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The Teaching Postdoc: What Four Early Career Scholars Learned from an Honors College

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Abstract: Authors examine the impact of honors education on four early career scholars who each spent two years in a postdoctoral position (2017–2023), highlighting how initial in-depth exposure to honors curricula and culture positively influences professional identity and teaching practice. Fellowships in a Teaching, Research, and Mentoring (TRM) Program offer nascent scholars from a range of disciplines the opportunity to work with students, extend curricular offerings, and launch career trajectories in a variety of ways. Accounts of these experiences should encourage honors program administrators to look to the ranks of early career scholars as desirable instructors.

Keywords: higher education—honors programs & colleges; faculty-college relationship; professional development; University of Montana (MT)—Davidson Honors College

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INTRODUCTION

In a 2016 essay titled “An Agenda for the Future of Research in Honors” in the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council (JNCHC)*, George Mariz argued that one key focus of future research in honors education should be “criteria for selecting honors faculty” as well as “the effect of honors teaching on faculty, which remains virtually unexplored territory” (p. 6). Research on honors faculty published in *JNCHC* and *Honors in Practice (HIP)* since the publication of Mariz’s 2016 essay reveals that honors faculty continue to be underexplored with the exception of essays by Dailey (2016), Guzy (2019), and Miller (2019). The primary scholarly focus of honors research remains students, covering important topics like effective pedagogy, student experiences, and justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) work.

In 2022, *JNCHC* published a series of essays on “The Value of Honors to its Graduates.” These essays highlighted how participation in an honors program profoundly impacted student self-confidence, sense of belonging, and intellectual and character development (*JNCHC*, spring/summer 2022). Notably, several student stories described how honors students later went on to their own careers as faculty. These essays, as well as numerous other research studies on the impact of honors of students, show that an honors education is often transformational for students. What, though, is the impact on faculty?

Qualitative studies like our reflective essay are important data points in understanding the impact of honors on faculty. Faculty experiences, which include how faculty are recruited to teach in honors and how these experiences impact them, shape honors education for everyone involved (Dean and Jendzurski, 2012; Oleson and Hara, 2014; Umbach and Wawrzynski, 2005). In this essay, we look at the impact of honors education on four early career scholars who each spent two years from 2017–2023 in a postdoctoral position at the Davidson Honors College at the University of Montana. In addition to highlighting how early in-depth exposure to the model of honors education influenced our professional identities and teaching practices, we also discuss the value to the honors curriculum that early career scholars brought to the college. We hope that the findings shared in this piece add to the scholarship on the impact of honors on faculty as well as encourage honors program deans and administrators to look to the ranks of early career scholars as desirable honors instructors.

As we share how our experiences as honors faculty during our time as early career scholars shaped our professional identity, we want to note that in

at least two of our subsequent experiences in large research institutions, we have seen that early career scholars are generally not sought after as honors faculty. Instead, honors courses offered by departmental faculty tend to rely on select tenured professors. We hope to encourage those who hire honors faculty, whether as permanently rostered instructors or faculty appointed elsewhere, to consider more actively recruiting early career scholars and novice teachers into the honors classroom.

Discourse about honors education includes growing scholarly discussion about the small minority of universities that supply a large majority of faculty across academic fields. An extensive 2022 study published in the journal *Nature* found that just five American universities train one in eight tenure-track faculty members in the U.S. (Wapman, Zhang, & Clauset, 2021). Honors programs are not immune to the hierarchies of prestige and have complex histories as both exclusionary and liberatory spaces (Mintz, 2022). As previous research has demonstrated, the perceived prestige of honors programs is often an appeal for enrolling students (Hilton & Jordan, 2021). We argue that embedding early career scholars in honors not only brings innovative new ideas to honors curricula but also broadens the ranks of faculty who might have the opportunity to teach in honors, contributing to the diversification of ideas and people in academia.

