaming sirens . . . and . . . no paramedics giving orders and helping my grandmother. There was only the scatter of gravel as [my uncle’s] truck left and headed for town.”

Not surprisingly, Katrina has decided to pursue a career in rural medicine. As she puts it, “the problems rural doctors deal with are very different from those in larger communities. It’s difficult to treat people who have been treating themselves for generations. However, there is a great need for those types of doctors. A community’s ambulance service shouldn’t have to consist of a pickup truck and neighbors acting as paramedics. I want to help change that, and I want to help those people who I consider my people live healthier lives.”

What I am learning about ECU honors students is how different they are from what I was like at their age. I grew up in a lower-middle-class rural community in northeastern Ohio that I was desperate to leave once I hit adolescence. I wanted the city—any city—in order to shed what felt so much to me like small-town suffocation. I used graduate school in New York in the same way my father used the Navy—to get out of Ohio. Many of the academics I’ve met in my career have had similar itches. So do many of the honors students with whom I’ve worked and I’ll bet more than a few of Weiner’s do too. But, like Kara, Kristeena, and Katrina, many if not most of the honors students at ECU, even those who are frustrated with their home situations and all the cultural ills that attend such deeply embedded poverty, do not want to

get away. They want to see more of the world, do more and experience more. They certainly want more opportunity, but they feel a bond with their home communities that a psychological class-move away from those communities would betray. In this case, then, honors can't just be about helping a group of less-than-privileged students get ahead; it also must work to help a poor community enrich itself and do more than simply endure.

I know that my students' stories are anecdotal and certainly not the most dire that we as honors faculty do and will encounter. Still, they tell me something. Perhaps the trick for us in honors is doing what Kristeena says she has tried to do—improve what we do while remaining who we are. As a new director of a program that I don't yet fully understand in a place it will take years to feel I know, it is my challenge not to impose my own definition of success upon it, not to make it something it's not nor reach for a population that may not be whom we best serve. I have to find the best ways to help our students reach their goals, and this effort will include finding potentially radical ways to transform their home communities. Here I disagree with Weiner when he says that, "as educators, most of us have learned that we cannot change the world—or even our society. We can, however, help make the lives of our own students better." In order to make my students' lives better, I think I must try to change the world—or at least this Kentucky chunk of it. If I'm going to succeed in directing them, I will have to let my students guide me in finding powerful ways to help the places they call home.

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