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Honors as Gadfly

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Abstract: Although honors populations occupy only a fraction of institutional enrollments, they have undeniably changed the nature of higher education. This essay considers the impact of honors on university culture, processes, and infrastructure. Touted as a "critical element" of the comprehensive college experience for both students and faculty, honors exceeds and outpaces other units within the academy in curricular innovation, cross-functional collaboration, and high-impact practice, and by its example, it continues to provoke others into action by its persistent variation and maturation.

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> 'Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
> That wants it down.'
>
> —Robert Frost, "Mending Wall"

No matter how I read it, Christopher Keller's forum essay boils down to one central question for me: Is honors overstepping its bounds? What those bounds might be and whether it matters if we overstep them seem to be the sand traps that Keller leaves us to confront. While Keller's concerns settle primarily on the boundaries surrounding academic research, social justice, and widespread social activism, his central worry seems to be the trouble we create when we poke our nose into other people's business and make ourselves at home where we really don't belong: "I am interested in exploring concerns about what movement into and occupation of these kinds of territories does not only to honors but to those territories themselves and other stakeholders who occupy them."

Of the three chapters in recent NCHC monographs that Keller cites, I want to focus on Aaron Stoller's argument in his chapter in *Occupy Honors Education* about the impact honors can have on a university if indeed it functions like the laboratory we claim it does. Although our honors populations occupy only a fraction of our overall institutions—generally, a tenth or a fifth or less—what honors has championed at each of the institutions where I have worked—and what honors has probably championed at all of our institutions—has undeniably changed the nature of higher education. I attended an AAC&U workshop on high-impact practices when I first arrived in Chattanooga to help us strategize how best to organize our new office of undergraduate research. The research documented in the texts we read to prepare for the workshop all pointed to the same supposition: students will retain at higher rates, graduate faster, and feel better about their college experiences in part based on how many high-impact practices they undertake and how integrated and intentional those practices are (Brownell and Swaner 41–57). While one such experience—be it a first-year experience or a living learning community or an undergraduate research experience—makes a difference, pulling several together within a cohort could be a game changer. Thinking of honors education this way makes it nothing short of an embarrassment of high-impact-practice riches. We don't just require a freshman honors seminar, we require a sophomore seminar and a thesis-preparation seminar as well. We don't just host a living learning community, we also put those freshmen in the same seven hours of writing-intensive honors humanities courses so that they have plenty to talk about late at night in their dorm rooms. We don't just support undergraduate research, we require it—as part of a sophomore seminar or in a community-engaged year-long design thinking lab or within a special honors research fellowship program or, of course, in an honors thesis. We don't just encourage our students to study abroad, we give them funding to do so as well as read draft after draft of their Gilman and Fulbright applications and organize our own international trips as well. We weave these precious experiences together for all our students and then watch them take off. A single program at a university cannot enjoy the success honors has had for as long as we have and not be noticed, envied, and eventually copied, whether honors gets the credit or not. I am working where I am today because a former provost here saw a national report noting that, in order to increase its retention and graduation rates, a university needed to institute an honors program if it didn't already have one, or grow the one it did have. Honors programs and colleges offer the best possible academic

undergraduate experience a student can have at many of our institutions. All the high-impact practices that honors has heralded and implemented and polished have morphed into large-scale undergraduate research efforts, university-wide study abroad initiatives, and ever-proliferating living learning communities.

The expansion of our territory beyond our hallowed honors halls reminds us all that whatever boundaries honors educators may imagine separate us and our students from the general population, those delineations are as illusory as the ones that the university imagines keep us from sticking our nose in everyone else's business. Like it or not, honors is set up to be a self-appointed university gadfly.

