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Can Faculty Afford Honors?

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In “Costs and Benefits in the Economy of Honors,” Richard Badenhausen identifies several pressing issues regarding the economic status of honors in the current financial climate of higher education, including the role of faculty in addressing those issues. The crux of his argument regarding faculty seems to be that faculty are generally unaware of the budgetary issues involved in administering an honors program. For instance, he states that his work with the admissions office on the costs of recruitment strategies has given him a “much deeper appreciation of the economy of honors education even though this is not knowledge that many of my fellow faculty members seem to share.” As a non-administrative faculty member myself, I would argue that honors program directors should take the initiative in ensuring that honors faculty are informed about and invited to participate in discussions concerning the program’s financial status. By opening these lines of communication, honors directors can also become more intimately aware of the increasingly difficult professional decisions that faculty have to make as a result of the “new normal” economy. If funding is, as Badenhausen argues, “always sloshing around in the institutional coffers,” then honors directors should consider allocating some of these funds to enhance faculty knowledge about the economics of honors in the following ways.

PROVIDE COMPENSATION FOR HONORS COURSES AND PROJECTS

After honors directors have negotiated with administrators about budgetary options for staffing honors courses, they need to disseminate this information widely so that faculty and department chairs can make informed decisions about accommodating honors in teaching assignments and course rotations. Is money available to hire an adjunct to teach the regular course not covered by a faculty member who teaches an honors course? Will honors courses be considered on-load or off-load in a particular department? Are faculty who teach honors courses aware of differences in teaching load policies among departments and programs on their campuses? I have been fortunate enough to teach all my honors courses on-load, including not only honors composition, which is considered part of our department’s normal freshman

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composition rotation, but also the honors seminars listed under our department's special topics designations. Other departments allow faculty to teach honors courses only if the administration will pay for an adjunct to teach the regular course not being covered by the full-time faculty member. Some of my colleagues, however, would like to teach an honors course or seminar but are not allowed to because of their departmental teaching commitments; faced with increasing enrollment and long-term hiring freezes, some departments simply cannot afford to release faculty from upper-division and graduate courses for which specific faculty specializations are needed.

Even if on-load, compensated off-load, or adjunct options are available, faculty must carefully weigh their obligations to their home departments and to their own professional development. Just like everyone else in the “new normal” economy, faculty are being asked to do more with less, such as teaching courses with higher class caps to accommodate increasing enrollment and to compensate for dwindling faculty lines. We are also obligated to our chairs, colleagues, and students to cover upper-division and graduate course rotations so that students can graduate as close to on-time as possible. Can we really afford—and not just in the financial sense of the word—to take more time away from our regular teaching and research commitments to prepare for extra honors work?

Badenhausen also laments the fact that “[m]ost honors programs and colleges have few if any dedicated faculty, further isolating honors in the university hierarchy.” At most schools, faculty who teach honors are not hired for dedicated honors lines, but many are certainly dedicated in terms of being enthusiastically committed to honors education. We find ourselves acquiescing to pleas from beleaguered honors students who need thesis advisors, committee members, and honors contracts to graduate; we gladly report for duty when applications need to be reviewed, when interviews need to be conducted, when orientations and retreats and socials and fundraisers need to be staffed. Traditionally, many of us have undertaken this extra work because of our dedication to the honors community. We can also add these activities to our annual review forms, but this is not the primary incentive for honors educators. If faculty members are being asked to set aside old-fashioned, romantic notions about the vocation of teaching and get down to dollars and cents, then perhaps we need to reassess how much uncompensated volunteer work is too much.

PROMOTE NCHC RESOURCES

Another way that honors directors can foster faculty awareness of honors finances is to share the wealth of information generated by NCHC members. As a member of the *Honors in Practice* editorial board, I get annoyed when

I read manuscripts from authors who have obviously never read any previous issues of *HIP* or *JNCHC* or any of the monographs. This neglect of the body of scholarship in our organization might be attributed in part to the high turnover rate for honors directors; the previous director may have absconded with or discarded the hard copies, or the new director may not have found time to review the publications either in paper or electronically through the NCHC website. In any case, the director can take the initiative to circulate copies of monographs and journal articles among the faculty. If you want faculty to learn about the economics of honors, you might start by purchasing multiple copies of the monograph *Fundraising for Honors* by Larry Andrews or by downloading and emailing copies of Greg Lanier's "Growth = Bucks(?)" essay from the *JNCHC* forum on "Managing Growth in Honors."