Honors programs differ in their approach to offering honors courses and hiring honors faculty. Larger honors colleges like Barrett College at Arizona State University or the University of Wyoming Honors College have a significant number of faculty rostered within the honors college (Barrett Honors College, 2022; University of Wyoming Honors College website, 2022). Many others—both smaller honors college and traditional honors programs like the Arts and Sciences Honors Program at the University of Colorado Boulder—draw most of their faculty from academic departments across campus (University of Colorado Honors Program, 2022). These faculty are encouraged by their departments to offer a course that is part of their typical curriculum to a specialized honors student audience. This breadth of faculty participation allows honors course offerings to serve a wide variety of student majors, interests, and general education requirements. For instance, the University of Colorado Boulder Arts & Sciences Honors Program offers courses from, for instance, classics, ecology and evolutionary biology; political science; math; and women and gender studies (University of Colorado Honors Program, 2022).

The limited literature available on hiring honors faculty indicates that teaching honors courses is typically a coveted opportunity and that honors

educators are expected to be master teachers (Dailey, 2016; Mariz, 2016). Anecdotal evidence from personal experiences by the authors suggests that faculty rostered within honors colleges are typically teaching or instructional faculty whereas faculty from other departments who offer a single honors course during a semester are often tenured or tenure-track faculty within their home department. In this way, honors programs draw on a wide range of experiences, disciplines, and areas of expertise in offering the highly student-centered, deep-dive courses that are central to the honors experience.

Research on faculty hiring in honors, however, appears to be limited or nonexistent. Before coming to teach at the Davidson Honors College, our knowledge of the intricacies of honors education was minimal, our prior teaching experience having been focused on students specializing in our respective disciplines (history, marine biology, international affairs, and musicology). Throughout this essay, we reflect on the lessons we learned from and about honors education during our fellowships and how they shaped our career trajectories within and beyond academia at large.

STRUCTURE OF TEACHING, RESEARCH, AND MENTORING PROGRAM

The Teaching, Research, and Mentoring Program (TRM) Fellowship Program at the Davidson Honors College (DHC) was founded in 2017 through funding provided by the Davidson family, the major donor and namesake of the college. It originally supported two Fellows per two-year term until 2020, when the program transitioned to supporting one Fellow per two-year term. The primary mission of this program is to bring early career scholars from a range of disciplines to the DHC to benefit the student body, the college's curricular offerings, and the Fellows' career trajectories in a variety of ways. Fellows join the rest of the full-time honors college administrators and faculty in the honors building, participating as active members of the academic community through teaching and service throughout their term.

We were expected to divide our time between teaching, research, and service, though the exact divisions of these responsibilities varied per Fellow and semester. The general expectation of teaching load was four courses per academic year. We generally taught multiple semesters of Art of Inquiry, the DHC's upper-level research methods and ethics course. To fulfill the rest of our teaching load, we had the freedom to design courses in our area of specialization. These independently designed courses were often listed under the

Special Topics in Honors course listing or co-listed with a department affiliated with the Fellow's area of specialization.

We also pursued research, and our trajectories varied according to individual specialties. As part of our two-year contract, we received professional development funds for travel, materials, or other research and development-related uses, as well as a budget to hire honors students as research assistants. While we were expected to conduct research in conjunction with our teaching and service responsibilities, we were completely independent in our choice of subject matter, project type, and division of research-teaching-service time throughout the Fellows' terms.

Service expectations for Fellows varied by term but generally aligned with the committee structures determined by the DHC leadership. As members of the DHC faculty/staff community, we attended and played key roles at major departmental events including Convocation, Medallion Ceremonies, scholar receptions, and faculty meetings, and we served on departmental committees such as a Sustainability Task Force, the Western Regional Honors Conference planning committee, and DHC admissions and scholarship committees. Though the exact division of service responsibilities in relation to research and teaching was not defined in Fellows' contracts, these responsibilities were generally reflective of the lower service loads carried by other DHC teaching faculty rather than the higher administrative staff service requirements.

Especially toward the end of the fellowship, Fellows were encouraged and expected to spend time pursuing their next appointments and to serve on the search committees to find our replacements. DHC leadership and other university faculty were highly supportive of each Fellow's job search, offering useful feedback and recommendations as we applied for permanent faculty positions at institutions across the country.

