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The Professionalization of Honors Education

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Abstract: Honors education in America has undergone a process that sociologist Theodore Caplow describes as professionalization. Caplow identifies four stages whereby a developing profession transitions to a professional association: organizing membership, changing the name of occupation from its previous status, developing a code of ethics, and after a period of political agitation, beginning a process by which to enforce occupational barriers. Each of these defined stages present new challenges to honors educators. This paper examines honors education in the context of specialization, considering both the origins and growth of honors education in the last century and contemporary discourse relating to certification and systematic program review. While controversy over certification has abated in recent years, Caplow's theory suggests that the issue is likely to resurface.

Keywords: learned institutions and societies; occupational groups; voluntary certification; Theodore Caplow; National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC)

Discussion about the professionalization of honors education surfaces at national meetings and in other forums where it remains a controversial topic. While significant attention has focused on the profession of higher education as a whole as well as individual disciplines, no theorist has yet examined honors education as a profession. The various disciplines have evolved separately along with the evolution of American higher education, and despite the common functions of research and teaching, service as a college-level faculty member does not constitute a profession. Rather, "one is a professor of history or chemistry, not simply a professor. And it is research, not teaching that provides the expertise that qualifies one as a professional" (Bennett, 1998, p. 46). According to Bennett,

> by the turn of the [twentieth] century, most academic disciplines had already created their membership associations and special learned societies, and established regional and national annual meetings as well as scholarly journals. Special canons and distinct methods of research were regularized, along with terminal degrees as apprenticeship programs for inducting new members. This apparatus identified a discipline as a profession, established hierarchies of status among members, and defined intellectual legitimacy and prestige. (pp. 46–47).

New disciplines are continually arising as areas of specialization emerge and become independent or as new occupations within higher education create the need for special training.

Most of the traditional disciplines had begun the process of developing professional associations by the 1920s (Bennett, 1998). Unlike lawyers, doctors, accountants, nurses, and academics such as chemists or sociologists, however, faculty and administrators in honors education do not have homogeneous professional backgrounds. Though honors faculty and administrators typically hold degrees similar to their counterparts in other disciplines, no certification or examination is required to become an honors educator. Honors educators come from all disciplines within higher education and receive their orientation to honors education only through their association with honors. While growth in this field has been occurring steadily for nearly the last century, the time has come to examine honors education as a profession itself and to determine where, along the evolutionary continuum, honors education is currently located, applying sociological theories of professionalization to the work taking place in honors education.

THE PROCESS OF PROFESSIONALIZATION

Defining a Profession

According to Pavalko (1971), "to refer to a particular kind of work as a profession is to accord it dignity" and denotes "full-time performance of a particular kind of work for pay in contrast to engaging in the activity on a part-time basis or without pay" (p. 16). Carr-Saunders and Wilson (1933) developed a more precise and more frequently cited definition of a profession: "an occupation based on specialized intellectual study and training the

purpose of which is to supply skilled service or advice to others for a definite fee or salary" (p. 4). Abbot defined a profession as an exclusive occupational group that applies abstract knowledge to particular cases and possesses jurisdiction over knowledge, skills, and work (1988). The definitions of "profession" vary as widely as the theories they are based on, but all of these definitions imply that a profession occupies a recognized area of knowledge, skill, and membership and holds legitimacy over its jurisdiction or authority, suggesting that others identify the profession with the work around which it is organized.

Professionalization as a Theory

Theories of professionalization from a sociological perspective began a half-century ago using ethnographic and case study methods, focusing first on law and medicine (Pavalko, 1971). However, the study of specific occupations, or the sociology of work, had begun nearly forty years earlier. Theories of professionalization have tended to approach the topic as a process of evolution or as a continuum along which an occupation can progress. The first approach questions how far an occupation has come in establishing itself as a profession whereas the latter asks to what extent an occupation has approached professional status.