At the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga (UTC), we have a graduate assistant in our honors college who handles all our assessment work. As a wannabe Industrial Organization psychologist, he loves his job and expands it into places that the rest of us would not likely go. He recently asked all of us in the college to give him a list of what we think reflects our success in our respective positions. I said, without hesitation, that the UTC Honors College can and should have a demonstrable impact on the university and its culture, and, as its dean, I believe it's my job to guide us to have the following:

- Impact on university culture, particularly in relation to
  - residential life
  - academic innovation beyond the individual college or major
  - the proliferation of interdisciplinary work and instruction
  - the overall understanding and successful building of better campus communities
- Impact on our university processes, e.g., the development of
  - freshmen living learning cohorts
  - more exciting and less dysfunctional general education and university requirements
  - study abroad and study away opportunities
  - undergraduate research
- Impact on our institutional processes and infrastructure that specifically cross college and unit silos such as
  - cross-campus advising
  - scholarship opportunities
  - recruiting
  - transfer student support

That's quite a few fences to hop over. I don't know if my fellow deans and my provost always appreciate my two cents regarding what's happening across campus, but I do know that as dean of honors, I have at once both a broader perspective than most and a more particular one, thanks to the interminable weeds into which I get. Unlike other deans, I am an advisor to over sixty students, a classroom instructor of freshmen (one who taught face to face during this pandemic), and someone with a slightly better than cursory knowledge of most majors on campus. I see it as my responsibility to share what I know with my colleagues even while I am tramping all over their territories. Surely they can handle a little well-intended criticism.

I believe that honors should not stay in its own corner on our campuses, in higher ed, in our world. Our operations constitute a microcosm of the entire university (and perhaps even certain segments of our society), which allows us, though tightly focused, a unique perspective. Until I shifted from program director to dean, I shared this perspective only with my family and administrative assistant and honors friends, but suddenly I was at the adult table where, once I learned the lingo, I could offer my opinion and perspective and maybe even make a difference in how the university does its work. We are currently growing our living learning communities on our campus because, as our chancellor said in his state of the campus address, we need to capitalize on the success of programs like honors and build them out. At Eastern Kentucky University, the founding director of that program, Bonnie Gray, was the instigator of a conversation about academic merit scholarships, something the university had never awarded until she started talking about it. Honors changes campuses.

As Paul W. Ferguson, President of Ball State University, and James S. Ruebel, Dean of the Honors College, argued in their 2015 piece for the 50th Anniversary *JNCHC* Forum on "The Value of Honors," honors doesn't just benefit the students it serves or the faculty who try out new pedagogical practices that ultimately work their way into their home departments; the university's overall quality of students benefits due to the magnetic quality of a fine honors college: "Although the actual percentage of incoming students participating in the Ball State University Honors College has not risen above 9%, the number of students matriculating to Ball State who were honors eligible rose to 12%, with one fourth of these students distributed across the university" (13). Jake B. Schrum, President of Emory and Henry College, and Joe Lane, Director of the College Honors Program, noted in that Forum that their institution initiated an ambitious campus-wide "Project

Ampersand," designed to mimic the project-based learning fostered in honors across campus. They recalled that the dean of faculty referred to the project as "mainstreaming the Honors Program" (38). Even a self-described presidential skeptic like Dennis R. Harkins of Orange Coast College said that no one should continue to see honors as a precious place that only offers "learning opportunities for students that challenge them at their highest level of achievement" when all faculty should be offering these opportunities to all students:

> after becoming more connected with the faculty, seeing their passion, and listening to students describe their experiences, I am convinced that honors programs are not an add-on but a critical element of a comprehensive college experience for both students and faculty. (Harkins and Baker, 107)

While knocking down the fences that have customarily surrounded our honors college, we need to remember the larger conversations about what determines who gets into our programs and who is locked out by our gatekeeping practices. As we question our own admission practices, we also start to dismantle the very boundaries honors has constructed and maintained about who should be allowed into our programs and colleges—who is or is not "a good fit" for honors. We open up the possibility that perhaps—if honors could actually benefit students broadly—our singularity and reason for existence are not as clear as we thought they were. We may begin to wonder not whether what we do is effective but rather whether it should be available and effective for everyone. If so, then maybe we could really say that there is no place where honors should not stick its nose.

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