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# Honors and the Humanities: Necessary as Air and Water

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## Honors and the Humanities: Necessary as Air and Water

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Larry Andrews' brief but substantive essay covers the waterfront. In it, he ranges from the health of the humanities to Cardinal Newman's inspiring vision of what the humanities do to bring out the best and the most exaltedly human in each of us. The essay renews in me the notion that honors ought to hold steady in its commitment to making sure that students, specifically the increasing number of students for whom college may seem primarily a means of assuring future financial stability, have more than a passing acquaintance with the humanities and the rest of the liberal arts, the competencies they teach, and the questions with which they engage.

The importance of the humanities has come up for debate, as Andrews' summarizes so succinctly. Similarly, honors may seem frivolous, elitist, and rear-guard in a cultural environment that maintains that post-secondary education ought to create job-ready graduates. At the yearly meeting of the National Collegiate honors Council, it is almost a given that at any moment, in some session or in a hallway conversation, people are bemoaning the fact

that their own schools are questioning the expense of honors, the messiness of honors, and even the place of honors within the institution itself.

Further, as someone who attended a quasi-elite college and was told that there was no need for an honors program there because “all our students are honors students” and who is now an honors administrator at a broad-access regional institution where some colleagues wonder aloud about elitism, I know that the question about the place of honors is a vexed one. We may, however, have the collective energy, wisdom, and idealism needed to defend both honors and the humanities and to prepare a compelling case that those least likely to be steered to either “h” are those who might best be served by them. Far from being elitist, both honors and the humanities protect the equalizing function of higher education.

The recent American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) publication *America’s Unmet Promise: the Imperative for Equity in Higher Education* by Keith Witham et al. traces the intersection of class, race, and access to higher education and discusses the directions in which students move (or are moved) once they enter post-secondary education; it notes that simply having access to college enrollment does not mean that each student has an educational experience to that of other students. For example, reporting that in 2012 “70.2 percent of African American community college students were enrolled in a career/technical education program, compared to 67.9 percent of white community college students, 60.7 percent of Asian community college students, and 64.1 percent of Latino college students,” the authors suggest that, despite the fact that such programs may well offer good outcomes in the form of job preparation and employment, “the disproportionate enrollment of historically disadvantaged populations in these programs has the potential to limit opportunities for transfer to four-year institutions, thereby contributing to existing disparities in bachelor’s degree attainment for these groups” (Witham et al. 18–19).

The brief by Witham et al. cites research indicating that individuals with college education “are more likely than those with just a high school diploma to have consistent health insurance coverage and healthy lifestyles that reduce reliance on social and healthcare services” (6). The study also notes that “college graduates are almost twice as likely to vote as those with just a high school diploma, are much more likely to consider themselves informed about current political issues, and are more likely to participate in volunteer activities” (6). Once again, research finds that postsecondary education provides benefits that extend beyond job prospects and implies, at least to me,

that we in higher education are called to assert as persuasively as possible that humanistic study is required for the well-being of a robust democracy and an engaged citizenry.

We in honors need to be making the case for humanities. Given data such as that found in the AAC&U's most recent employer survey, which substantiates the fact that "the types of problem-solving and analytical thinking skills students gain through undergraduate education are more important than the specific major or program in which they earn a degree" (Witham et al. 6), we must convince colleagues, students, and potential students that a curriculum requiring reading, thinking, writing, and arguing about what we might call eternal questions is good not only for the soul but the transcript and the résumé. We should argue as well that students whose coursework might end after two years are more in need than other students of an educational experience that provides them with the opportunity to develop their knowledge and skills in ways other than those inculcated by their more technical studies. If students are going to complete their higher education with an associate's degree, then that degree should equip them with the competencies and intellectual skills required of citizens, community members, and voters.

I suggest that honors should overreach, as do the English professors of Andrews's article. We should, for example, establish robust articulation agreements between community college honors and the programs of four-year schools to help assure that vocational/technical students in two-year schools have an honors curriculum that prepares them fully for the option of transfer to a four-year school and the positive economic, civic, and social outcomes associated with a baccalaureate degree. Given the finding by Burning Glass that "employers are seeking a bachelor's degree for jobs that formerly required less education, even when the actual skills required haven't changed or when this makes the position harder to fill," students who are currently ending their studies with associates degrees are increasingly likely to find themselves back in the classroom again, strengthening the case for robust linkages between two- and four-year institutions.

Honors programs and colleges seem to me as necessary as clean water and clean air. To function well, individually and as a democracy, we must each have access to questions, competencies, ideas, and experiences beyond the pressing issue of how we will provide a salary to support ourselves. Going beyond our material needs, such questions—and our intersection with others who are asking and answering them—help us understand precisely what we are seeking to preserve and protect with our economic efforts. They help us

to see our mission and to proceed through our lives and our interactions with the world as something other than employees. These endeavors free us while also showing us our shackles and allowing us to ask ourselves how we might pick their lock.

Let us then defang arguments about the irrelevance of the humanities and the elitism of honors by making a concerted effort to convince precisely those students and colleagues who are least likely to be convinced that we are designed for them. Doing so requires outreach and faith. Even my initial efforts at hammering out an articulation agreement with a local community college require a great deal of learning about the real and human effects of educational inequality and inequity. Quite possibly the honors program I direct will need to re-examine some of its own most sacred assumptions about merit and educational attainment in order to keep promises to students whom we hope to serve.

Still, such an effort is worthwhile both practically and ethically. Engaging students who would otherwise not have much access to humanistic study or to honors education broadens our constituency beyond the bounds our critics think we set for ourselves; further, and perhaps most importantly, it helps us fulfill our mandate to liberate minds and cultivate an educated democracy. Answering critics by broadening our scope and showing our centrality allows us to survive and to continue our cultivation of individual lives and a robust society.

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