

Honors as Incubator for Creating and Sustaining Faculty Professional Growth

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Abstract: Successful honors programs inspire and sustain a vibrant and committed faculty. This essay presents an established honors program which demonstrates, through varied faculty commitments over time, honors as a valuable asset in identifying, recruiting, supporting, and rewarding a strong, creative, loyal faculty that benefits the entire institution. Authors suggest multiple ways for establishing and nurturing the kinds of relationships that enhance both honors and its dedicated faculty. Leveraging honors for professional growth and pedagogical development, these include the design of interdisciplinary courses and special seminars, mentoring of student projects, engaging in study-travel ventures, winning distinguished awards, serving on important committees, earning academic grants, and presenting at conferences. As exemplified in its long and rich history, honors continues to be an incubating space for faculty development and student success.

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In her lead Forum essay on “Creating and Celebrating Honors Faculty,” Lynne C. Elkes poses many questions about how honors programs identify, recruit, support, and reward faculty members who help sustain the honors enterprise on campuses where the “controlled chaos” of teaching roles in honors can be either an advantage or a liability—a challenge in either guise. In discerning how successful a program is in building strong bridges between faculty advancement and an honors program’s central mission of excellence in teaching, scholarship, and service, one of the best strategies is to

count the number of faculty eager to accept an honors teaching assignment. Another more telling indication is the extent to which faculty engage in honors beyond the core contribution of teaching honors classes. At Columbia College, we are proud of an almost forty-year history of such varied faculty commitments to honors, a record that demonstrates how honors is an asset in “creating and celebrating” a strong, creative, loyal faculty that benefits the entire institution. We hope that the story we tell in this brief response to Elkes’s essay will provide some guiding tips for establishing and nurturing the kinds of relationships that enhance both honors and its dedicated faculty. Nothing of what we describe is necessarily groundbreaking or different from what other well-formed honors programs do, but reminders of good practice are a worthwhile investment in keeping our programs strong and our faculty well supported, appreciated, and rewarded.

From the beginning of its founding, our program, much like others, has put a premium on offering students enriched and multiple educational experiences. We have encouraged faculty to teach fully interdisciplinary courses or to infuse their subject matter courses with interdisciplinary components such as periodic units that connect to other disciplines; student oral reports on timely, relevant topics; research from other fields related to coursework; online forums that allow discussions across disciplines; applied projects that reveal multi-disciplinary interests; or other pathways that enable faculty (and students) to stretch their knowledge and skills. Our principal way of fostering interdisciplinary teaching and learning is the required senior seminar, an opportunity for faculty to develop a unique course offered only in honors. The seminar is a chance for faculty to break the disciplinary boundaries of their home departments; explore new topics of interest; and experiment with different teaching strategies, modes of assessment, and student learning achievements. Such engagement in honors—ranging from interdisciplinary teaching to advising, mentoring projects, committee service, conference presentations, publication, and other honors activities—helps to diversify their professional portfolio for career enhancement and can be advantageously described and documented for personnel decisions, along with critical reflections on the impact of honors work on faculty development.

Providing a supportive environment for such faculty innovation yields additional benefits that entice faculty involvement in honors. The senior seminar we have mentioned, for instance, has often included a study-travel dimension that has provided funding for faculty to accompany students on educational trips to Place as Text locations such as Dublin and Belfast, Paris,

New York, Orlando, London, Miami, and Berlin. Teaching in honors has also inspired faculty grant writing to secure resources for implementing special course projects that extend beyond the class time frame; one example is a recent NCHC Portz grant for an education professor's collaboration with students in designing an ongoing mural installation on campus, which grew out of an honors course on "Education through Arts Creation." Another is a grant from the South Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities for a faculty member and student to conduct research at several major library and private special collections of Robert Frost iconography scattered across the United States. Faculty from other fields in the sciences, arts, and social sciences have also earned similar collaborative grants for projects born in their honors teaching and mentoring experiences, achievements that reveal how honors is an incubator for faculty professional growth.

