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Honors and the Curiouser University

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Abstract: With roots in the Latin *cūriōus*, meaning “full of care or pains, careful, assiduous, inquisitive,” the word “curiosity,” like this forum on “Current Challenges to Honors Education,” grows out of both the pain and promise of critical inquiry. This essay takes up the challenge of moving honors from the periphery to the heart of higher education by daring to redefine the college or university itself. Honors fosters—and even demands—the curiosity to look beyond the comforting confines of one’s own mind. Facilitating the conversation, collaboration, and innovation that shape a curious university, honors offers students, faculty, staff, alumni, and community members both space and reason to meet across disciplinary lines. Through cross-disciplinary programming, innovative reward systems, expansive messaging, and broad partnership building, honors assumes the role of campus and community leader by issuing a dare to know that defines and shapes the curious university.

Keywords: honors, administration, innovation, collaboration, challenges

“Curiouser and curiouser!” cried Alice (she was so much surprised, that for the moment she quite forgot how to speak good English).”

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

“Curious” is a curious word. Its roots in the Latin *cūriōus*, meaning “full of care or pains, careful, assiduous, inquisitive” (*Oxford English Dictionary*), suggest both the pain and promise of critical inquiry described broadly in Richard Badenhause’s introduction to this Forum. More specifically, this essay explores how curiosity might guide honors programs and colleges through the challenge of becoming “essential and central units to which institutions look for leadership and on which the institutions depend” (Badenhause). The Latinate definition of painstaking curiosity has shifted over time toward a more adventurous modern definition of the curious as

both “eager” agents “desirous of seeing or knowing” and, self-reflexively, the objects themselves of such curiosity, “exciting attention on account of . . . novelty or peculiarity” (*OED*). Honors students embody every facet of this definition: they are curious curiosities with minds both careful and eager, who therefore need encouragement and guidance as they take intellectual risks on the path to lifelong learning.

The National Collegiate Honors Council’s “Definition of Honors Education” maps this journey with the milestones of “measurably broader, deeper, or more complex” educational experiences resulting from a “learner-directed environment and philosophy.” Recognizing the risks and rewards of such pedagogically collaborative curiosity, honors educators are well positioned to issue—and accept—the poet Horace’s ancient challenge: “*Sapere aude*” or “dare to know.” They become true campus leaders, however, only by transforming this educational imperative into an institutional call to action, daring not just students but also colleagues and partners across campus and in the community to look beyond the limits of their own interests. Through cross-disciplinary programming, innovative reward systems, campus-wide messaging, and broad partnership development, honors programs and colleges can and should lead their institutions in curious collaboration.

The educational imperative of honors education is much like that of the liberal arts: curiosity and collaboration are core values of our missions. It is no surprise that a liberal arts college like Vassar, for example, explicitly “nurtures intellectual curiosity, creativity, respectful debate and engaged citizenship,” much as Carleton College “strives to be a collaborative community that encourages curiosity and intellectual adventure,” and Pomona College promises to engage students “in probing inquiry and creative learning that enable them to identify and address their intellectual passions,” which, in turn, “guide their contributions as the next generation of leaders, scholars, artists, and engaged members of society.” Built in this liberal arts tradition, many honors programs and colleges share the mission of cultivating these particular habits of mind, explicitly valuing “intellectual curiosity, academic attainment, and the development of social consciousness” (University of Pittsburgh), fostering “the free and creative exchange of ideas” and “intellectual curiosity” (Motlow State Community College), and promising “the intellectual, personal, and professional growth of students who demonstrate curiosity . . . and who seek a rigorous and well-rounded undergraduate experience” (University of Michigan), to cite just a few examples. While higher education as a whole teaches students to ask questions, the systematic cultivation of

collaborative curiosity in liberal arts and honors education models for other academic units, student services areas, and community partners how curiosity might lead individuals in unexpectedly rewarding directions.

A key initial step in institutionalizing the personal rewards of such curiosity is to develop honors programming that connects and opens communication between students, faculty, staff, alumni, and community members who might not otherwise meet. My aim here and throughout this essay is to offer some concrete ideas that have worked at my public land-grant institution in the hope that they might prove useful in a variety of institutional contexts. Honors events and programs on our campus, for example, include quarterly university-wide networking socials for all faculty, staff, and honors students; annual community talks by top professors and honors alumni; cross-disciplinary faculty-student honors book clubs; an honors alumni professional mentoring program; student luncheons with visiting activists and speakers; and group community-engagement projects. In every case, our programming strategy results from the belief that curiosity can and should be cultivated: people want to engage with the intellectual community on a college campus because they enjoy learning about ideas and experiences beyond their own limited range of experience. By creating space in our programming to build the relationships between unlikely allies that lead to true innovation, honors incentivizes and operationalizes a “curiuser” institutional culture and thus establishes itself as a key site for cross-campus collaboration.