IMPACTS ON THE FELLOWS

We identified three important ways that teaching at an honors college early in our career shaped our development. First, the position offered some freedom when it came to designing courses but also asked us to take on existing interdisciplinary courses. The position therefore helped us develop courses beyond our PhD training that broadened our scope as teachers. Second, the small class sizes (the DHC caps course enrollment at 20), curriculum structure, and the model of teaching in honors classrooms also shaped how Fellows developed their teaching craft. Most especially, we learned to take more interdisciplinary risks and to incorporate service or experiential

learning into our classrooms. Finally, the position pushed us to hone our scholarly and professional identities. Fellows developed their own agendas at the college and university, so these identities did not follow the same trajectory. Nonetheless, the work of teaching, mentoring, and conducting research at an honors college allowed all of us to expand on previous interests, build new skills, and develop professional networks that put us on new paths in and out of academia. Professional development is critical to early career scholars since, as existing research has documented, securing employment as a faculty member is extremely difficult; far fewer faculty positions are available than students who graduate with PhDs in most fields each year (Larson, Ghaffarzadegan, & Xue, 2014; Speakman et al., 2018).

The first impact the position had on our career development was creating the space for us to design courses we wanted to teach but had not had the opportunity before. This opportunity allowed some of us to make strategic moves in getting experience in courses that we would want to teach later, as was the case with Gross's class on consumer culture history or Riley's economic sociology class. For others, the position created the space to design classes that we would never have taught without being in an interdisciplinary environment, such as Collins's two place-based, community-engaged courses on refugee resettlement in Missoula as well as the school to prison pipeline and prison arts programs. How the courses were listed (in DHC or in another department) also taught the Fellows how to build connections across departments and to learn about the dynamics and challenges of scheduling cross-listed courses with outside faculty/staff.

The second important impact the fellowship had was changing how we approached our work as educators in and out of the classroom. Teaching at an honors college exposed us to a new set of students who brought their expectations of engaged faculty to the classroom (Hill, 2005). The UM honors students also arrived with high levels of preparation, a willingness to participate readily in class discussions, and an appetite for independent research projects. As honors faculty, we responded to the expectations of these high-performing students. Collins learned to improvise more in the classroom and to trust the students to carry their weight in co-designing their curriculum and learning. Benes increased her use of primary sources as learning material, encouraged more student-led discussions and peer review, and built research training into disciplinary courses. Riley used DHC's Art of Inquiry, an upper-level research methods and ethics course, to develop a semester-long, scaffolded model of interdisciplinary student peer review (Riley and

Spurling, 2023), which she describes in another article in this issue of *HIP*, enabling her to further coalesce her teaching and research.

INDIVIDUAL IMPACTS

Perhaps the most important impact the TRM Fellow position had on us was how it shaped our scholarship, professional identities, and ultimately our trajectories in unexpected ways. Because of the different paths the TRM Fellows have taken, we address each experience in turn to show the different iterations of possible paths.

Gross followed perhaps the most traditional or expected path as a TRM Fellow. The position was described as giving newly minted PhDs experience in teaching and mentoring as well as research with the unspoken presumption that Fellows would go on to faculty positions at other universities. Gross, now an assistant professor of history at the University of Colorado Denver, fits that model well. However, she sees the TRM position as a turning point for her professional identity. While at DHC, Gross taught a course in public history, a subfield designed to train students in the practice of history in places such as museums, walking tours, and historic sites. Gross also led students in the creation of an exhibit at a local museum. These activities and courses were not requirements of the position but instead possibilities created by the flexibility of the job and the encouragement Gross received to do public-facing work. Gross credits this aspect of the DHC work she did with making her an appealing candidate for jobs in public history.

Benes was attracted to the TRM Fellowship because of her interest in pursuing a career focused on teaching and mentoring. She entered the TRM position with over a decade of teaching and mentoring experience in biological sciences, and her intention was to use the position to gain a faculty position at a liberal arts or community college. However, experience in an honors college helped Benes reimagine what a career in undergraduate teaching and mentoring—and in higher education more broadly—could look like. First, by teaching interdisciplinary courses and mentoring students in a variety of majors, she learned how to translate her experience in the sciences to support a broader student population. Second, for the first time Benes witnessed administrative positions that centered on student education and success, challenging her assumption that deep mentor-mentee relationships developed solely in faculty roles. Fortuitously, the DHC opened a search for the Director of Prestigious Scholarships and Fellowships in her second year as a Fellow. The position's emphasis on student mentoring and success outside of

a faculty position and the opportunity to develop a brand-new office fit many of the characteristics she sought in a position and satisfied Benes's personal desire to stay in Missoula, Montana. Benes's time as a Fellow prepared her for this role through experience working with students from many disciplines, an understanding of how extra- and co-curricular activities support student development, and growing connections with partners across campus.

