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Professional Transitions in Honors: Challenges, Opportunities, and Tips

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Abstract: Authors reflect on ways that honors practitioners have experienced various professional transitions and provide insights to help others successfully manage such changes.

Keywords: administration of education programs; California State Polytechnic University-Pomona (CA)–Kellogg Honors College; Western Carolina University (NC)–Brinson Honors College; Columbia College (SC)–Dr. John Zubizarreta Honors Program; University of Nevada–Reno (NV)–Honors College

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Honors transitions are inevitable. Many of us in honors, for example, have relocated from other disciplines, moving from the prescribed boundaries of our academic areas to the diverse and challenging demands of honors, quickly learning new leadership skills and approaches to navigating

challenges and prospects within and outside our institutions. Some of us have relocated to different institutions; some have negotiated growth from programs to colleges; some have advanced to positions in higher administration; some have witnessed changes in directors or deans; some have needed to adjust to the rapid succession of top administrators and their assorted agendas; some have retired. With creative approaches to change, such shifts to new faces, leadership styles, program ideas, and professional priorities can become opportunities rather than obstacles in our professional development in honors. The authors of this piece represent honors professionals who have experienced various transitions, and we offer our reflections and tips to help others in our field to manage such changes successfully.

MOVING FROM RESEARCH SCHOLAR/TEACHER TO HONORS FACULTY

Moving from the defined pedagogical and scholarly practices of our subject areas to honors presents both challenges and opportunities. Honors, by design, encourages creative approaches to both teaching and research, sometimes pushing faculty to shake up hegemonic disciplinary assumptions about curriculum, course design, instructional strategies, and assessment. The same vulnerability occurs in research when faculty interests turn from the hard-core dimensions of creating new knowledge in a narrow field to the wider concerns of interdisciplinary teaching and scholarship.

Tips

- Find ways of parlaying unique honors course topics, design, and pedagogy into the development or revision of disciplinary courses, using honors as an incubator for innovation in a home department major.
- Tap into the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) professional community to help legitimize scholarly work in honors focused on honors pedagogy. For example, check the *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* (<<https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/josotl/index>>) or the *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning* (<<https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/ij-sotl/>>).
- Engage honors students in collaborative undergraduate research and publication to build their professional credentials while simultaneously deepening and enhancing student learning.

BECOMING A NEW DIRECTOR/DEAN

New directors or deans inherit the position, often finding themselves adjusting to legacy reputations, practices, and policies. As the “newbie” on the scene, the incoming leader should respect and celebrate the best achievements of a former colleague but also remember to be true to one’s own individual vision and leadership style. The case of an assistant director stepping into a position made available by a retiring, rotating, or resigning director calls especially for sensitive, productive bridges between old and new leadership. If the program or college requires major overhaul for reasons ranging from incompetence or neglect to shifting institutional priorities, changing demographics, diminution or infusion of funds, or simply time for renewal, then a new appointee should regard the transition as a springboard for professional growth and revitalized connections with administrators, faculty, staff, graduates, and students.

Tips

- Make sure announcements of leadership transition are clear, timely, and circulated to all concerned honors constituents. Emphasize new vision, new ideas, new day. Generate excitement.
- Meet with honors faculty, program/college/external advisory councils, graduates, and students to establish rapport.
- Identify key institutional allies, strengthening established relationships and repairing lost connections.
- If the former leader is willing, do not hesitate to rely on his or her guidance and sense of history.
- Use the transition as a moment to reaffirm honors mission, inspire fundraising and enhanced financial support, invite diverse faculty to teach in honors, reimagine student recruitment and retention strategies, and rethink curriculum and other honors functions.
- Work with the faculty development unit as well as faculty advancement and governance to ensure that the transition to honors leadership is recognized and rewarded appropriately.

RETIRING FROM HONORS LEADERSHIP

Ada Long's *Handbook for Honors Administrators* (1995) solidified long-standing anecdotes in the field about the "frequent transience of honors administrators" (33) and the typical terms of honors leaders; her research uncovered a significant portion of survey respondents who indicated that three to six years seemed ideal although a majority reported that their terms were "indefinite or permanent" (32). More than twenty years later in 2016, Andrew Cognard-Black's research confirmed the claim, revealing that half of honors administrators at all NCHC member institutions serve for three years or less ("Census"). Short-term or long-term in honors—no matter: leaders will face the unavoidable transition of retirement and should do as much as they can to ensure a positive change.

Tips

- Develop a detailed job description—keyed to the mission, character, and culture of honors—to help identify the best candidate to inherit the position.
- Draft a monthly calendar of specific dates for various honors-related events, operational functions, deadlines, and such to help the successor with adjustments and planning.
- Offer to remain in touch to answer any questions and to help with any issues. Be reasonably available whenever needed to ensure the new director/dean's success.
- Create a Google Drive, Dropbox, or other shared folder to describe and share all relevant hard-copy and archived digital files, providing the new leader with easily accessible information, documents, templates, and reports.
- Meet regularly as a mentor with the new director/dean during a transitional period to help him or her adjust to the role.
- Communicate with graduates to familiarize them with the new leader and express confidence in and excitement over the transition.
- If possible, stay professionally active in honors education through NCHC and regionals; preserving one's affiliation and continuing to serve in honors organizations after transition to retirement can help

boost the visibility and reputation of a new director/dean and a new program/college through positive associations. A retired director/dean can make introductions, encourage a new member to serve on committees, include a successor in ongoing conference presentations or publications, and take other actions that make both the retiree's and the new leader's transitions fruitful and fulfilling.

* * *

Transitions occur in many different guises and can involve the move from director/dean back into a home department, from honors to higher administrative posts, from a leader of a program to leader of a college, from one institution to another, and other changes in one's professional trajectory. All of these transitions are fraught with challenges, but they also present opportunities that can enrich both individuals and organizations. We hope that our brief reflections and tips provide a useful beginning for making the most of transitions in honors.

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