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Editor's Introduction

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Editor's Introduction

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The lead essay of this issue of *JNCHC* examines the origins of the National Collegiate Honors Council and its publications. In "The Wisdom of Our Elders: Honors Discussions in *The Superior Student*, 1958–65," Larry Andrews of Kent State University describes the first eight years of the honors movement in a way that is informative, surprising, thorough, useful, and humbling. The pioneers among the Inter-University Committee on the Superior Student (ICSS) anticipated virtually every major focus and issue of its descendant organization, the NCHC, in initiating and promoting honors programs throughout the United States. Andrews has produced a concise and insightful analysis of that early organization through a detailed study of its newsletter, called *The Superior Student*.

Included in Andrews's study is the changing focus and structure of the newsletter, prompting the editors of *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* and *Honors in Practice* to take a brief look back at the history of the two current NCHC publications in hopes that these journals will have the good fortune to find a Larry Andrews fifty years from now. *JNCHC* is a semi-annual publication that in the year 2000 replaced the *Forum for Honors* (1970–96) after a four-year hiatus during which the NCHC had no scholarly publication. Unlike the *Forum for Honors*, each issue of *JNCHC* initially focused on a single theme, inviting essays only on that theme. Topics addressed in the first twelve issues were: Liberal Learning in the New Century; Science in Honors; Educational Transitions; On Honors Education; Honors and the Creative Arts; Liberal Learning; Technology in Honors; Students and Teachers in Honors; Multiperspectivism in Honors Education; Research in Honors; and The Psychology and Sociology of Honors.

The year 2005 brought two major changes to NCHC publications. One was the inauguration of a new journal called *Honors in Practice*, which replaced the NCHC newsletter, *The National Honors Report*, and which publishes practical, descriptive, and analytical essays on nuts-and-bolts matters related to honors. At the same time, *JNCHC* started dividing each of its issues into a forum and a section of research essays on any topic. One immediate benefit of this change was that researchers could get their work in print more quickly without waiting for a themed issue relevant to their interests. Another

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benefit was the creation of a serious dialogue within the *JNCHC* Forum about topics that have included: Students in Honors; What Is Honors?; Outcomes Assessment, Accountability, and Honors; Honors Administration; Grades, Scores, and Honors; Managing Growth in Honors; Honors Culture; Honors and Academic Integrity; Social Class and Honors; Honors in the Digital Age; Honors and Athletics; Helping Honors Students in Trouble; and Honors Study Abroad. Although contributors to the *JNCHC* Forum often ground their opinions in research, they are freed from the constraints of academic scholarship to speak their minds on matters affecting their everyday lives. Forum essays are above all opinion pieces.

When Frank Rich left the *New York Times*, he titled his last column "Confessions of a Recovering Op-Ed Columnist" (12 March 2011) and wrote: "For me, anyway, the point of opinion writing is less to shape events, a presumptuous and foolhardy ambition at best, than to help stimulate debate and, from my particular perspective, try to explain why things got the way they are and what they might mean and where they might lead." As described by Larry Andrews, the members of the Inter-University Committee on the Superior Student in the 1950s and 60s were perforce trying to "shape events" in a movement that was still in its nascence. Today, the *JNCHC* Forum serves primarily "to explain why things got the way they are and what they might mean and where they might lead."

The topic in this issue's forum is "The Institutional Impact of Honors." In the spring of 2011, we invited essays of roughly a thousand words that consider this theme in an institutional, national, or international context. The lead essay by Scott Carnicom of Middle Tennessee State University was distributed on the *NCHC* listserv and website; forum contributors could but did not have to respond to ideas about innovation and conservation that Carnicom addresses in his essay. Other questions that contributors were invited to consider included:

Do honors programs and colleges counterbalance or enable the current emphasis on career preparation within most institutions? Do they raise the level of teaching and learning throughout the institution, or do they drain off the best students from the undergraduate population? Does the concentration of high-achieving students within an institution create a source of intellectual and social leadership for the larger institution? Do institutions use their honors programs to promote recruitment, rankings, and numbers of national scholarships, and, if so, is such prestige-seeking necessarily an asset to the institutions and the programs? Does honors make the larger institution look better or, by contrast, worse? Do honors programs have

impacts of which institutions are unaware? Are such impacts ever subversive?