"In the beginner's mind, there are many possibilities, but in the expert's, there are few" is a quotation often attributed to Zen monk Shunryu Suzuki (1904–1971). For Collins, the opportunity to teach courses she was interested in but had never taught opened new ways of thinking about teaching and learning, moving her away from the role of classroom expert to co-explorer and classroom curator. Simultaneous consciousness of her novice level of understanding combined with fierce curiosity in topics that she was passionate about allowed her to build and teach courses that paralleled her ongoing research interests rather than courses in which she would have all the answers. This confidence and safe practice field for experimentation allowed her to teach courses that helped her understand, in real time alongside her students, topics like refugee resettlement in Missoula and youth incarceration in Montana (Collins & Niva, 2020; Collins, Hawes, Hawthorne, Gomez, & Saldin, 2021). These kinds of improvisational experiments helped her to build trust in the process of teaching with a "beginner's mind" that has continued to inform her teaching in all her courses as a teaching assistant professor at the University of Colorado Boulder.

Riley found that the Fellow experience increased the breadth of opportunities she had when applying for permanent academic jobs. She continued to apply for musicology and other field-specific professorships but was also a competitive candidate for honors and interdisciplinary humanities-type jobs, especially at small liberal arts colleges and in positions where job requirements included team-teaching, interdepartmental collaboration, and contributing to general education courses. She also noted that teaching in an interdisciplinary context impacted her approach to designing and promoting upper-level music and culture classes. Often, music seminars contain significant prerequisites, e.g., theory and history, that prohibit students outside the major from taking them. Riley was instead intentional in the course description language to reach students from outside the music major and found that teaching courses with students from varied majors generally increased the breadth and quality of in-class discussions and experiential learning activities.

Throughout our fellowships, one of the most powerful opportunities was the ability to work with high-achieving and highly motivated honors students

without the constrictions of departmental course requirements or large class sizes. Across many different disciplinary and methodological contexts, we could implement experiential and active learning activities and structures that aligned with our values and were piloted with the highest caliber of students. In our further careers, the experience of developing these pedagogical approaches has shaped our teaching and research trajectories and further strengthened our abilities as experienced educators.

IMPACTS ON THE DAVIDSON HONORS COLLEGE

Over the last five years, the Fellows have had important positive impacts on the DHC. The temporary nature of the position and deliberate selection of scholars from different disciplines continually refreshes the DHC's teaching and research offerings through new courses and projects that involve students. Since the inception of the TRM Fellowship, DHC enrollment has grown by almost 30%. While this growth is not a result of the TRM program, the embedded postdoctoral Fellows serve to infuse new ideas and innovative courses that support and maintain high-caliber curricular and extracurricular offerings to the growing student body.

Perhaps the most conspicuous contribution of the program is the diversity and breadth of courses offered by Fellows. We have collectively taught 16 unique courses including American Roots Music, Race and Environment, National Parks and American Wilderness, and Science Writing. These new courses embedded interdisciplinarity into the curricular offerings of the DHC without increasing the need to recruit external faculty. Further, all of us taught honors sections of departmental courses in our disciplinary home departments. Cross-listing courses helped us build connections to other departments and assisted students in completing honors and major degree requirements.

Beyond the classroom we filled an important role as mentors for the college, training undergraduates in research and creative scholarship and supporting the capstone and experiential learning requirements. We approached mentoring relationships in different ways. For example, Gross advised capstone students but also hired some as research assistants for museum exhibit work, leading to collaborations on projects that lasted beyond one semester. Riley worked with a research assistant over multiple semesters to compile a large ($n = 20,840$) lyric analysis data set intended to inform several years of future projects. Collectively the authors mentored 27 students one-on-one during their tenure. Student participation in conferences like UM's Conference

on Undergraduate Research and the Western Regional Honors Conference, public presentations at local museums, and publications (e.g., Collins, Benes, & Manley, 2021; Riley & Spurling, 2023) further enhanced the promotion of the DHC's focus on and success in student scholarly engagement.