One of the earliest theories of professionalization, using an evolutionary approach, was introduced by Theodore Caplow. Caplow (1954) categorized the evolution of a profession through five activities, identifying a sequence of four functions that are described as steps. He proposed that on the path from an occupation to a profession, the first step is the "establishment of a professional association" (p. 139). The role of the professional organization first and foremost is to establish membership criteria, thereby limiting the practice of the evolving profession to those deemed by the association to be qualified. The second step, according to Caplow (1954), is "the change of name" (p. 139), which serves the purpose of separating the evolving profession from its previous occupational status while also providing a "title which can be monopolized" (p. 139).

The third step, which has been incorporated into a number of later theories on professionalization, calls for the "development and promulgation of a code of ethics which asserts the social utility of the occupation," further limiting the unqualified from practicing the evolving profession (Caplow, 1954, p. 140). The fourth step is "prolonged political agitation, whose object it is to obtain the support of the public power for the maintenance of the new

occupational barriers" (p. 140). Though the results vary by profession, this step "usually proceeds by stages from the limitation of a specialized title to those who have passed an examination to the final stage at which the mere doing of the acts reserved to the profession is a crime" (p. 140). One additional activity Caplow identified may take place concurrently over a long period of time: the "development of training facilities directly or indirectly controlled by the professional society" (p. 140). The control by the professional society may include but is not limited to "admission and final qualification" (p. 140). Although Caplow (1954) admitted that some variation in the order of these steps or functions could occur, he believed that they largely defined the difference between an occupation and a profession.

Caplow's (1954) theory of professionalization can be used to examine honors education as a discipline and to determine where it is along the evolutionary continuum. His theory serves as the theoretical framework for the following examination of honors education.

TRACKING THE HISTORY OF HONORS EDUCATION

Evolution of Honors Education

Though occurring somewhat later than many traditional disciplines, honors education has begun taking steps towards establishing itself as a profession. The introduction and expansion of honors programs within United States institutions of higher education commenced as a result of several significant people and events. The key origins include Frank Aydelotte's exposure to the honors program at Oxford University and his creation of the Swarthmore College honors program in 1922, Joseph Cohen's organization of the Inter-University Committee on the Superior Student (ICSS) in 1957–64, and the organization of the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) which succeeded ICSS (Rinn, 2006; Owens, 2010; Rinehart, 1978; Guzy, 2003).

By the 1950s, thirty years after the first published research on the subject, honors education still remained largely undefined. Although discussions were beginning to take place about honors education at the national level, no organized support yet existed. According to Merton (1982), the role and function of a professional organization is to provide practitioners "social and moral support to help them perform their roles" and to "see to it that professionals need not cope with their professional problems alone" (p. 202). As practitioners were seeking to begin or further develop honors programs at their institutions, scant initial support was available for their endeavors.

Establishment of a Professional Association: ICSS and NCHC

According to Guzy (2003), very few honors programs were "fully developed" by the mid-1950s, and it would take the work of Joseph Cohen to bring the honors movement into the "realm of the large public university" (p. 19). The development of the ICSS by Cohen in 1957 marked the first effort of an organized honors movement. Cohen developed the Honors Council at the University of Colorado in 1928, and his success in doing so at a large, public university would serve as a model for other institutions. According to Rinehart (1978), Cohen was able to create a program flexible enough to "remain viable even during World War II, which was a major factor in the demise of many other honors programs" (p. 17–18).

The development of an organized honors community and honors movement began in the 1950s when the Rockefeller Foundation gave a grant to the University of Colorado for the purpose of expanding its honors program. The 1956 Annual Report of the Rockefeller Foundation shows that in that year the University of Colorado Honors Program was to be given $28,000 over three years for the purpose of making "its experience available through other institutions" and to hold an inter-university conference at Boulder during the summer of 1957 (p. 248).

