2022

Who Owns Honors?

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Abstract: The long-term shift in undergraduate enrollment away from traditional humanities disciplines toward vocationally oriented majors poses a unique set of challenges for honors. While some have responded by emphasizing humanities' centrality to honors education, this essay argues the imperative that honors practitioners and administrators improve outreach efforts to preprofessional honors programs. After considering why fields outside the liberal arts and sciences are underrepresented in the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC), the author outlines a number of strategies for soliciting greater participation from academic leaders and faculty in these disciplines as well as improving the experience of career-focused majors in liberal arts honors programs.

Keywords: educational change; higher education—theory & practice; professional education; learned institutions & societies; Mercy College (NY)–Global Honors College

Citation: *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, 2022, 23(2): 3–13

The steady decline of students majoring in traditional humanities fields has been a topic of endless discussion and debate in higher education over the past several decades. While the root causes and long-term implications of what is sometimes hyperbolically described as the "death of the humanities" are hotly contested, the underlying trends are indisputable: nationally, departments of English, history, philosophy, and foreign languages have experienced declining numbers each of the past ten years, shrinking by nearly 25% over that period. In 2020, for instance, only one out of every twenty-five graduates had a degree from a discipline in the humanities (Barshay, 2021; Nietzel, 2019). The data underlying these trends is publicly available at the *Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System* maintained by the U.S. Department of Education.

Many have argued that this downturn reflects a growing preference among students and their parents for majors that funnel directly into a specific career path, a theory supported by rapidly expanding enrollments in business, engineering, and the health sciences—up 60%, 100%, and 200%, respectively, since the turn of the century—as well as robust growth in "applied" liberal arts majors such as communications, criminal justice, and computer science. Although defenders of the humanities frequently point to data showing their graduates with employment rates and earning potential on a par with vocationally oriented programs, such attempts at myth-busting have done little to dispel the popular notion that preprofessional majors are a safer bet in terms of short- and long-term job prospects.

Whether one perceives the shrinking of humanities departments (and concurrent expansion of career-focused programs) as an inevitable consequence of the evolution of higher education or an existential crisis with dire consequences for American society, this shift poses a unique set of challenges for honors, a space that has long been closely aligned with those subjects experiencing the most troubling drops in enrollment. A great deal of ink has been spilt in past issues of this journal detailing the intimate relationship between honors and the humanities (or liberal learning more generally). However, far less attention has been paid to the other half of this story: namely, the place of preprofessional fields within the honors community. Despite the existence of countless honors programs in areas such as business, nursing, engineering, computer science, and education on campuses across the country, surprisingly little discussion has focused on how to better integrate this segment of the honors community into the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC). A similarly urgent need is to address the challenges faced by the growing number of preprofessional students within liberal arts and sciences (LAS) honors programs. The goal of this essay and forum is to spark an overdue and necessary conversation about expanding honors in new directions, building bridges between LAS and preprofessional honors programs, and ensuring that our stated commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion extend to students and faculty in vocationally oriented fields.

I began this essay by reflecting on the longstanding ties between honors and the humanities and on how this relationship has shaped the way honors educators have reacted to the enrollment crisis in the humanities. I argue that while honors can and should continue to be grounded in a broad liberal education, overemphasizing the inseparability of honors and the humanities risks alienating students and faculty outside of these disciplines.

The essay concludes with some strategies that the honors community and NCHC might adopt to better accommodate existing preprofessional honors programs, facilitate greater communication and collaboration between preprofessional and LAS honors programs, and better serve the preprofessional students in our programs.

DO THE HUMANITIES OWN HONORS?

