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The Catalytic Impact of Honors

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As president of two public research universities (University of Maine and Ball State University), I have had the pleasure of working with excellent, long-standing honors colleges. At each institution, the honors college has earned a place of distinction as the intellectual heart and soul of the university. That place of distinction has much to do with an evolution of honors culture at each campus. I learned a great deal about honors and honors culture from my colleague Charlie Slavin, the iconic Dean of the UMaine Honors College. In 2008, Charlie, who was a close friend, wrote an essay called “Defining Honors Culture” for the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* focusing on the role such an experience can have on developing a mindset of “intellectual risk-taking.” As Charlie wrote about honors students:

Students in honors are willing to take intellectual risks both in their discipline and outside of it: they enjoy the challenge. They are the exceptional English students who revel in discussions of quantum mechanics and the outstanding engineers who can’t read enough

history. Their personal economies guide them to get the most out of their undergraduate education. . . . they are willing to explore and often find themselves surprised at their interest. They're willing to take the risk. (16)

As we chart a refreshed course at Ball State University through a new strategic plan, "The Centennial Commitment (18 by '18)," in anticipation of the hundredth anniversary of our institution, Dean Jim Ruebel has been a vital partner in enabling the Ball State Honors College to fully explore and exemplify the new vision:

Ball State University aspires to be the most student-centered and community-engaged of the 21st-Century Public Research Universities, transforming entrepreneurial learners into impactful leaders—committed to improving the quality of life for all.

This concept of the twenty-first-century entrepreneurial learner follows upon the premise of John Seely Brown, who artfully describes a new paradigm of learning as an active sport and one that is characterized by learning in an environment of creativity, nurtured risk, and student success.

Traditionally, discussion about the value of honors education focuses on the outcomes for students: enhancement of skill sets that are (a) academic, (b) social, (c) leadership-oriented, (d) personal, and (e) vocational or professional. These are all real outcomes, but they can also be achieved outside honors. What makes honors special is that it provides a place, a program, and the resources for nourishing these outcomes in the company of other high-achieving students who are undergoing the same transformations and who show respect for these high ambitions in their peers.

Less widely discussed are the effects of honors education on faculty development. Honors involves commitment to a pedagogy that is new for most first-time honors professors, requiring that they "let go" and place more responsibility for the success of the class on the students: to inquire, to explore, to discover, to collaborate, to create, to take risks. The great temptation is to short-circuit these processes by injecting faculty control in the form of overt or implied correct answers or in directed assignments where the outcome follows from the direction. This faculty intervention is sometimes disguised as "rigor" or "high standards." When faculty give up this desire to control the process and outcome, we discover that students respond enthusiastically to being treated as an adult—as a true participant and as a leader rather than as a follower—for the first time in their academic lives. A class can begin with

a question rather than with a set of determinate exercises or a lecture. Once having opened that dangerous-looking door, faculty find it difficult to close; their teaching changes permanently.

Just as students can achieve their goals outside honors, faculty can also discover this pedagogy outside honors: it just happens more effectively and more often within an honors environment. Inspired by their work in honors, faculty frequently begin to develop new courses, perhaps tangential to their own disciplines. An English faculty member offers an honors colloquium on the Holocaust; a professor of landscape architecture offers an honors colloquium on sustainability as reflected in science fiction; a history teacher develops an honors colloquium on philanthropy; a journalism instructor teaches an honors colloquium on the Beatles. Sometimes these somewhat experimental courses lead to permanent or frequent offerings in the faculty member's own department. Sometimes they continue to be offered only through honors. In either case, the curriculum and the students are enriched in previously unexpected ways from taking such an intellectual risk. In addition, faculty members may find that they have a new strand of scholarship to pursue that can lead to publication and other forms of peer recognition.

A less frequently documented value of honors comprises the institutional benefits gained by having such a program on campus. Honors students populate majors across the campus and enrich those programs while they are themselves being enriched. All honors students are also someone else's students. The common wisdom is that a successful honors program attracts high-achieving students whether or not they choose to participate in the honors program; the better the honors program, the more attention it will attract from such students. The notion that honors-like students are attracted by a thriving honors college or program seems confirmed, at least in the limited sample of Ball State, by the stimulus for honors at key points in the university's history: the foundation of the program in 1959, the creation of the signature programmatic scholarship in 1976, the progression to a college in 1979, and the "leading with honors" initiative in the 1990s as part of a university-wide goal of increased admissions standards. Although the actual percentage of incoming students participating in the Ball State University Honors College has not risen above 9%, the number of students matriculating to Ball State who were honors eligible rose to 12%, with one fourth of these students distributed across the university.

Thus, a true value of honors is the catalytic impact such a learning experience has on honors students and in turn on their peers, their faculty, and

even their administrators. A culture of intellectual risk-taking, which at Ball State we associate with entrepreneurial learning, can permeate the institution, inspiring it to engage and achieve at higher degrees of rigor, expectation, outcomes, and performance. Performance can be improved not only in the academic and research agendas but in the other divisional agendas of business affairs, student affairs, enrollment services, and strategic communications—all advancing the stature of the institution.

Students make a choice whether or not to do honors, and after having chosen, whether to persist. Those who persist to the honors diploma have demonstrated a commitment through choice and action; at any point, it would be easier or more convenient to stop, but those who choose to go on will integrate their academic and co-academic experiences into transformative self-realization. They will experience the impact of honors culture that Charlie Slavin described as a “culture of individuals who take intellectual risks and who participate in this community only because they choose to” (18). This is a value well-conceived.

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