Peanuts and Shoestrings: Building an Honors Faculty Pool with Limited Resources

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Abstract: This essay presents common practices for developing faculty in small honors programs and colleges operating with limited financial resources. The author outlines strategies and applications for implementing targeted faculty development, including: transdisciplinary coordinating efforts toward bringing full-time and adjunct faculty together for the purposes of curricular innovation, metacognitive development, and academic risk-taking; effective practices and processes for the advertising and hiring of adjunct faculty in honors; and integral opportunities for honors deans and directors to teach courses. While budget advocacy is crucial to program sustainability and development, the author acknowledges that this is not always possible, particularly in two-year institutions seeking to develop honors faculty. This essay considers the tightrope walk of building and maintaining workable practices in small programs with trajectories toward curricular growth and improvement.

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Lynne C. Elkes's lead article for this Forum articulates a succinct and effective definition of honors faculty, one that covers valuing their relationships with their students, a commitment to and passion for their discipline and the profession of teaching, and an eagerness to take on a challenge. These faculty, after all, work with students who are used to taking on challenges in

and outside the classroom and who are usually striving for excellence beyond the norm while they are in school. In essence, an honors curriculum asks for the best from our students, and it should offer our students the best of our teaching faculty—with the caveat that asking the best of our students and offering the best of our faculty still require the necessity of grace when a student or faculty member falls short of expectations. Just as honors students can be yoked with perfectionism, honors faculty can struggle under the assumption that their classes should be flawless in order to rise to expectations. With that said, staffing honors courses at a small institution can come with a unique set of challenges.

My time in honors leadership thus far has comprised serving as honors program director and then dean of honors at a very small, very rural community college in Cleveland, Tennessee, from 2016 through 2022. In 2019 and 2020, we embarked on the process of converting our honors program into an honors college. As part of that process, we explored the possibility of establishing a dedicated honors faculty line, but our administration all but scoffed at this idea. We had a student body of roughly 2,200, and our full-time faculty hovered somewhere between 70 and 75 positions. It had taken several years to establish a tenure track line for criminal justice, for example, even though we had data suggesting that students were clamoring for associates degrees in that field. The prospect of establishing a tenure-track line solely for honors instruction wasn't feasible given our student body and our budget. Our entire operating and travel budget for honors was just $6,000, and as dean, I still taught a number of classes to ensure that we could appropriately staff them. All classroom upgrades were managed through grants, and the majority of student and faculty travel was funded the same way. We did not have a salaried or adjunct line. We relied solely on other departments to "loan" us their faculty to teach our classes, and when we hired honors adjuncts, we had to dip into the campus-wide adjunct budget that generally existed for emergencies. Our shoestring budget left us offering little more than peanuts for an instructor's time to meet the required teaching load for our classes.

Given these limitations and the specific needs of our program in the context of our small school, we undertook three initiatives to develop a pool of instructors who would teach our honors courses: 1) we implemented targeted faculty development and coordination efforts to prepare faculty and adjuncts from other fields to design honors courses that served our larger curriculum and to teach honors course in ways that encouraged metacognition and academic risk-taking among our students; 2) we established an honors adjunct

position; and 3) as the dean, I taught several of our core honors courses that made up our curriculum.

While I have no particular revelations or paradigm shifts to suggest, I can outline a few practical steps that are likely common practice in many honors programs/colleges and that may be helpful to readers new to honors leadership, those who are revitalizing a program, and those who are building a new program from the ground up—all of whom may be struggling under tight budgets.

FACULTY DEVELOPMENT AND COORDINATION

We had been holding pre-semester meetings for faculty teaching honors courses for a few years before our enrollment grew to an extent that required expanding our pool of honors faculty. As the need for honors instructors grew, our focus for the "pre-semester meeting" shifted from a short gathering—where we generally asked, "What questions do you have about the learning objectives for this course?"—to a more extensive development and coordination effort.

These meetings ultimately covered four major items. First, we talked about the kinds of honors students the instructors were likely to encounter. This discussion gave us an opportunity to address myths about honors students, like the idea that they are the ones who were always going to make it anyway or that they don't have as many heavy burdens to carry with them as underprepared students often do. We talked about common mental health concerns among students in the honors community and the crippling effect that perfectionism can have on some of them.

Second, I enlisted any faculty who had attended the National Collegiate Honors Council's annual conference in recent years to lead a discussion in which they shared resources and ideas for honors instruction gained from attending the conference. We often tried to foreground approaches that encourage metacognition and academic risk-taking for our students. This segment of the discussion often stressed the idea that an honors classroom can be treated as a kind of laboratory in which faculty try out new techniques or ideas in an environment; the population of motivated students who had already built a sense of community among each other increased the likelihood of active participation. This concept of the honors classroom as a laboratory is foregrounded in NCHC's "Shared Principles and Practices" and the previous iteration of those guidelines called the Basic Characteristics of

Honors Programs and Honors Colleges, and it is also commonly featured in sessions at the annual conference facilitated by the Teaching and Learning Committee.

Third, we reviewed the honors college's curriculum as a whole and discussed which program objectives each course might cover. We operated with five major program outcomes:

1. Academic excellence,
2. In-depth subject exploration,
3. Public presentation experience,
4. Leadership, and
5. Service.