Even as the size and influence of the humanities diminish across higher education as a whole, these fields continue to enjoy great prestige and influence within honors. From the "founding fathers" Frank Aydelotte (English) and Joseph W. Cohen (philosophy) to the present-day leadership of NCHC and on campuses across the country, humanities faculty have long exerted a disproportionate influence on the growth and trajectory of honors education in North America. For example, more than two-thirds of the past presidents of NCHC and nearly half of current leaders of honors programs and colleges at member institutions were trained in a humanities field (Andrews, 2015, p. 7; NCHC, "NCHC 2016 Census," 2016). Given this prominence, humanistic ideals have been a recurring theme in the scholarship of honors teaching and learning. The first issue of the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* (*JNCHC*, Vol. 1.1, 2000) featured a discussion entitled "Liberal Learning in the New Century," and a number of past *JNCHC* forums have been dedicated to the relationship of humanities or liberal learning to honors education. These forums include Vol. 3.1 ("Forum on Liberal Learning," 2002) and Vol. 16.1 ("Forum on Honors and the Future of the Humanities," 2015). Additionally, several forums have touched on related themes such as Vol. 6.2 ("Forum on What is Honors?" 2005) and Vol. 20.1 ("Forum on Current Challenges to Honors Education," 2019). Moreover, innumerable contributions to *JNCHC*, *Honors in Practice* (*HIP*), and the NCHC Monograph Series champion liberal values like curiosity, inquiry, diversity, autonomy, and critical thinking. A similar emphasis on the humanities is evident in the sessions, workshops, and keynotes at NCHC's annual conferences. Although perspectives from the sciences have become more visible in recent years (e.g., Buckner & Garbutt, 2012), for many, the humanities have always been, and will likely continue to be, the heart and soul of an honors education. This sentiment was perhaps most clearly articulated in the 2015 *JNCHC* Forum "Honors and the Future of the Humanities." In his lead essay, Larry Andrews (2015) made an impassioned case for the centrality of the humanities to honors, arguing that they "share core values, including the importance of deep, sustained reading" (p.

8). They also value, he continues, "thoughtful responses to texts and an ability to integrate them into broader knowledge, reaching toward not just learning but wisdom" (p. 8). Andrews characterizes honors as "wrestl[ing] with universal problems of human experience"; "in-class discussion and debate"; "thoughtful, synthesizing essay responses rather than multiple-choice checkoffs"; "tolerance for ambiguity and a recognition of complexity and context"; and "overweening intellectual ambition" (pp. 8–9).

In a response essay, Andrew Martino (2015) struck a similar tone, asserting: "Honors programs are a model of what the humanities can teach us" (p. 28). He argued: "At the core of an honors education is a solid foundation in the humanities . . ." (p. 28). In another contribution, Frances McCue (2015) recounted her honors admissions committee's strong preference for humanities applicants: "We look through the stacks until someone says, 'A humanities person!' And then we say, 'Ah good.' These moments are rare. We celebrate the culture aficionado, the philosopher, the poet, the painter, the historian, and the dramatist. . . . In our ranks, they are elevated" (p. 15).

The celebration of honors and the humanities in these essays was accompanied by more ominous musings on the current state of higher education. For example, Andrews (2015) lamented that colleges are "more and more run as a big business, and boards of trustees hiring a president or even a provost look to the CEO as a model. Administrative talk teems with terms such as, pardon the expression, 'productivity,' 'stakeholders,' 'learning outcomes,' and 'data-driven decision-making" (p. 4). Martino (2015) likewise warned: "If we continue on our current business-model path, we will eventually arrive at a system that is not only devoid of wisdom or the capacity to achieve it but that dismisses its importance" (pp. 28–29). Other recent articles in honors journals have pointed to the commodification of education as an existential threat to honors (Meadows, 2019); Joan Digby (2016), for example, lamented: "The idea of teaching students how to think and how to expand their intellectual and cultural world has been overwhelmed by utilitarian ends" (p. 35).

