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The Case for Heterodoxy

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Abstract: Despite being originally designed to educate men, honors programs are not very attractive to male students in general and to male students of color in particular. Because access to honors programs is limited by a credentialing process that favors white men, many members of minority groups find them inhospitable and are significantly underrepresented. This essay suggests three concepts to be used to reimagine honors programs to be more welcoming of minority students: radical hospitality, asset-based thinking, and heterodoxy.

Keywords: diversity, honors, challenges, innovation, heterodoxy

"Touché . . . rapier wit . . . on point . . . engage . . . parry . . . counter . . . riposte." The language of argument as a path to truth is not the language of agriculture, in which ideas are planted, nourished, and grow to maturity over time, but the ancient language of hand-to-hand combat. An "opponent's" ideas are attacked and counterattacked; theses and dissertations are not "presented" but "defended." Twenty years ago, Deborah Tannen reminded us in *The Argument Culture* that this culture exists because it speaks particularly to men, who are more inclined to agonism by nature (Tannen 166ff). Beginning in the Middle Ages, European scholars and teachers eagerly took ownership of this adversarial model of advancing erudition because men claimed reason as their special province and because the concept that the highest learning was attainable only through reason supported the widespread political practice of excluding from civic life those who were deemed incapable of reasoning at the highest levels of *logos*. The higher education establishment, which resisted the education of both women and African Americans until nearly the end of the nineteenth century, was stunned by Wiley College's 1935 victory in debate over the University of Southern California and could attribute it only to the coaching of distinguished poet Melvin B. Tolson (a Columbia University

graduate) and to the presence on the team of James Farmer, Jr., whose father was on the Wiley faculty. Maintaining the intellectual *status quo* meant dismissing Wiley's achievement as a historical fluke just as it meant dismissing the scientific theories of Rosalind Franklin and Cecilia Payne-Gaposchkin until they were advanced by men years later.

After all, the dialectical approach to learning was not originally designed to educate the entire population of the democracy that invented it, including foot soldiers, farmers, women, and slaves, but rather to educate young men of wealth and privilege for military and political leadership. To deny that this classical infrastructure is central to American higher education in general and to honors pedagogy in particular is to fall victim to our own form of "white fragility" (DiAngelo 2)—call it "honors fragility," in which our visceral response to questions about the way we do things (e.g., "Are we elitist?") is to defend our practices rather than to listen carefully, take a deep breath, and re-examine them.

Richard Badenhausen is correct: our very immersion in the war of words that constitutes academic discourse keeps us trapped in the familiar and makes it difficult for us to venture outside the well-worn path to see ourselves from the outside with others' eyes, particularly through the eyes of those who are not invited to participate in honors or choose not to. For a moment, let us look at honors through the eyes of Stephen C. Scott:

> As the only Black honors student in my graduating class, I was aware of my tokenism, especially in my honors courses, in the honors college office, in the honors learning center . . . and in university and honors college committee meetings, but I never let it bother me much. My peers misperceived me as an "Oreo"; my physical appearance was Black, yet my mannerisms and opinions were "White" to them. Again, that did not bother me because I felt at home among my honors college peers—until my senior year, when I took my first study abroad trip. After that trip, I experienced my first engagement with the Black community at the university and spent a semester unpacking my distorted understanding of African Americans in American history primarily through the mentorship of a remarkable Black woman. By the end of the semester, I understood the importance of correcting my White friends' sense of privilege, representing and advocating for my community in this elite academic space of honors, and paving the way for other Black students to succeed in higher education. (109)

To see the pervasiveness in honors programs of a casually accepted infrastructure of embedded assumptions about what white, middle-class, adolescent males need to know and need to be able to do, try flipping your honors program to see how well it serves populations other than that one. What if your honors program had more students of color than white students enrolled? What if nontraditional students outnumbered students of traditional age? What if men outnumbered women and the largest demographic group among your honors students was African-American males, many of them veterans? Would the program you have now still work for this population? Would you need to change or redesign it? If so, why? And how? What embedded assumptions about honors students might you need to address? Would the classes your program offers need to be different? Would your honors faculty be well suited to teach these students? Would the mentoring change? What kind of community building might be appropriate? Would the social justice activities your program engages in still work or would they need to be rethought? What might the community service vision look like? Given this college population of the twenty-first century, shouldn't the honors program of the twenty-first century be designed for them?

I would like to propose a possible solution to the first problem in Badenhausen's essay, "Shunning Complaint": *access*. Badenhausen asks this question: "How do we create pathways into our honors programs and colleges for students from underrepresented groups when faced with the reality that honors programs and colleges are still predominantly white?" I would contend that what we call "access" is really an issue of "inhospitability" and what admissions professionals are increasingly referring to as "fit" (Smith and Vitus Zagurski).