Fellows also engaged broadly in the DHC and campus communities. While not required, several developed community events including a retreat at UM's Flathead Lake Biostation and Open Mic Nights. We believe this extracurricular engagement helped students feel supported by a diversity of staff in the DHC and provided more paths for building community engagement and buy-in by students.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

Honors teaching facilitated a deep developmental experience that transformed our pedagogy and played an enormous role in shaping our professional lives. Our contributions to the college also shaped the educational experiences of students and the overall curricular portfolio of the DHC. The nature of honors courses helped us practice teaching methods beyond just lecturing. The two-year position offered extended training that gave us dedicated time to become familiar with and gain authentic experience in implementing best practices of engaged teaching.

Reflecting on our experiences, we recommend that honors programs support postdoctoral fellow positions as they are highly valuable to both fellows and programs. We are advocates for other early career scholars having opportunities to teach in interdisciplinary and subject-flexible contexts. Moreover, actively recruiting and including early career scholars as honors faculty members serves the larger honors mission of being inclusive, innovative, and relevant (Badenhausen & Buss, 2022; National Collegiate Honors Council, 2022). As Guzy (2019) noted in *JNCHC*, "Just as the honors community is working to overcome potential bias in honors admission and retention standards, honors administrators should also work with departments to expand the honors faculty pool in equally thoughtful ways to increase representation" (p. 73). Early career scholars bring new approaches to teaching and expand the course offerings and experiential learning opportunities available at an honors college. At the same time, teaching postdoc positions provide crucial pedagogical experiences that influence early career scholars in how they understand honors education and expand their notions of what kind of professional trajectories are possible.

Honors programs should be intentional about supporting the professional development of postdoctoral fellows. Seasoned honors college faculty should mentor young scholars by helping them navigate the complicated departmental silos, showing them how honors education bridges these disciplinary divisions, and offering opportunities to collaborate and learn far beyond their home departments. Upon entering the position, postdoctoral fellows should critically reflect on the type of career trajectory they are aiming for and develop their fellowship time to prepare for their goals. Important reflective questions include: Do you intend to stay in honors? How can honors help you expand the depth and reach of your specialization? Is honors a juncture point or a career shift from your PhD training?

Faculty mentoring graduate students soon to be on the job market should encourage them to pursue honors and interdisciplinary positions alongside appointments in their degree area. Riley noted that when she was first applying for faculty positions directly after finishing her PhD, the TRM Fellowship was not initially on her radar or list of potential jobs, and she only found out about the TRM Fellowship when a friend shared it with her. When honors programs run searches for faculty, postdocs, or other positions, they may wish to consider how they can reach a broad audience and consider how job description language, keyword tags, and posting sites impact the pool of candidates targeted and reached.

An additional recommendation concerns the sustainability and desirability of these types of programs in regard to changes in the cost of living and other financial factors in the home institution's region. Riley and Collins, the two most recent TRM Fellows, both took on significant additional paid teaching responsibilities due to a rapidly rising cost of living in the Missoula area. To be competitive, recruit high-caliber candidates, and ensure that fellows can excel during their tenure, programs should plan to offer competitive salary and benefit packages.

Finally, we advocate counting the long-term experience of early career scholars' teaching in honors colleges in multiple ways. Overall, we viewed our positions as transformative, but in unexpected ways. Not all Fellows have maintained an academic trajectory. Some have used it to launch careers in the private sector. Of the six Fellows who have come through the program so far, two have chosen to pursue careers outside of higher education. One is now a mental health counselor and the other is doing research in the technology sector. For the four authors of this piece, all of whom have chosen to stay within academia in a range of positions, participating in honors education

strengthened our pedagogical models by allowing us to develop them in a flexible space and bring the philosophy of honors to our next steps.

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