HONORS BEYOND THE LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES

As a faculty member within a humanities department, I am sympathetic to arguments for the myriad benefits of a liberal and humanistic education as well as the perils inherent in the corporatization of the university. Naturally, humanities scholars have every right to offer a full-throated defense of their intellectual value. Still, rhetoric implying that the humanities are a necessary

and sufficient condition for honors education is likely to be poorly received in those parts of the honors community outside of humanities fields, or the liberal arts and sciences entirely. Are faculty and administrators from preprofessional programs part of "the problem" with the commodification and neo-liberalization of postsecondary education? Are students who approach their college experience in broadly instrumentalist terms—as a means of achieving a stable career and comfortable life—betraying the humanistic ethos of honors? Can honors exist without the humanities or even the liberal arts? According to NCHC's "Definition of Honors Education" (n.d.)—which explicitly acknowledges the "diversity of honors experiences," "array of missions," and "inevitable differences" between types of programs—the answer would seem to be "yes." However, this official line appears in sharp contrast with the perspectives articulated above, which are (at least in my experience) more representative of the culture of honors. To borrow a concept from Pierre Bourdieu, the irreplaceable place of the humanities in honors is part of the *doxa* (that is, a fundamental, taken-for-granted belief) of the national organization (Fazioli, 2020).

I do not accuse anyone of deliberately maligning undergraduate programs outside of the liberal arts and sciences nor of advocating the exclusion of preprofessional faculty and students from the honors community. My concern is rather that the peculiar dynamic in which humanities faculty continue to hold power within honors as they lose it elsewhere can produce a kind of siege mentality that has alienated our honors colleagues in preprofessional programs. I do not think it a coincidence that fields beyond the liberal arts are distinctly underrepresented in NCHC leadership, membership, and scholarship. Despite the difficulty of quantifying this lack of representation (since NCHC does not collect data on which honors programs are in preprofessional areas), we do know that fewer than 1% of honors campus leaders come from outside the liberal arts and sciences ("NCHC 2016 Census"). Although I have met many business, nursing, engineering, and computer science students at the annual conferences, an examination of recent conference programs reveals few sessions (outside of Student Posters) dedicated to issues of special relevance to preprofessional honors programs. Similarly, only a very small proportion of articles and book chapters in NCHC publications are focused on topics related to honors beyond the liberal arts and sciences; some of these are discussed below.

These few data points indicating the likely underrepresentation of preprofessional programs have been reinforced by my conversations with leaders

of honors programs in these areas, many of whom do not see NCHC as particularly relevant to their needs and goals. If NCHC wants to invite more participation from students and faculty in vocationally oriented fields, it needs to identify effective strategies for outreach and inclusion. I will conclude with some ideas inspired by discussions with colleagues possessing greater knowledge of and experience in honors beyond the liberal arts. These suggestions can be divided into two categories: the first on bringing better representation of preprofessional honors programs to NCHC and facilitating greater collaboration and communication between preprofessional and LAS honors programs; and the second on how LAS honors programs can better serve students in career-focused majors.

Outreach to Preprofessional Honors Programs

In a number of ways, NCHC and its regional affiliates could encourage greater involvement from preprofessional honors programs across the country. One obvious strategy is engaging in direct outreach, such as inviting academic leaders and faculty members in these programs to propose sessions or workshops at the annual conferences. One challenge is that the conference only becomes attractive to, for example, business honors directors if they believe that other business honors directors would also be in attendance. If this "critical mass" problem could be overcome, the creation of a preprofessional theme or track (like the one that already exists for Student Posters) would signal to these faculty that the conferences are a worthwhile investment of time and money. The absence of any organizational networks for honors programs in business or other preprofessional honors programs highlights an unmet need for collaboration and communication for which the annual conferences could provide an ideal setting. The Beginning in Honors New Directors Network Reception is an excellent model for how to facilitate these relationships.

Another way for NCHC to encourage more participation from preprofessional honors faculty is to revisit the membership structure. Currently, institutional memberships only provide benefits to a single individual, usually the dean or director of a university-wide honors college or program, which means that preprofessional honors leaders must purchase their own individual professional memberships at a cost that obstructs their involvement in the national organization. A membership structure that considers the possibility of multiple autonomous honors programs on a single campus would likely bring more preprofessional programs into NCHC's orbit.

In addition to encouraging more preprofessional honors programs to join its ranks, NCHC should consider how to grow honors within these rapidly expanding areas of higher education. Leaders of preprofessional programs and schools may not immediately see the value of an honors component, perhaps assuming that honors is solely the provenance of the liberal arts. However, research has shown that honors programs increase student engagement and success within vocationally oriented programs (Petersen et al., 2021; Levinson & Mandel, 2013). Furthermore, by providing additional opportunities for original research and scholarship, honors programs can help to identify and cultivate future scholars and educators in these preprofessional fields, which is as important as producing the next generation of practitioners (Lim et al., 2016).