The data that the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) has been collecting on honors programs over the past few years (see Table 1) suggest that students in honors programs are, on average, about 64% female and 36% male. As it turns out, the single combat model of academic discourse appears to be attractive to women who are more comfortable with that paradigm than with the set of behaviors assigned to them with their gender. Not only do they find what Badenhausen calls "intellectual disputation" more inviting than do our current cadres of high-achieving college-age men, but they appear eager to practice their skills in the more competitive and higher-stakes environment of honors, where women outnumber men by 56% to 44% among college students at large but almost 2:1 in honors programs (National Center for Education Statistics; National Collegiate Honors Council). In the 1960s, women's colleges were loath to desegregate because their faculty felt that they

would lose their advantage as incubators of the next generations of *Jeannes d'Arc*. They were concerned that women would not feel safe engaging in ritual battle with male classmates and would defer. We seem to be past that. Clearly, women have been welcomed into the honors fraternity much more warmly than they have been welcomed into Congress. According to NCHC statistics, however, the participation rates for people of color in honors are dismal: we are 11% African-American, including students in the programs at HBCUs, which are predominantly Black, and two-thirds of African-American honors students are women, making African-American men a tiny minority. We are 9% Latinx, with a smattering of students who self-report as members of indigenous groups or as biracial or multiracial, but only 6% Asian (NCHC), although Asian students constitute the largest majority subpopulation at many of the nation's elite high schools (Strauss; Rab; Freishtat).

Honors programs have been aggressively trying to reach out to students of color for some years, so perhaps our lack of success in recruiting them requires a bit more introspection. Perhaps they don't think the culture of the honors community is a good fit for them; perhaps they are plagued by the "imposter syndrome"; perhaps they think of themselves as deficient in the qualities by which the ideal honors student is defined, presumably by the white community (Davis). Perhaps we exclude them with our admissions policies (Rhea): We have no way of knowing how well the students we did not admit would have done in our honors programs; they were never invited in because their grade point averages or class rank or test scores didn't make the first cut.

Table 1: 2014–15 NCHC Summary Percentages of Students by Gender, Race, and Ethnic Diversity in Honors Expressed as an Estimated Number of Students per 100

Race	Men (36%)	Women (64%)
White	24	42
African American	4	7
Asian	2	4
Latinx	3	6
Other (includes American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, two or more races, race/ethnicity unknown)*	2	5

*terminology taken from NCHC survey instrument; I have converted the percentage in the 2014–15 NCHC summary table to an approximate number of hypothetical honors participants per 100 students.

In our efforts to justify our admissions choices, we are better—as Badenhausen notes—at finding deficits in a student's application package than assets. Many programs now offer aspiring honors students who do not meet the minimum standard for admission based on test scores, grades, and class rank an opportunity to enter the program through the kitchen since they could not get in through the front door, but this is second-class citizenship. Furthermore, such policies are potentially racist if back-door admission is an opportunity extended only to students of color who fall short of biased standardized tests or whose grade point averages are from school systems that are not as high-performing as others and thus not assumed to be "equal." As a result, students offered special admission to meet diversity goals feel marginalized, only grudgingly welcome, constantly on probation, or as if their admission was a mistake and that eventually they will be discovered. This sense of marginalization seems inevitable if honors, like the academy of which it is a microcosm, reflects "domain assumptions and methods of inquiry long implicated in institutionalized racism, gender oppression, and service to dominant economic, social, and political institutions" (Harding 710)—hence Scott's matter-of-fact assumption that he felt comfortable in his honors program because both he and the white students perceived him as culturally white.

Here, then, is my proposed solution to the problem of this homogeneous student population of our own making. It comes in three parts, each of which requires us to reimagine our admission and retention policies, our curricula, and our extracurricular activities to eliminate what Badenhausen calls "lack of community among students, a stale curriculum, an absent or incoherent mission**,** uninspiring programming."

