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Linda Frost

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, linda-frost@utc.edu

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No Complaints, Please; Just Time to Rethink Honors

LINDA FROST

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Abstract: This article responds to a lead essay by Richard Badenhausen posing current challenges to honors education and requesting solutions. Frost argues that the place of honors in our undergraduate curriculum needs to be rethought in part because general education core requirements are shrinking; accordingly, the NCHC Basic Characteristics noting honors viability by the number of honors credit hours a student takes need to be revised as well. As one of the few nimble academic units in the university, the honors program or college has been, is, and can continue to be a key site for innovation on our campuses.

Keywords: honors, credit hours, general education, innovation, design thinking.

Richard Badenhausen is good at writing Forum essays. He knows how to articulate the issues and make the reader, not just him, crave answers rather than snarky commentary. After I read Badenhausen's essay, I made it a point to extoll its virtues not only to my friends in honors but to my friends seeking administrative posts that might have something to do with honors. I think "Shunning Complaint" provides an excellent distillation of the issues confronting us today in honors and beyond. Of course, the bulleted list at the end of Badenhausen's essay isn't just about honors. That list demonstrates how higher education today is turning faster and faster on its axis and how we who have been in it for a while are trying to decide which tactic is best: sinking our feet into whatever ground we can find or finding something new to grab on to and going with the whirl.

As so many of us are these days, I have been trying to see around the corner and into the future for higher education and consequently honors. I think Badenhausen has noted most of what I foresee, and I laud him for that. Not

the least of this list is the question of how we imagine honors curricula and our academic imperative in institutions that more and more are tasked with keeping tuition costs down by limiting the kinds of coursework our students are able to take. At an NCHC panel I was on a few years ago, we struggled with the question of how to deal with “all that AP,” AP being the stand-in for all college credit gained by high school students. We know that taking a hyped-up version of a composition class with your high school English teacher is not what college is about; it may be good preparation for college writing, but it is not college work. Even so, the time for complaining about it is over. Federal aid will no longer support courses students take that don’t clearly contribute to the completion of their degree programs. In Florida, students are charged 200% of their regular tuition for every hour they take over the 120 they are allotted for their college degree. It has been my feeling for a while that we cannot simply pretend that these truths don’t apply to our students. Honors students, too, are capable of graduating with horrific amounts of debt and grave doubts about the value of what that debt has paid for.

How we have thought about honors education, justified it to the students we recruit and the administrators to whom we answer, and delivered it—defined it—on our campuses is all in question now. At the same time, what is also true is that the work honors has done and promoted has had terrific success. Despite Badenhausen’s doubts about whether honors really can act as an experimental space on our campuses, I think it has done precisely that. Study abroad, undergraduate research, living learning communities, experiential learning—all of these innovations that honors has championed and tested and institutionalized in our programs for decades—are now flourishing beyond honors. Most universities and colleges sport study abroad offices now; they all have (or are scurrying to set up) offices of undergraduate research and creative activity; and “experiential learning” is a catchphrase throughout higher education. Honors doesn’t own these ideas, and while we may well have been the site where students were expected and guaranteed to participate in three or more of these kinds of high-impact practices, they are now being heralded across campuses.

That’s a good thing, right?

Despite what it may mean for honors educators trying to justify their existence, surely we should be glad that the work we have done for years has been adopted beyond us. Surely we should celebrate the fact that more students than ever at regional and large public institutions, if not all institutions, have access to the opportunities that we know give students the most bang

for their scholarship buck. Surely we should see this situation as the success of honors in the U.S. even if organizations like NCUR and AAC&U get the credit for branding and building out our successful experiments. Perhaps we should bask quietly in our experiment's success

Nevertheless, giving others the credit doesn't help us justify our existence or budgets today, nor does it help us figure out what we need to be doing in our own programs. We have to come up with new innovations, as Badenhausen notes, new experiments to stay viable. Many of us are doing just that, finding ways to take on community problems, to move into early graduate work, to foster leadership in our students, to turn our programmatic energies toward overcoming social injustice. Still, the question remains of what it means to do honors work these days. Honors cannot be defined by how smart our students are via test scores and GPAs after so many of us have argued vehemently that those measurements don't really matter. If indeed we are more than our students' numbers, what are we?

Although it is not the favored child of "Shunning Complaint," I hold on to our unique ability in honors to imagine, instill, test, and replicate innovation on our campuses. Honors programs and colleges are and can be, in the nomenclature of my state's former governor, speedboats to our campuses' battleships. We are nimble and can change and redirect what we do with minimal repercussion and obstacle, notably so when compared to our necessarily denser degree-granting fellow colleges. Our elasticity is the hallmark of innovation; it is what we can and continue to offer higher education in general. Rather than just smart kids with high test scores, the admitted students in all of the three programs with which I have worked have had two traits in common—initiative and the ability to take direction. That's a mean combination when you're looking for agents of change.

My solution then is two-fold. First, we need to resee honors and reclaim it in part as the site of innovation it actually is. Second, we need NCHC to record our revised notions of honors education to reflect the reality of the arenas in which we live and work today and in which we may well be working tomorrow.