When an honors program joins NCHC, the director is considered the institutional representative and receives membership benefits that include publication subscriptions, member rates for conferences, and eligibility to vote, to run for office, and to serve on national committees. Other faculty at member institutions can also attend conferences for member rates, but, if they want to serve on committees or subscribe to hard copies of publications, they must purchase individual professional memberships. Institutional memberships are paid through a program's budget, but professional memberships are usually an out-of-pocket expense; this counts as an "unreimbursed business expense" for tax purposes, but it is still paid by an individual, not the program. (I tip my hat to those directors who elect to purchase a professional membership in addition to the institutional membership.) Some of my colleagues have changed jobs and ended up at schools that are not NCHC members, and they would love to continue to participate in the national conference, but they would have to pay prohibitively expensive non-institutional member registration fees. Directors need to be aware of the individual costs involved as they promote faculty involvement in such opportunities.

SUBSIDIZE TRAVEL TO HONORS CONFERENCES AND WORKSHOPS

Badenhausen also observes that, in reviewing the program for the 2011 NCHC conference, he saw many sessions listed for teaching but no sessions with "money" in the title. When I reviewed the program, however, I saw an increasing number of sessions devoted to administrative issues, such as the Best Honors Administrative Practices (BHAP) track that included presentations on "Fundraising Fundamentals for Honors" and "Budget, Space, Staffing: External Consulting Help for Internal Issues." The Developing in Honors (DIH) program also included panels on "Appropriate Staffing for Your Honors Program/College," "Budgeting in the Age of Shrinking

Budgets,” and “Fundraising for Your Honors Program/College.” In this economy, NCHC should indeed be providing such sessions, and directors should be attending them, but directors need then to return to campus and share this information with their honors faculty. If directors want to raise faculty awareness of issues in honors economics, they need to relay this information effectively to faculty.

Similarly, fundraising for travel to NCHC conferences typically focuses on bringing as many students as possible to present papers and posters and to participate in academic and social events. Directors should also consider bringing faculty to learn about not only pedagogical approaches to honors education but also administrative and financial issues faced by honors programs. Most faculty members travel to disciplinary conferences to give presentations, to learn about new research, to network, and maybe to check the “presentation” box on their annual review. I use my faculty travel allotment to attend NCHC because the cores of my research agenda are honors composition and honors education, but my situation is uncommon. Informing faculty about the conference and perhaps instituting an attendance rotation for interested faculty could expand the number of sessions covered per year for information gathering and, in turn, strengthen the sense of community for the program.

Aside from the annual NCHC conference, faculty members have other travel opportunities with which to learn about honors administration and economics. The six regional honors organizations hold annual conferences in the spring, and various state honors organizations hold annual meetings; faculty travel to these might be easier for a program to support. Many NCHC committees schedule face-to-face meetings during the annual conference and then conduct their year-round business electronically. Some committees, however, such as the Publications Board and the Honors Semesters committee, have traditionally held a mid-year meeting; terms on the Board of Directors and Conference Planning committees also necessitate travel throughout the year. NCHC seminars, workshops, and institutes provide additional opportunities for faculty immersion in honors issues. Funding faculty travel for these types of honors activities is an investment in the infrastructure of the honors program and invigorates faculty interest and involvement in honors issues.

SHARE WITH US THE FINANCIAL INFORMATION YOU THINK WE SHOULD KNOW

Badenhausen notes that “there may be tangible benefits for colleges and universities that foreground the economic aspects of higher education and ask faculty to take a more overt role in discussions about that side of institutional life.” Involving faculty in financial discussions is particularly germane to

contemporary grappling with concepts of transparency and shared governance in higher education. Many of the recommendations listed above would cost money rather than save it in a time of diminishing budgetary resources, but if that money really is “sloshing around,” then funding faculty development would be a worthwhile investment. Rather than simply express surprise that faculty members are unaware of the arcane economic underpinnings of higher education administration, sit us down and share with us the information that you feel we need to know so that we can be more effective advocates of and participants in honors education.

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