We received a record number of ten responses.

Carnicom argues in his lead essay—“The Institutional Effect of Honors: Innovation or Conservation?”—that, while honors educators see themselves as innovators, their customary practices more accurately classify them as traditionalists, preserving principles that go back, through Frank Aydelotte, to British educational institutions. While honors preserves a tradition that includes innovation, its history of conserving small-class discussions, one-on-one mentoring, and original research are a crucial refuge from and antidote to the careerism and cost-efficiency that dominate most institutions of higher learning today. Honors programs may incubate new pedagogies, but they do so while preserving the treasure chest of old ones.

Several forum contributors echo Carnicom’s view that honors programs are and should be inherently traditionalist. In “Defending the Traditions by Preserving the Classics” for instance, Kevin L. Dooley of Monmouth University makes a strong and unqualified argument for the value of preserving tradition in honors education, concluding with the eloquent assertion that we must impart traditional “wisdom to our students and show them that they are both the heirs to and beneficiaries of this legacy and that hope for the future lies not in the immediate gains of the present but in the lessons of the past.”

In “The Helmholtz Maneuver, or *The Idea of (Honors in) a University*,” Richard England of Salisbury University follows in the tradition of Hermann von Helmholtz and John Henry Newman in advocating the ideal of honors as the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. He argues for this pursuit in part for the practical reason that most important discoveries and technological advances are byproducts of pure science and its equivalent, pure education. Our challenge today is to convince academic and political leaders, in terms they can understand, that a traditional honors education has practical value.

Benjamin Moritz of the Metropolitan State College of Denver defends the tradition of elitism in honors in his essay “Can the Elitism of Honors Help Students at Non-Elite Schools?” Moritz thinks that elitism successfully addresses a critical problem in higher education today, namely the low retention and graduation rates of lower-income, high-achieving students. Deploying Carnicom’s notion of conservation as innovation in the context of honors, Moritz writes that the small classes, student-faculty interaction, and community bonds in honors programs give their students the peer pressure, self-confidence, and high expectations they need to complete their education. Thus, the elitism of honors, he argues, promotes institutional democratization.

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Linda Frost of Eastern Kentucky University expands on the idea of honors programs as traditional loci of high expectations in “Academically Adept,” which is a response both to Carnicom’s essay and to the recently published book *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*. Defining honors programs and their students as adept rather than adrift, Frost argues that the common recruitment claim that honors is “not more difficult, just different” is wrong. Honors courses are, in fact, more difficult, providing a valuable service to both their students and their institutions by maintaining high standards, and honors educators should proudly proclaim this difficulty rather than denying or underplaying it.

In “Extra Breadth and Depth in Undergraduate Education: The Institutional Impact of an Interdisciplinary Honors Research Fellowship,” Nathan Hilberg and Jaclyn Bankert offer an example of Carnicom’s notion of tradition as innovation by describing a summer research program at the University of Pittsburgh. The success of the students in this program, they write, demonstrates not only the effectiveness of innovative approaches to traditional research but also its wider impact on the university.

Bernice Braid and Gladys Palma de Schrynemakers put the conservation of tradition in a context that leans more toward the experimental than the one Carnicom suggests. In “Conservation, Experimentation, Innovation, and Model Honors Programs,” they offer a trilateral configuration of approaches that, they write, honors programs are uniquely situated to implement and to contribute to their institutions. The possibility of sequencing courses over a four-year period, during which students and faculty can collaborate on in-depth research and experiential learning, allows honors programs to develop and share innovative projects. The authors offer one multimedia example of their trilateral configuration in process at Long Island University Brooklyn.