PART I: PRACTICE RADICAL HOSPITALITY

Honors programs with selective admissions arrive at the final candidate pool like Michelangelo carving out David from that immense chunk of marble. The purpose of selective admission is defensible exclusion, so admissions committees excise away what they don't need by the very "critical" processes for which Badenhausen calls us to account. They rely on criteria that are easily measured, making inclusion or exclusion easy to justify mathematically, knowing that the criteria they are using may or may not accurately predict a student's success in honors past the first semester (Chenoweth 18) and knowing that their programs face higher attrition rates after the second year

just as students begin to be judged by their ability to create new knowledge and not by what grades can measure, i.e., their ability to retain and reflect what is already known (Cognard-Black, Smith, and Dove). Many programs drop students whose GPA falls below a certain point. Does the failure to make good grades in an honors program mean that the students did not learn from it or benefit from it, or that their admission was a mistake because they did not achieve in the major leagues as glitteringly as they had in the minors against softer competition? Can only the students who are excelling in an honors program get a better education by participating in it? Grades can be affected by mental health issues such as anxiety and depression when learning is not. Unconventional thinking and creativity can put grades at risk; after all, the ability to get good grades reflects students' ability to think like their teachers, or as their teachers want them to, not their capacity for original thinking. Students who get good grades have mastered the skills and strategies required to get good grades, so of course good grades and high class rank are a solid predictor of future good grades. But if the purpose of an honors program is to create an environment that allows high-achieving students to continue to be high achievers, it is practicing the opposite of diversity.

The opposite of exclusion is not just inclusion; it is *welcome*. The concept of "radical hospitality"—drawn from contemporary Christianity and Jewish thinkers, seeks to return those faiths to their ancient and medieval roots (Pratt; Schnase) and connect them explicitly with the values they share with Islam (Siddiqui). The charge is this: *Welcome the stranger*; as is put forth in Hebrews 13:2 of the King James Bible, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."

The very fact that honors programs are not very diverse makes them seem inhospitable to all minority students—not just students of color but international students and nontraditional students as well, who see themselves as strangers because they *are* strangers—in a strange land. Optics matter. Minority students will be more likely to see themselves as welcome if there are more of them, so honors resources should not be used only to benefit students who are already the beneficiaries of privilege but should offer an enriched educational experience to students who did not have access to an honors education at lower levels but could still catch up.

We should invite students who have excelled at measures of excellence other than tests, grades, and class rank to join our programs because we believe they will benefit from the honors approach to learning. We should look at what students have done in secondary school besides achieve high grades and at what they have done at lower educational levels that looks like

honors work at the college level. Our thinking should be asset-based rather than deficit-based.

PART II: PRACTICE ASSET-BASED THINKING

When considering an application, we should ask ourselves what this student would bring to our program and what the student has done that would be an asset to the honors community of learners. We should ask whether the student made a YouTube video that went viral; crushed the SAT in seventh grade; started a business or founded a nonprofit; completed an Eagle Scout or Girl Scout Gold Award project or an Extended Essay for the IB diploma; wrote a piece of gaming software; completed a military mission before the age of twenty-one; put together a garage band; organized a national March for Our Lives.

A baseline GPA requirement for admission or retention is useful only to establish the point at which a student is assumed to be operating at a deficit. You cannot discriminate among students on the basis of GPAs even though, unlike test scores, they were not arrived at using a common standard. Identical grades blur how different all high-achieving students really are. We should look instead for the intellectual attributes that make a student unique and for work that shows extraordinary imagination, originality, or persistence. None of the achievements I listed above requires a privileged, middle-class upbringing or the extra help of college-educated parents who live in an affluent school district with a high-SAT zip code. You don't need to be an insider to have the skills to accomplish them.

Some years ago, the College of Letters and Science at the University of Wisconsin began inviting every admitted student to apply for admission to the honors program, regardless of entering GPA. On their webpage, they assure students:

> Standardized test scores play a very minor role during the L&S Honors Program admission process. Instead, we consider your responses to essay questions and your high school co-curricular and community involvement as measures of your willingness to engage with the liberal arts experience at the heart of the Honors Program.

The Honors Living-Learning Community at Rutgers University-Newark goes a little farther:

> The HLLC looks at the admissions process a little differently than most university honors living-learning communities. We begin by defining "honors" differently, looking much deeper into student potential than is possible through only blunt instruments such as standardized test scores. HLLC engages potential students in in-person interviews and group simulations to see how they employ multiple intelligences in collaborative problem solving. This process helps to reveal who students really are, what their talents are, and what they can bring to an incredibly diverse and challenging learning environment like Rutgers University-Newark.