Though Cohen is not specifically named in the 1956 Rockefeller Foundation Annual Report, it states that "the director of the Colorado program will visit interested universities, and representatives of other state universities may be invited to participate directly in the program at Colorado" (p. 248). The purpose of Cohen's visits was to prepare for a national conference on honors and to share his knowledge of developing an honors program. According to Asbury (1994), "most early honors work was concentrated primarily in private colleges and universities, and only did it occasionally appear in public institutions . . . [and] this meant that the honors concept was not available to a vast number of students," an issue that Cohen set out to resolve by introducing honors programs into state institutions (p. 7).

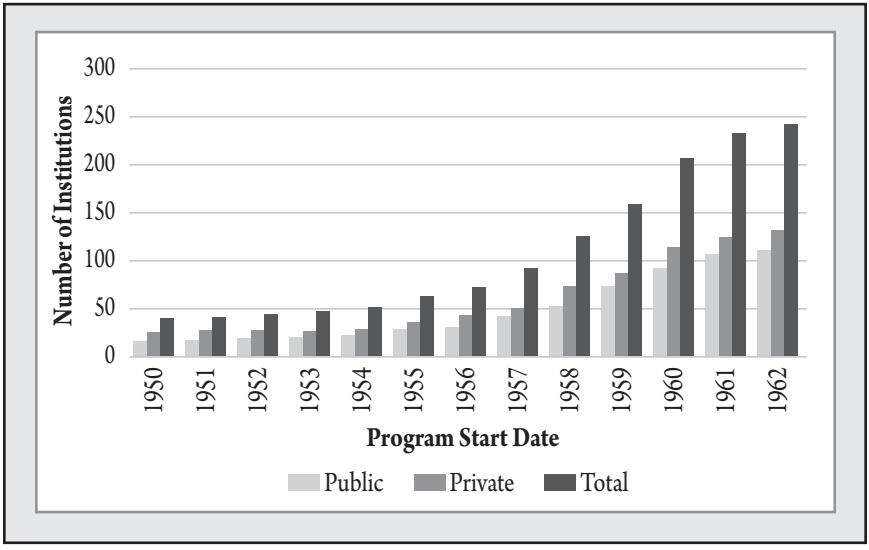
Cohen's plan was to extend the honors concept through national conferences. In 1957, the first and second national conferences on honors met in Boulder, Colorado, at which not quite thirty public and private institutions were represented. The result of these conferences was the formation of the Inter-University Committee on the Superior Student (ICSS). Participants initiated a newsletter, known as *The Superior Student*, which was published from 1958 to 1965. The committee and the publication stimulated interest in

honors programs across the country. Figure 1 shows that the number of institutions offering honors programs more than doubled in the first five years of the ICSS, with a total of 90 programs in 1957 and 241 in 1962.

The honors movement received additional support in the form of grant funding. According to Rinehart (1978), the Carnegie Corporation awarded ICSS $125,000 shortly after its formation as well as an additional $140,000 in 1960. Further support came from the National Science Foundation, the U.S. Office of Education, the U.S. Steel Foundation, and the Ford Foundation Fund for the Advancement of Education. By 1965, ICSS had 338 institutional members (Rinehart, 1978). Asbury (1994) reported that, by 1965, "the members of the committee felt that the honors movement had reached the point where the colleges and universities could carry onward themselves," and ICSS was disbanded (p. 8).

With the disbanding of the ICSS in 1965, honors program directors expressed their desire for a national organization, and the NCHC was formed in 1966 (Rinehart, 1978). O'Brien (1994) describes Joseph Cohen's perception of how the two organizations were different: "The ICSS was a committee, dependent for its very existence upon a grant. The NCHC was the very first organization devoted to honors education that was set up to be financially

Figure 1. Growth in Number of Honors Programs 1950 to 1963



Note: This figure illustrates the growth in the number of honors programs from 1950 to 1963, according to data collected in the surveys distributed from 1961 to 1963. The figure does not account for 34 programs listed in the ICSS inventory that did not include a start date.

self-supporting" (p. 26). NCHC held its first annual conference in Kansas in 1966 (Rinn, 2006). Attendance at the conference was about 200 individuals representing 100 colleges, in contrast to the 43 administrators from 27 colleges at the first ICSS meeting (Baurecht, 1990). The development of NCHC marked the first step in the evolution of a profession according to Caplow's theory (1954) that the role of a professional organization is to establish membership criteria; this role remains a primary purpose of NCHC along with promoting the honors movement.