Each class was required to address the first two items from that list, and then they also had to address at least one of the other three. As our honors faculty pool grew, we found that new faculty often incorporated a public presentation because it was the easiest way to get started. However, we wanted to make sure that our curriculum was addressing all five goals regularly to ensure that students engaged with all program goals before graduation. To promote even distribution of program outcomes in course design, we used our honors faculty development and coordination meetings to brainstorm potential projects for each class and track the program outcomes those projects would promote on a curriculum map for that semester. We compared that map to previous semesters to identify any trends or ongoing gaps that needed to be filled.

Finally, we wrapped up the meeting by taking some time to write and workshop syllabi, honors projects, and methods for conducting our classes. More seasoned honors faculty served as mentors for those newer to the work to offer suggestions about what had worked for them in the past and what they had decided to avoid after a few less-than-successful attempts. We originally intended for this part of the meeting to be just as highly constructive as the rest of the meeting, but we had a few neurodivergent faculty who struggled to focus in such a setting. Though the intention was to create a collaborative environment, they reported feeling put on the spot, finding this kind of working environment stressful. Given that feedback, we made this part of the meeting optional, but we encouraged faculty who chose not to stay for the workshop to meet later with honors leadership or someone with ample experience teaching honors courses to discuss what they had decided to do.

We relied on outstanding faculty from other departments to staff the majority of our courses. We were intentional about presenting our meetings not as opportunities to vet their work but rather as true development opportunities, in which their engagement could count toward professional development hours required for their tenure and promotion reviews.

Tight budgets plagued this part of our curriculum design. We were lucky to secure from Academic Affairs stipends for faculty teaching honors courses. These stipends were not only small and largely symbolic but were always susceptible to being cut during tight budget years. Most faculty did not teach honors courses for the extra pay and were surprised when they were reminded that this stipend would appear in equal instalments on each paycheck throughout the semester. They were generally grateful for the added support, and I was grateful for the opportunity to say that we were compensating them in some small way for the extra work they did.

HONORS ADJUNCTS: THE PROS AND CONS

Relying on the goodwill of other departments to loan us their faculty worked well most of the time, but it was tenuous. As budgets got tighter and tighter during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, we decided to create adjunct positions for the honors college. This initiative came with benefits and risks, as most initiatives do. Readers feeling uncomfortable with the adjunctification of honors are right to feel that way; it meant that we were paying our honors instructors less on average than before, and we were introducing the risk of hiring someone with pedagogical skill untested at our institution to facilitate elements of our program. During tight financial times, however, we often find ourselves having to take calculated risks and working to mitigate any potential consequences.

We tended to post the position and conduct interviews over the summer. These job ads brought in a number of applicants, most of whom wanted online teaching opportunities. Though our program was not averse to offering online courses, they were often staffed by honors instructors we knew well and who had demonstrated experience with online instruction. Unfortunately, we had to turn away otherwise qualified candidates who were not proximate enough to our campus to conduct in-person classes. The candidates who were available for in-person instruction had a range of experience and came from a variety of disciplines, and we quickly realized that hiring adjunct honors

instructors had the potential to diversify our instructor pool beyond what was available at our college. We were generally able to pick candidates with some level of experience with honors (either as students or instructors) and thus to bring in a variety of approaches to honors curriculum and instruction.

Because my role as dean often included a substantial amount of teaching, we also had the opportunity to hire alumni from our program to co-teach with a seasoned instructor, so some of our outstanding students who had gone on to earn bachelor's degrees now had the opportunity to serve in a role comparable to a teaching assistant, a distinct advantage as they prepared to apply to graduate school or sought more permanent teaching positions. We thus had the chance to continue serving and developing our alumni long after they had left our program.

TEACHING AS A DEAN

An honors dean teaching classes is no uncommon phenomenon, and the benefits are significant. Often, people rise to honors leadership because of their dedication to honors education and to their investment in and genuine enjoyment of working with motivated students. Teaching an honors course or two each year keeps deans connected to students and can help them understand the general characteristics of the students their programs are serving. Depending on the teaching load and the kinds of courses the dean teaches, this practice can help a dean meet incoming students (for example, by teaching honors first-year experience courses) or facilitate students' as they approach graduation (by teaching an honors capstone or thesis course).

Honors deans, however, often serve on the Deans' Council, the Academic Council, and various other committees and boards that facilitate the leadership of the college. These administrative duties inherent in running an honors college require varied tasks and skills such as recruiting, scheduling, curriculum building, and assessment. Their work may be focused primarily on honors, but by the nature of their position, they are often pulled into other administrative duties that serve the college or university as a whole.

All of this is to say that teaching as a dean can and should be a beneficial experience, and for many it may even be rejuvenating and invigorating. We should keep a close eye, however, on the potential danger of relying too heavily on an administrator to teach classes that would not be staffed otherwise.

CONCLUSION

The initiatives I have outlined are relatively common practices in small programs operating with limited resources. Honors students often have higher retention and success rates than the general student body, and colleges and universities often want to promote these programs for that purpose. For a growing program at a school that wants to promote the retention and success of students, I would argue that advocating for better resources and a more robust budget is crucial. Exploring opportunities to work with a development office to find potential donors or working with a grants office to secure grant funding may be valid options. However, cuts to already tight budgets are a reality in higher education, and expanding resources may not be possible. In such situations, honors leadership should work with upper administration to identify opportunities for sustainable growth and development through such strategies as involving honors leadership in the faculty pool, using honors instruction as a form of pedagogical development for faculty in other departments, and establishing and filling adjunct positions with quality instructors. Keeping an eye on sustainability and development of honors pedagogy should be central to these efforts.

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