Research In, On, or About Honors

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In his thought provoking essay in this issue, George Mariz makes a call for "devoting some serious attention to setting an agenda for honors research." He tells us that research in honors is a lot less common than it would appear to a casual observer, writing that "Both narrative and statistical accounts of honors are so far inadequate to yield useful conclusions." Honors administrators, he contends, need this sort of analysis in order to "be able to argue with hard evidence for the . . . demonstrable advantages of honors." As a result of these concerns, he writes, "Research in honors has become a priority for the National Collegiate Honors Council."

I wholeheartedly agree both that it is surprising that more data haven't been gathered or analyzed and that such analyses will help administrators demonstrate the significant benefits of honors education for both honors students and the larger colleges and universities we serve. I also support a renewed focus on research within the broader honors community. I am struck, though, by what I think is a misplaced preposition in both Mariz's essay and in the broader discussions at the NCHC. While usually tagged with the phrase "research in honors," these conversations are usually about

research *on* honors. We need to clarify that there is—and should be—a great deal of research in honors that is not on honors. Like Ted Estess before me, I am unsatisfied with the view that "'Honors scholarship' [means] scholarship about Honors programs, their students, curricula, and institutional settings" (26). To suggest that what qualifies as research in honors is strictly research about what happens in honors is to ignore some of the most creative, innovative, unique, and honors-like research that we and our students do. If we tell ourselves, and the broader communities we serve, that the only—or the privileged—research in honors is research on honors, we do ourselves and our students a grave disservice.

Mariz begins his essay by outlining how disciplinary norms for what counts as research are generally clear, yet in honors no such standards are specified. He uses this comparison to pursue further the question of how research about honors should be conducted, suggesting an inclusive approach that employs both quantitative and qualitative approaches since neither is adequate on its own. Mariz makes a few concrete suggestions: research on honors should be both longitudinal and comparative, and we need to examine the effect of honors not just on students but on faculty as well. I agree that his suggestions will improve our ability—and particularly the ability of our administrators—to defend honors and justify our role in the broader university.

I want to claim, however, that we already do unique research in honors. Rather than settle for better justifications of honors programs, we also need collectively to articulate what counts for research within the honors framework and what makes research in honors so full of power and potential. (For the record, I think we should encourage research on and about honors from outside of honors as well, as a way of being less self-referential and "caught inside a closed loop," as Mariz describes it.) Those of us who work in honors often do so out of a vision of scholarship that incorporates and builds upon disciplinary expertise that we have previously developed while also explicitly connecting to the goals of well-rounded and -grounded liberal arts education (see Estess). Calling for greater, more rigorous research in honors when we really mean research on or about honors ignores precisely much of the exciting, rigorous, and important scholarship that happens within the purview of honors education. The emergent focus on research in honors should, I suggest, invigorate our commitment to put into practice precisely the style of scholarship to which we are committed: interdisciplinary, integrative, and community-engaged as well as inclusive of and empowering to students.

These thoughts are prompted by an effort just beginning at the University of New Mexico Honors College, where I am an assistant professor. We have created a task force with the aim of discussing and making recommendations about how to better integrate methodological instruction into the honors curriculum. In our inaugural discussions, the question has arisen whether we want to replicate the offerings of math or other departments but with an honors twist or if honors students are better served by unique methodological training not available elsewhere on campus. The question, in other words, is whether research in honors does or should rely on disciplinary methods, or if there is something unique about the interdisciplinary research of the type we expect from our students that requires its own methodological training.

Similarly, at the UNM Honors College we ask ourselves regularly what it means to teach students how to synthesize multiple disciplines and truly engage in an interdisciplinary way. I am of the mind that honors-level interdisciplinary research is tough work, work that we cannot expect of our students by relying only on disciplinary methodological training. So, what does it mean to conduct effective interdisciplinary honors research? I suggest that this type of question is what we need to be asking about research in honors, both for faculty scholarship and for research conducted by or including students.

Our task force has therefore begun to ask how we should train students for honors-level work. Our discussions focus on questions about (1) what courses we can offer that will prepare students for a senior capstone experience and for lifelong critical, interdisciplinary engagement and (2) what elements are crucial to interdisciplinary, community-engaged research. These questions are deeply related to the broader question we should be asking ourselves as honors faculty: how can we better engage in research that embodies the honors framework and mission?

These questions may be particularly salient for honors programs and colleges located at research universities, where the research imperative for tenure and promotion is likely more pressing. At the UNM Honors College, faculty members have a somewhat privileged position relative to those in other universities: we are tenure-stream faculty with significant research requirements for tenure and promotion, yet we are housed a hundred percent in honors without being shared with other departments and disciplines. Tenure recommendations come from within our college although faculty members representing disciplinary expertise outside of honors also sit on our tenure committees, reflecting the broader expectation that faculty in honors straddle

and negotiate both disciplinary and interdisciplinary goals of scholarship. That the primary evaluation of the quality of our work comes from within honors, though, gives us a unique freedom to examine what it means to conduct honors-style research and how to best serve our personal and professional goals, our college, and our students—a great opportunity for pursuing the type of research we want to encourage within the honors tradition. Our collective task, however, is to be more explicit about precisely what form this research should take.

Consequently, in addition to calling for more research about the practices and benefits of honors programs and colleges, I propose that we begin collectively to imagine what makes research within honors unique. As a place to start, I suggest the following special characteristics of honors research: our scholarship is inclusive of students; we integrate research and teaching; we are often highly engaged in and with the broader communities where we are housed; and our work is both interdisciplinary and able to address non-specialist audiences. We need to develop among ourselves ideas for best-practices and standards for honors research, both as criteria for tenure and promotion and as a way of improving the services we provide to students. We must think deeply—beyond research *on* honors—about what makes research *in* honors unique and powerful.

REFERENCE

Estess, Ted L. "Honors Scholarship: Another View." *JNCHC* 5.1 (2004): 25–27.

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