An even more radically hospitable application system is that of the Pavlis Honors College at Michigan Tech University:

> There is no GPA requirement for application, only your commitment and motivation to achieving your goals and strengthening your Pavlis Honors Abilities. To apply, you should be able to share your vision for incorporating this into your education.
>
> 1. Create and fully complete a Seelio E-Portfolio Profile.
>
> 2. Create a video that helps us understand why you have chosen to apply to the Pavlis Honors Pathway Program. Your video may consist of your own edited footage, a video recording of a PowerPoint or Google Slides presentation, an autoplay Prezi presentation, or even an essay that you read aloud on video. You will upload your video to the application form (please include your last name when naming the file). Your video should be approximately 2 minutes in length. Your video should:
>
>   - Articulate your personal goals and vision
>
>   - Explain why you want to join the Pavlis Honors Pathway Program
>
>   - Connect to your pathway choice, or indicate which path-way(s) you are considering
>
> 3. Fill out this application form, which includes one essay question. The essay question is: *Which Pavlis Honors Ability do you believe will be most challenging for you, and why? What are some initial ideas you have about how to push yourself to grow in this area?*

In this system, there are no "strangers" or "outsiders within" (Collins 14). Everyone is welcome.

PART III: BE HETERODOX

In honors, as in all education, best practices need to be dynamic and evolve as student populations change. If they become ossified, they become what Badenhausen, citing Deresiewicz, refers to as *doxa*, or conventional thinking. Popular opinion among academics is still popular opinion—arrived at by adopting the ideas of others rather than by thoughtfully arriving at the same ideas yourself. If you find yourself reflexively defending what has always been done just because it has always been done, *doxa* becomes orthodoxy—not just commonly accepted thinking but "right" thinking.

Instead of orthodox, we should be heterodox. If Hegel is right, *thesis* needs *antithesis* or the *status quo* remains in place. Even the NCHC's Basic Characteristics were never intended to be followed as if they had been brought down from Mount Sinai on stone tablets. They were arrived at through debates that took longer than it took the Founding Fathers to write the *Constitution*, and NCHC leadership has always intended them to continue to be debated and amended if necessary so that they can remain our agreed-on best practice. We have always contended that honors should serve as a crucible for new ideas, including new ideas for honors education itself. Heterodoxy demands both innovation and leadership. The University of Wisconsin and Michigan Tech are good examples, as is California State University-Los Angeles, which admits students as young as eleven to its honors college through its early entrance program.

In practicing heterodoxy, some of the following suggestions are useful. Use your imagination to create new kinds of honors programs that can be flipped because they work for more than one population. Remember that not every honors student is a white, middle-class, post-adolescent male who has never done anything but go to school and has no real life experience but does have an obligation to give back to the community that is helping to subsidize his education. Do not seek to teach the importance of social justice to refugees or to students who live in food deserts. A service learning experience may not be necessary for students who are raising young children or who work in their families' small businesses between classes or who care for their siblings so their parents can work. Do not presume to teach teamwork

to veterans or require study abroad for students who are here on F1 visas—studying abroad. Let your students teach these concepts to one another and replace individual reflection with problem-solving discussion and program projects. This approach not only leads to learning for all but also values collaboration over competition and rewards something besides winning.

Imagine other standards of academic excellence that are not derived from the patriarchal Athenian and Talmudic models. Accept capstone projects that are not research-based academic essays. Not every student is going directly to graduate school, and most do not plan a career in research. One of my honors students, a history major, made a film in the style of *60 Minutes* called *Eleven Minutes*, consisting of a montage of scenes in which his neighbors in East Baltimore demonstrated how to cook cocaine into crack on your kitchen stove, interviews with local dealers, interviews with police and lawyers, and interviews with scholars in urban sociology at our university. He documented a piece of public history, but he also created a work of journalism and art. His faculty advisor and I told him at the time that he should be aware what the real *60 Minutes* would pay for the footage. He is now a colleague, having since gone on to obtain an MA and MFA and write two bestsellers: a memoir and a collection of his essays for *Salon*. He is in great demand as a speaker. Perhaps the ideal honors student is not the perfect David you imagine, but a statue you have never seen before. If becoming a rock star in your honors program means making up structural deficits to conform to an artificial and outdated white, middle-class ideal, the model for that new and different statue will never apply.

The problems that Badenhausen proffers for our solution are wicked ones. While I have no map to suggest, I do think that reimagining our design strategies for honors programs is essential to our survival. I also believe that the concepts of inclusivity, hospitality, appreciative inquiry, and heterodox thinking can provide a form of celestial navigation to lead us into uncharted terrain. This approach involves risk, perhaps great risk, at a time when honors is already under attack from many quarters and higher education itself is on the defensive. Nevertheless, I suggest we turn for wisdom to Robert Frost, who ends "Choose Something Like A Star" with this thought:

> So when at times the mob is swayed
>
> To carry praise or blame too far,
>
> We may choose something like a star
>
> To stay our minds on and be staid.

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