The NCHC's authorization of a newsletter in 1970 gave a new voice to the honors community and took the place of *The Superior Student* published by the ICSS (Rinehart, 1978). According to O'Brien (1994), with *Forum for Honors* "members of the NCHC, and others concerned with honors education, had a publication wherein to converse, discuss, announce, outside of fleetingly glimpsed workshops at an annual conference" (p. 26). This time in honors history constituted the first wave of the honors movement.

Post-War Honors Movement

World War II had influenced the growth of honors programs and the work of Frank Aydelotte, but the Vietnam War had an opposite impact in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The introduction of new programs slowed, and some programs were dissolved. Another negative impact on the honors movement during this time was the egalitarian philosophy that evolved on college campuses. According to Cummins (2004), "many colleges emphasized open access . . . and programs for handicapped, minority, and less well-prepared students" (p. 26). Open access and attention to less well-prepared students led to an increase in the number of community colleges but further slowed the honors movement (Byrne, 1998). This trend was reversed, however, with the issuing of the 1983 report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE), *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform.* This report urged serving the needs of gifted students, who "may need a curriculum enriched and accelerated beyond even the needs of other students of high ability" (NCEE, 1983, p. 24). As a result of this report, institutions returned to a focus on the needs of exceptional students.

The 1980s marked the second wave of growth for the honors community. Faculty and administrators at the community colleges that grew out of the egalitarian culture became aware that their student bodies also comprised a growing number of academically gifted students and so implemented programs to meet their needs (Byrne, 1998; Viger, 1993). During this decade,

membership in the NCHC grew by nearly 40 percent. At public institutions, non-need-based aid grew at a rate of 12 percent annually, while need-based aid grew only 6 percent (McPherson & Schapiro, 1998). Non-need-based aid, or merit aid, was an attempt by institutions to attract high-achieving students, and this trend continued to increase for at least another decade (Long, 2002). Additionally, state legislatures began voicing fears of "losing their best students to other states during and after the college years," otherwise known as "brain drain" (Long, 2002, p. 1) and began taking steps to lessen these trends. As a result, the 1980s were a time when honors programs diversified and grew. In her statement of intent to run for the second vice-president position of the NCHC in 1990, Toni Forsyth stated that

> since joining the organization in 1985, I have witnessed a phenomenal growth in membership as well as in diversity among its members. We, too, have moved from a largely homogeneous population of mostly four-year institutions to a wonderfully heterogeneous population of two-year and four-year public, private and historically Black colleges. (p. 7)

With growth in membership, NCHC evolved into an organization that continues to offer annual national conferences for administrators, faculty, and students, supporting regional conferences as well. In addition to the *Forum for Honors*, which evolved into a scholarly publication that was published through 1995, NCHC began a newsletter in 1980. In 1986, this newsletter became the *National Honors Report* and was published quarterly through 2005. In 2000, NCHC began publishing the refereed *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council (JNCHC)*, which is published twice annually and features scholarly articles on honors education. In 2005, *Honors in Practice* (*HIP*) was introduced to publish articles on innovative honors pedagogy (NCHC, 2019). Additionally, the NCHC publishes monographs on topics important to the honors community.