RESEEING HONORS

At the 2017 NCHC conference in Atlanta, I attended a design thinking workshop hosted by the Pavlis Honors College at Michigan Technological University. The facilitators—Laura Fiss, Lorelle Meadows, and Mary

Raber—led ice breakers that encouraged our failures rather than our successes. We played a clapping game with partners and whenever someone screwed up, we both yelled “HOORAY!” From there, we did a very simple exercise to demonstrate what it might mean to think differently about honors.

The facilitators asked us for words or characteristics that we commonly associated with the circus such as elephants, the Big Top, popcorn, audiences of parents and children, and clowns. Next, they asked us to substitute an opposite for each of these words—ants for elephants, for instance, adult couples rather than families and children, an underwater auditorium for the Big Top. They then noted that we had basically outlined how Cirque du Soleil had reconceptualized the circus. Although not a one-to-one match, we got the point.

Next we were asked to list the characteristics and/or common assumptions made of honors. And we did: selectivity and elitism, high test scores, perks and benefits, scholarships, priority registration, separate housing facilities, closed classes—the works. Once we’d finished that, we were told to turn these honors staples on their heads and imagine programs that would decidedly rank as Cirque du Soleil subsidiaries of the NCHC.

Then the Pavlis Honors College facilitators explained how this exercise had worked for them. They noted that they had decided they had a real diversity problem in their program—i.e., NO diversity—and they were looking for a way to address it. They essentially did the design thinking exercise on their campus and made major changes to their program. From what I recall, they dropped the required test scores to get in and may have dropped the minimum GPA required to stay in. They let anyone register for their honors classes who wanted to. They didn’t offer additional scholarship or financial benefits of any kind. They innovated around honors and then looked at the result: much greater diversity, better retention, and, again if I recall correctly, a better community feeling overall.

I’m sure they had problems, not the least of which may have been convincing their administration that what they were doing was a good thing, but the approach had the effect in part for which they had hoped. In other words, they knew that they couldn’t use the same old tricks to do something that none of those tricks had ever managed to do. They needed to totally change the impression of what honors was if they wanted to attract a different kind of student to it, and so that is what they did.

DO WE STILL NEED THE FIFTH HONORS PROGRAM (AND NINTH HONORS COLLEGE) NCHC BASIC CHARACTERISTIC?

I am about to start the third curriculum revision of my career and the second overall at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga Honors College. We have made incremental changes to our forty-year-old program and started new programs, but we have not yet addressed one of the major problems that today troubles almost anyone's well-established honors curriculum: keeping the honors curriculum relevant as our students' general education requirements shrink.

We require our students to take twenty-seven hours of honors seminars that replace general education courses. We don't want to stop offering our general education honors seminars; they give our students and faculty exciting intellectual and academic experiences in robust, intimate, learning communities. (I always think that honors courses do as much to reenergize the faculty teaching them as to feed the hearts and brains of the students taking them.) We don't want to stop the kind of humanities immersion we do in the first year, when our students have the most leeway to take our courses and explore the academic landscape beyond their major requirements. We are beginning a conversation on our campus about building out departmental honors beyond the thesis in order to give our students more options in their majors for fulfilling their honors requirements. Many of these options are in place at other institutions, and I was grateful to pull from the expertise of Greg Tomso at West Florida University, Malin Pereria at UNC Charlotte, and Christian Brady at the University of Kentucky when we were starting our conversation here about this issue.

I also spoke at length with B. L. "Rama" Ramakrishna, Director of the National Academy of Engineering's Grand Challenges Scholars Program Network. The Grand Challenge Scholars Program (GCSP) is a competency-based, nationally instituted, Obama-era call to academic engineers to help their students craft a path through their undergraduate years in order to address one of fourteen "Grand Challenges" (these include directives like "provide access to clean water" and "prevent nuclear terror"). The students apply to their institution's GCSP by showing how the courses they are and will be taking and the extracurricular activities in which they are involved align with their chosen challenge, a challenge that will serve as the key research question for their capstone project. While "engineering-centric," as Rama says, the program's guidelines never mention engineering in their description

of the competencies the students are expected to attain while working with their GCSP; rather, they include elements like multidisciplinary work, entrepreneurship, and social consciousness.

What the good people of Grand Challenges did was look around the corner and see the severe limitations that additional course credit would mean for any enterprising but financially and temporally limited engineering student. The GCSP has no specific required courses. Program heads evaluate their students' success by how well they have envisioned a path through their educations and developed the skills they need to attack the Grand Challenge of their capstone project.

It is time for honors administrators to think differently about course credit—what we have mandated in our Basic Characteristics as at least 15% (for a program) and 20% (for a college) of a student's credit-bearing degree program. If we want to keep abreast of the tides of our profession's changes, we need to think beyond the credit hour as the primary marker of our students' honors success. I think this means—for most of us—that we need to seriously rethink honors overall: what we are giving our students and why; who we want our students to be; what honors does for and gives to our campuses; what our *raison d'être* should be as we look to the next generation of honors.

The only viable solution I see for any of the challenges to honors that Badenhausen poses in “Shunning Complaint” is this kind of careful reconsideration of honors overall. If we do this rethinking together—thoughtfully and humanely and with the kind of curiosity and consideration that I know most honors administrators, faculty, and staff give to everything they do—we may well be able to usher in a new era for honors, one that solves many of the problems we know about as well as those we don't even realize we have yet.

The author may be contacted at

linda-frost@utc.edu.