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A Dual Perspective on AP, Dual Enrollment, and Honors

HEATHER C. CAMP AND GIOVANNA E. WALTERS

Minnesota State University, Mankato

As co-authors of this response to Annmarie Guzy's essay, we provide different vantage points on prior-credit programs that arise from our distinct roles on campus, and together we suggest the appropriate way forward for honors. To represent our unique perspectives and to mimic the ongoing back-and-forth on this topic on our campus and elsewhere, we have chosen to format our response as a dialogue, thus suggesting some of the multiple voices and angles on AP, dual enrollment, and honors.

Both of us have felt the impact of AP and dual enrollment programs and have worried about its implications for both the traditional and honors experiences. Notwithstanding our concerns, we move forward reassured. We feel that the characteristics of honors that have helped us build strong programs will help us maintain vitality and integrity in the changing academic culture ahead. By continuing to be flexible, experimental, and collaborative, we can construct models of honors that uphold quality and rigor while adapting to the institutional and national frameworks that shape higher education today.

HEATHER

As the composition director at my university and a faculty member in honors, I have paid the most attention to the impact of dual enrollment on our general education writing requirement. English 101 is perhaps the most frequently offered course on our campus and is an important source of credit generation for the department and university. English faculty members like the course because it serves as a funding source for teaching-inclined graduate students. Administrators are drawn to it as a site for increasing retention, promoting student success, and encouraging timely graduation.

At my institution, dual enrollment sections of English 101 are taught by high school teachers in often rural areas. English faculty members, in turn, play a supervisory role. While lending institutional support to dual enrollment offerings in our region potentially constricts the number of students who might be served onsite by our English 101 course, university administrators encourage us to be involved in dual enrollment to generate revenue and to foster positive relationships with public school systems and communities in the region.

GINNY

As an honors advisor and instructor, I have noticed increasing numbers of students entering the university who have completed a significant number of general education requirements, including English 101. More than half of this fall's entering first-year students are coming to campus with some type of general education requirement completed. Anecdotal evidence, primarily conversations with students, has led me to believe that this trend is driven in large part by the increasing cost of higher education and the student loan situation in our country. The opportunity to complete a semester or even a year of school at very little cost to the student is extremely tempting. First-year students are often asking how soon they can take upper-level courses, either in honors or in their major. They seem eager to move quickly through their college requirements and are generally confident that they possess the basic skills to succeed in upper-level courses.

HEATHER

My involvement in dual enrollment has led me to share some of the frustrations articulated in Guzy's lead essay. The trend toward sprinting through

college requirements, even though it is fueled by legitimate financial worries and abysmal college completion rates, seems in Guzy's words antithetical to "philosophical reflection or transformation" and to "building ties in the honors community." I also have reservations about the quality of college course equivalencies offered in high schools, seeing this problem less as a failing of individual teachers and more as a systemic problem: most high school teachers are removed from a disciplinary community and from other professionals engaged in similar work, and they lack the materials, time, and rewards to sustain and innovate their college-level teaching. From a developmental standpoint, I question whether the AP/dual enrollment movement has sufficiently explored the level of work that high school students are capable of achieving. I would like to see more research being done on the interplay between high school students' social, emotional, and intellectual maturity and their capacity for college-level work.

GINNY

Another problem I see is the lack of clarity about what kind of prior knowledge and experience a college instructor can expect from a student who has earned credit through a dual enrollment or AP course. English 101 illustrates this problem well. I work with students on their first-year-experience reflective essays and on writing for their honors electronic portfolios. With the uptick in dual enrollment, I find that students enter with a wide variety of skills learned through their previous writing course equivalencies. One expects to see a range in competency, but with dual enrollment I feel less assured that students will know specific skills like proper citation, using library databases, or effective source synthesis. I feel more confident about these skills among students who have completed an ENG 101 course at my institution. The erosion of this benchmark makes it hard to know what students need when they begin writing in honors.

HEATHER

The pressures toward AP and dual enrollment call upon us as rhetoricians to make convincing cases for the distinctive work done in our general education honors courses. We need to make our case to administrators, parents, and students, and above all we need to ensure and demonstrate that honors work really is distinctive. Gone are the days when we could rely on honors requirements to guarantee our courses would fill, if such days ever existed. To

sell our programs and courses, we have to set them apart in the opportunities they offer. In one recent honors section of ENG 101 at our university, for example, students worked with the local newspaper (circulation 22,000) to develop a feature article for their glossy magazine. In spring 2017, honors students enrolled in an intermediate writing course for general education credit will tutor adult refugees in a community education program. Opportunities like these can help us make the case that honors general education courses are unique and valuable sites for learning.

GINNY

At the same time, we may need to think more carefully about what is essential in an honors curriculum. Honors programs need to recognize and adapt to the needs of their students, understanding that the honors education of the past may not best suit the future. For example, in 2015–2016 we instituted a new honors curriculum in which students could choose between two separate tracks: *Honors Program Graduate* or *Honors Program Graduate with Distinction*. Perhaps paradoxically, only the “Distinction” track includes honors sections of general education courses. The Honors Program Graduate pathway allows students to complete the honors program even if they come into the university with many or in some cases all of their general education credits.

This approach might not adhere to the NCHC Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program, especially the condition that “program requirements constitute a substantial portion of the participants’ undergraduate work, typically 20% to 25% of the total course work and certainly no less than 15%,” but as part of a competency-based honors program we embrace the mindset that the future of honors education lies in experiential and project-based learning that may or may not occur in a classroom. Such learning can occur with or without the general education curriculum. We view the association between honors and credit hours as an evolving concept.

HEATHER

In honors program models that deemphasize general education, administrators and faculty may have to work together to determine where in the curriculum to embed skills that were previously taken for granted. If fewer students are taking English 101 on campus, for instance, then honors administrators may need to identify a new home for library research skills. More

generally, a move away from a shared general education experience puts more responsibility on honors faculty to incorporate the habits of mind and liberal arts values of a general education curriculum into their upper-division courses and for the honors program to articulate standards and means of support for doing so.

GINNY

We also need to identify ways to engage with our fellow educators who are teaching dual enrollment courses in the high schools. Honors administrators might not have considered this kind of collaborative partnership before, but we benefit from envisioning high school teachers as colleagues in light of the significant role they are playing in providing today's college education. As more honors students bring in credit for prior learning, honors directors should have a seat at the table in university conversations about dual enrollment, including conversations about teacher preparation and ongoing training.

HEATHER

In matters of teacher development, Guzy encourages us to “tend to our own houses as well.” This advice may be especially relevant to general education courses, which are increasingly staffed by poorly compensated and often tenuously employed adjunct faculty. In their relationship to the departments for which they teach and in their access to a professional community, ongoing development, and time for planning, these faculty members may resemble dual enrollment instructors. Both types of faculty inhabit a kind of peripheral space that does not provide necessary support for and recognition of teaching excellence. Those of us involved in honors staffing should do what we can to provide the resources that teachers need to excel in the honors classroom.

GINNY AND HEATHER

The honors community's reputation for developing new and creative methods for teaching and learning has to be earned. The challenges associated with AP and dual enrollment extend fertile proving ground. We accept this challenge as we have done with other large-scale paradigm shifts in higher education.

REFERENCE

“Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program.” *National Collegiate Honors Council*. <<http://nchchonors.org/faculty-directors/basic-characteristics-of-a-fully-developed-honors-program>>.

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