Several recent articles have outlined successful models of preprofessional honors program development. In business honors, Beata M. Jones and Peggy W. Watson (2009) described a "separate but equal" model developed at Texas Christian University, and Julie Urda (2012) provided a step-by-step guide to creating a new program at Rhode Island College. Engineering schools interested in creating honors experiences can look to the unique integration of the sciences and humanities in the Fessenden Honors in Engineering Program at the University of Pittsburgh (Giazzoni, 2007) as well as the collaboration between the University of Iowa's Honors College and College of Engineering in tailoring a flexible, multidisciplinary curriculum to the needs of its engineering majors (Brewster et al., 2014). Another way for NCHC to facilitate this process would be to develop a consultation program for preprofessional schools or departments seeking to add an honors component, along the lines of the Recommended Site Visitor program that provides external reviewers to existing LAS honors programs and colleges.

Preprofessional Majors in Liberal Arts and Sciences Honors Programs

Another consequence of the national shift toward preprofessional majors is that traditional LAS honors programs across the country are seeing ever-greater numbers of these students in their programs. While it is exciting that so many career-oriented students are seeking an enhanced general education experience, such students often face more barriers to success in honors than those from liberal arts and sciences disciplines. For example, preprofessional programs, in order to meet the demands of accrediting bodies, often give their students less flexibility in the types of courses that form the backbone

of many college-wide honors programs. Moreover, many of these students have required internships, externships, practicums, or student teaching positions that can hinder their ability to complete honors requirements (Noble & Dowling, 2007). Making honors more accessible to these students will require us to "to think beyond the credit hour as the primary marker of our students' honors success," as Linda Frost (2019, p. 56) has recently suggested.

Creating access for preprofessional students can be accomplished through a combination of longstanding strategies and recent curricular innovations. The honors contract, in which students can make progress toward their honors requirements by undertaking additional work or collaborative, experiential partnerships in a non-honors course, is a common tool for giving students additional flexibility (Bahls, 2020; Miller, 2020). Institutions with sufficiently large student bodies can also offer honors-designated sections of courses within the preprofessional majors as Jones and Watson (2009) have done at TCU. More recent ideas include Kevin Gustafson's implementation of an "experiential capstone" as an alternative to the traditional capstone project for students whose programs require them to complete a year-long internship or residency off campus (Gustafson & Cureton, 2014). Other initiatives for improving the experience of preprofessional students in honors programs include the University of South Alabama's "service abroad" model for health science students to complete an honors thesis (Guy et al., 2020) and Northern Kentucky University's Honors International Teaching Fellows capsule targeted toward education majors (Bishop & Sittason, 2007).

CONCLUSION

The special relationship that honors has had with the humanities for over a century will, with any luck, continue for the next hundred years. However, in answer to the title question "Who Owns Honors?" no single discipline or area of knowledge should be able to claim sole possession. As postsecondary education evolves, honors must continually adjust to new challenges and embrace emerging opportunities. Happily, due to the complementary nature of their curricula, the balance between LAS honors based in general education and preprofessional honors in the major coursework need not be a zero-sum game. Providing an enriched honors experience for more undergraduate students should be our shared goal. We have embraced a collaborative approach at my own institution, where our college-wide Global Honors and major-specific Business Honors programs share students, work together on shared initiatives, and are invested in each other's success. I am sure we are not the

only campus that has built bridges across disciplinary divides, and this spirit of collegiality and collaboration should eventually be realized at a national level.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This essay greatly benefitted from conversations with numerous colleagues, but I am especially indebted to Beata Jones, Ellen Buckner, and Mahmud Wazihullah for sharing their wisdom and perspectives on the place of preprofessional honors programs in the NCHC. Many thanks also to Ada Long for her careful editing eye. Any remaining oversights or infelicities are the sole responsibility of the author.

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