With the NCHC's support, the number of honors programs and colleges has continued to grow nationally. According to Long's description of honors in 2002, "nearly half of all public four-year colleges and universities have an honors program and many also can be found on private four-year and community college campuses" (2002, p. 13–14). By 2016, 1,503 institutions, or 59% of traditional undergraduate institutions, were identified to have been offering an honors program (Scott & Smith, 2016). While not all honors programs choose to join the national organization, the NCHC membership

registry (R. Tualaulelei, personal communication, July 23, 2019) indicates that the organization experienced a record membership of 896 institutions in 2017.

Name Change: Transition from Programs to Colleges

While the successful creation of a professional association satisfied Caplow's (1954) first step to becoming a profession, the evolution of honors programs into honors colleges satisfied the second step of changing their name. Compared to honors programs, whose history spans over a century, honors colleges are a considerably more recent trend.

Casale (1983) described three reasons that large institutions should consider converting their honors programs to honors colleges but stated that honors colleges "cannot or need not exist at institutions which are small, highly selective in admissions, and restricted to liberal arts curricula" (p. 3). An honors college, described by Casale (1983) as "a strong, centralized, multi-functioned, and a highly 'visible' instrument for advancing honors" (p. 3), serves the purpose of providing services to students at large institutions where the size and variance in the number of programs can cause "academic or intellectual drift" (p. 3). A second purpose is that the title "college" confers clout; when headed by a dean rather than a director, the program rises to the "same administrative level" of the "substantive colleges" (Casale, 1983, p. 3). Last, Casale (1983) argued that the move to an honors college provides "an autonomy which . . . permits the college to serve many students in different disciplines more liberally and creatively than a narrowly conceived program can" (p. 4).

The idea of converting existing honors programs to honors colleges was a common topic in both *The National Honors Report* and at national conferences of the NCHC throughout the 1990s and early 2000s (Madden, 1994; Sederberg, 2008). Sederberg (2005) stated that while a few honors colleges have existed for several decades, 60 percent have "been established since 1994 and 80 percent grew out of a preexisting honors program" (p. 27). There were only 24 documented honors colleges in 1994 (Madden), but by 2007 the NCHC list of institutional members calling themselves honors colleges grew to 92 (Scott & Frana, 2008). Scott and Frana (2008) speculated that the increase occurred because "competition in recruiting is intense, and this pressure to attract students from a small pool will encourage more universities to launch honors colleges or convert existing programs into colleges" (p. 31).

With the economic crisis of 2008, growth in the number of honors programs evolving into honors colleges slowed but did not cease. In the last decade, the number of honors colleges has grown to 182, making up more than 12% of honors programs nationally (Smith & Scott, 2016).

In 2002, Long noted that "only public four-year institutions have a significant number of honors 'colleges' rather than honors 'programs'" (p. 10), but while four-year public institutions remain the most common homes of honors colleges within the United States, 31 can now be found at private 4-year institutions (Scott & Smith, 2016). Cobane (2008) wrote that he helped "facilitate a 'Developing in Honors' session where over twenty honors directors stated that they were planning on making the transition to an honors college in the next two to four years," and he further predicted that "by 2025, we can expect that most university honors experiences will be within honors colleges" (p. 25). The evolution of honors programs into honors colleges and the growth in the number of such honors colleges is evidence of Caplow's (1954) rationale for the second requirement for a developing profession: the changing of a name for purposes of separating the evolving profession from the previous occupational status.

Establishing a Code of Ethics: Basic Characteristics

Studies identifying the characteristics of honors colleges has led to progress in fulfilling the third step in Caplow's (1954) theory, establishing a code of ethics. A code of ethics, according to Caplow (1954), serves the purpose of eliminating the "unqualified and unscrupulous" and imposes "limitation[s] on internal competition" (p. 139). After the expansion of honors programs nationally, the honors community found itself with a great deal of variety among the programs. With this level of diversity from one program to the next, it became apparent to NCHC and the honors community that there needed to be more descriptors of what constituted a "fully developed" honors program.