Honors can build on this foundation by creating a system of intentionally designed academic and professional rewards. For students, these rewards result from the careful documentation of their own broad and engaged curiosity. Our students, like honors students at other institutions, reflect regularly and with clear guidance on topics including interdisciplinary co-curricular events, extracurricular reading groups, community engagement and service, professional and academic internships, alumni mentoring experiences, study abroad, research, and creative work. Honors has developed partnerships with advisors, faculty, and staff across the university’s departments, colleges, and programs to ensure that these units, along with their students, benefit from this thoughtful extension of academic work. Pragmatically, honors rewards both students and sponsors by matching funding for study abroad, internships, research, and creative work; helping students to contextualize, understand, and represent professionally the value of this work; and guiding students in planning, enacting, and documenting projects that bring their academic passions to life. Each of these steps on the honors journey results

in trackable outcomes and rewards for both students and the institution: many honors students study abroad or complete internships, most engage in and present research and creative work at national venues, and all manage complex capstone projects that often lead to graduate school admission or professional success. While these outcomes are typical of honors education, they move honors to the center of campus policy discussions when we demonstrate clearly, thoughtfully, and systematically how our outcomes document and uphold shared institutional values of curiosity and collaboration.

Honors can help build a curious institutional culture that focuses on such values by engaging and documenting the work of faculty as well as students and their sponsoring units. Our honors program has made a priority of rewarding curious faculty with both collaborative opportunities and documentation of their honors contributions for the purposes of promotion and tenure. Faculty, of course, often enjoy teaching and mentoring talented honors students, but their loyalty and commitment to honors grow exponentially when we facilitate their professional development in cross-disciplinary research, teaching, and service through the networking events, team-teaching opportunities, interdisciplinary book clubs, and community-engaged learning suggested briefly above. In addition to creating opportunities for such work, our honors program ensures institutional credit for faculty engaged in it. Working with our faculty senate, provost, and offices of analysis, assessment, and accreditation, honors has drafted and earned approval for honors-specific language in faculty code and job descriptions (formalized at our institution on “role statements” that identify the percentage of a faculty member’s role dedicated to research, teaching, and service). This language clearly articulates the place and value of a faculty member’s work with honors not only as part of professional development but also as a key component of promotion and tenure dossiers. Our university’s promotion and tenure review committee recognizes a standardized résumé of honors activity, requested by faculty and generated by honors staff, that provides specific evidence of honors teaching, research mentoring, and service. Honors has thus established itself as an institutional leader in faculty development, advocacy, and cross-disciplinary professional development with a documentation system that clearly and specifically rewards curious and innovative collaboration in every area of a faculty member’s job description.

Honors can make its role as an institutional leader both visible and public by acting as a campus hub for all interdisciplinary academic programming. Our program demonstrates to both students and the institution how much

we value academic programming from all areas and disciplines by requiring honors students to attend and reflect upon campus co-curricular academic activities every term. To facilitate this requirement, we have created a central calendar and weekly messaging system for students, faculty, and staff that showcases the range of exciting educational opportunities on campus and in the community each week. This weekly messaging takes time to coordinate, draft, and edit, but that effort builds cross-institutional collaborative connections and publicizes the honors program's daily challenge for students, faculty, alumni, staff, and community members to take on Horace's "dare to know." By regularly reaching out to departments, colleges, programs, student services offices, and community organizations to publicize their events alongside our own, we ensure that these areas understand our mission and consider honors a partner. Combined with an effort to place honors students, staff, and faculty in key roles on a variety of university-wide committees and community-engaged boards, this approach to programming and messaging has both emphasized the value of curiosity and situated the honors program as a campus and community leader that delivers this value to all.

Such clear messaging transforms honors into a hub for not just information but also collaboration. Because honors students, staff, faculty, and administrators are trained to seek overlap between their own and others' interests, they are well-positioned to look beyond their own individual growth, forging collaborative partnerships designed to expand any single point of view. Working with admissions, student services, and major academic units on campus, for example, honors can become a leader in institutional recruiting. Not only does honors attract and support top students, but we thoughtfully engage faculty and staff across campus in recruiting and mentoring students from underrepresented groups; identify and train enthusiastic college and university student ambassadors; connect curious students and faculty with the institution's signature research and creative opportunities; and raise institutional retention rates by engaging in and coordinating cross-campus high-impact practices.

Partnering with both campus and community organizations, honors can also take the lead in building crucial reciprocity between the university and the local community. In addition to modeling community-engaged learning across the curriculum and serving as one of Utah State University's first "Community-Engaged Departments," our honors program has collaborated in national grant and community-engaged-institution applications and created clear pathways toward a "Community-Engaged Scholar" transcript

designation. Similarly, working with study abroad and global engagement programs, honors can pilot international experiences for first-generation or underrepresented groups; raise scholarship money to support international study or internships; develop transcript designations or emphases in global engagement; and engage honors students and staff in leading institution-wide pre- and post-travel reflection upon international experiences. As a collaborator, honors must serve not as an idea laboratory on the fringes of campus but as the catalyst at its core, sparking innovative combinations of unexpected elements to achieve shared goals. When honors students, staff, faculty, and administrators consider what we can do with and for other entities on campus—rather than what those entities can do for us—we become indispensable institutional leaders.

To this end, our honors program has adopted Horace’s “*Sapere aude*” as our motto and key branding initiative. Not only does our program dare curious individuals to open their minds to different points of view, but we also call upon our institution to know and embrace its own diverse strengths. Both personally and institutionally, honors can facilitate the thrill of discovering more than oneself and the delight of collaborative solutions and innovations. By leading both individuals and institutions beyond the ease and comfort of business as usual, honors introduces everyone on campus to the people who can change their minds. The risks of failure and frustration in this facilitating role are quite clearly the price of institutional leadership. Honors must dare to take these risks if the goal is, as it should be, to lead curiouiser and curiouiser institutions into the future.

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