In a similar vein, Annmarie Guzy of the University of South Alabama makes an impassioned plea to maintain the innovative, experimental, and risk-taking character of honors education in her essay “*Harry Potter* and the Specter of Honors Accreditation.” Guzy argues that the pedagogical freedoms possible in honors go against the standardizing trends in higher education today and thus are all the more crucial not just to honors students and teachers but also to the vitality of otherwise increasingly regimented institutional curricula. Honors accreditation, Guzy further suggests, would imperil such freedoms and thus jeopardize the effectiveness of both honors programs and the institutions in which they are housed.

Taking a different slant on the matter of innovation and change, Becky L. Spritz of Roger Williams University sees among honors educators a resistance to cultural changes in higher education such as assessment, online courses, three-year undergraduate degrees, and career training. In “Emerging

from the Honors Oasis,” she argues that the traditionalism of honors, despite its appeal, threatens to make it backward and irrelevant and that the better strategy is to reconsider and perhaps welcome current educational innovations into the honors culture.

In “The Benefits of Honors Education for All College Students,” James J. Clauss of the University of Washington addresses the forum topic not primarily from the perspective of tradition or innovation but with a focus on what impact honors students have when they fan out from an honors program into the campus for the majority of their coursework. He cites also the important influence of innovative honors curricula and pedagogical strategies—such as portfolios and experiential learning—on the larger institution, effectively providing excellent education to all undergraduates.

Finally, in “Moving Mountains: Honors as Leverage for Institutional Change,” Craig T. Cobane uses his own institution, Western Kentucky University, as an example to claim that honors is the most efficient and effective way to transform a campus by enhancing its reputation. In recruiting high-achieving students and garnering national scholarships, honors increases the academic success of not just honors but also non-honors students who are attracted to the institution because of its reputation.

This issue of *JNCHC* concludes with three research essays on honors topics. The first is a study titled “The Roles and Activities of Honors Directors: Similarities and Differences across Carnegie Institution Types” by three authors: Debra S. Schroeder and Sr. Edith Bogue of the College of St. Scholastica and Marian Bruce of the University of Alaska Anchorage. The authors present data derived from a national survey they distributed to NCHC-member institutions in 2009. Based on a total of 276 complete responses (33% of those surveyed), the authors analyze commonalities and differences in perceptions about administrative responsibilities among honors directors at the four types of Carnegie institutions: associate, baccalaureate, master’s, and doctoral. One conclusion they draw based on these data is that perceived similarities between programs justify general sessions at the national conference while perceived differences warrant specialized sessions.

In “Honors Thesis Rubrics: A Step toward More Consistent and Valid Assessment in Honors,” Mark Haggerty, Theodore Coladarci, Mimi Killinger, and Charlie Slavin describe the background, rationale, and evolution of a series of rubrics they have developed in the University of Maine Honors College. With separate rubrics for students and faculty and for different phases of thesis production, the authors are working on creating greater validity and consistency both in supporting and evaluating honors work. They describe and assess each of the rubrics in their essay so that the models they describe might be beneficial to other honors deans and directors.

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In the final research essay, “A Role for Honors in Conservation and Biodiversity Education,” Kenneth J. Oswald and Ernest Smith provide a useful and compelling case for including conservation and biodiversity within an honors curriculum. They argue that these topics are crucial to the education of all students in any major and that honors programs are uniquely situated to reach a broad interdisciplinary spectrum. Using the University of Northern Kentucky Honors Program as an example, the authors also write that conservation and biodiversity are topics that fit well with the core mission of honors education, and they provide concrete suggestions for adapting these subjects to the goals of honors education—goals of conservation and innovation that bring us back full-circle to the primary focus of this issue’s *JNCHC* Forum on “The Institutional Impact of Honors.”