In 1993, the executive committee of the NCHC decided to revise the basic characteristics document originally endorsed by the ICSS (Cummings, 1994). After circulating the original document and requesting feedback, Cummings (1994) made the initial changes to the original document, which was the addition of four characteristics (Chaszar, 2008). The executive committee eliminated one of the proposed characteristics and made some minor editorial changes, but successfully approved the document consisting of

"Sixteen Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program," revised in 2007 to include 17 characteristics (Cummings, 1994).

In 2004, Peter Sederberg (2005), along with other members of the NCHC Ad Hoc Task Force on Honors Colleges, conducted a study focusing on existing characteristics of NCHC institutional members bearing the name "Honors College," with the mission of collecting descriptive data of these programs. The results of the data collected could not be called "scientifically conclusive" but were nonetheless used to create the NCHC's list of Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Colleges (Sederberg, 2005).

According to Caplow (1954), a code of ethics serves the functions of limiting internal competition and eliminating the unqualified. The Basic Characteristics serve a similar purpose within honors education as the basic principles that guide program practices. Without a process of certifying honors colleges outside of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, however, the Basic Characteristics have limited effectiveness at fulfilling these functions. As with honors programs, honors colleges have no single body that they report to, and the Basic Characteristics serve only as recommendations.

Political Agitation: Voluntary Certification

Without a nationally accepted instrument to be used in a process of certifying honors colleges, the Basic Characteristics as a code of ethics cannot be enforced within the honors community. The desire by some to require enforcement has resulted in what Caplow (1954) described as the fourth step in the evolution to a profession: political agitation "to obtain the support of the public power for the maintenance of the new occupational barriers" (p. 139). Caplow (1954) suggested that this type of enforcement is introduced in stages, with the first stage being a specialized title awarded as a result of passing a review or examination. In October of 2010, the NCHC's Assessment and Evaluation Committee was tasked with designing a mechanism to voluntarily certify honors programs, to be presented to the Board of Directors beginning in 2014. After extensive discussion, the committee recommended an instrument and procedures to be used for the process, but given considerable controversy over the issue, the board decided instead to establish NCHC-Approved Program Reviewers who would use the proposed instrument, not for purposes of certification but rather to strengthen the process of program reviews and allow for regular, constructive feedback from external, objective reviewers. For now, this compromise seems to have satisfied those

individuals who believe that the process of certification holds the potential for protecting and legitimizing honors education as well as those who believe that honors programs are too varied to be certified or that the process would create division among the membership.

CONCLUSION

The ability of a profession to establish and sustain its jurisdictional authority lies in the power and prestige of its academic standing. One strategy to increase jurisdictional authority is to embed professional preparation within university study and academic disciplines (Abbott, 1988). Universities have made a strong commitment to the important work of honors education, including, for instance, the granting of tenure to faculty in honors education (UNM, 2019; UCA, 2019). If the academy writ large is beginning to recognize the existence of the "discipline" and has granted authority over the discipline to members in the honors education field by rewarding those who develop curricula and conduct empirical research in the field, then it stands to reason that honors education may soon meet any objective criteria for a "profession." The topic of certification may well resurface, given the process of professionalization that seems to be underway in honors education.

If Caplow's theory applies to the progression of honors education as a profession, NCHC may be destined to see further political agitation on the issue of certification. The current compromise of NCHC-Approved Program Reviewers might not continue to satisfy those honors organizations that believe an "external agency" would lend legitimacy to their program and allow them to better compete for internal resources. Resurrection of the issue of certification, would surely recreate the rifts and animosity that it elicited in the past. While one argument is that certification would help honors programs establish their relevance in today's world of higher education, the counterargument is that it would create a standardization among programs whereas the variability built into the existing program review instrument allows for the flexibility to maintain unique institutional and program identities. The controversy over certification has died down for now, but the issue is likely to arise again in the future since it goes to the heart of NCHC's mission and the nature of honors education.

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