Teaming faculty with students on special honors projects has also resulted in collaborative publications in literary studies, biology, communication, art, music, mathematics, chemistry, teaching education, speech-language pathology, and, of course, honors education. Beyond publications, though, faculty have been able to add to their record of professional development through presentations at regional and national honors conferences. Over the years, honors has supported a number of faculty whose work with students inside and outside of class has merited an invitation to submit proposals to present sessions at SRHC or NCHC, often with students. Such accomplishments have endured as a signature feature of the program, earning honors a laudable reputation for its generous participation at yearly conferences and underlining its role on campus as a powerful resource for faculty development with the advantage of financial support for honors professional activities.

In her essay, Elkes mentions the challenge of identifying the salient characteristics of outstanding honors faculty. She lists, among other traits, an ability to cultivate meaningful relationships with students and colleagues, a passion for one's subject and for teaching, a willingness to accept risks and challenges in order to innovate and break boundaries, a desire to be an influential mentor and to make a difference in others' lives, and a real dedication to the transformative power of learning. Unsurprisingly, these same qualities appear fairly uniformly in criteria for faculty teaching awards at most colleges and universities in the nation (Chism, 2006; Svinicki & Menges, 1996). At our college, every winner of the four awards bestowed on faculty over the past forty years has been a colleague who has taught in honors, served on the college's honors committee, mentored students' honors projects, presented with

students in conferences, or published collaboratively with students in academic journals and books. Participating in honors, no matter how or when, has been a source of professional enrichment and celebration for faculty, a key facet of their advancement for tenure and promotion.

But the road to such success is not always easy or certain. As Elkes rightly points out, institutional contexts or other unpredictable variables often present changes and challenges that can derail an honors program's positive efforts to create and sustain a strong, mutually beneficial partnership with faculty across campus. In our case, the moment came during a trying time when several factors—an external college review process and harmful, short-lived administrative mandates for budget, program, and personnel cuts that decimated several majors—altered the college's identity and long tradition in the liberal arts and humanities, almost eliminating the honors program. Almost. Thanks to devoted alumnae, an approving past president, and the esprit de corps among remaining faculty, honors survived the ordeal and eventually regained its prominence in faculty estimations. Today, the program continues to rebuild its influence with faculty, sponsoring three faculty presenters at SRHC 2023 and offering an NCHC 2023 session by the director and a colleague on a grant-funded campus project designed by students in an honors course. Other opportunities for faculty continue to grow as honors reclaims its exceptional role in inspiring and supporting faculty excellence.

Still, recruiting and retaining honors faculty can be challenging in the face of budgetary and time constraints. The pursuit of excellence in education through an honors program requires dedicated and experienced educators whose availability to serve in honors can be difficult given their already busy non-honors teaching roles, research demands, and service responsibilities. Faculty turnover also entails initiating new faculty so that they understand the nuances of the honors program. The delicate balance between maintaining a well-staffed and adequately compensated faculty and accommodating their time limitations can pose a considerable obstacle to attracting qualified and committed individuals to teach and mentor within honors. However, building a welcoming and thriving sense of community to tie our program to the faculty at large has proven successful. Simple actions such as composing handwritten thank-you notes to faculty serving as mentors, sending small tokens of gratitude like branded coffee mugs to those offering honors courses, and hosting “lunch and learn” opportunities where honors can provide a meal and training for faculty interested in teaching honors but who are not sure how to get started have been effective methods of creating and sustaining faculty commitment to our program.

Elkes concludes her Forum piece with the following clarion call:

Students (and their wallets) expect that higher education will create an environment that lifts up those faculty most dedicated to their craft, valuing the effort that goes into an exceptional learning experience. Honors faculty are extraordinary for their contributions to molding students into forward looking, critically thinking, educated leaders. Leaders in higher education, therefore, owe it to all their constituencies to promote best practices in creating a sustainable, vibrant honors faculty.

We can think of no better way to affirm the importance of honors in fostering an atmosphere on campus that helps to discover, inspire, support, recognize, and reward faculty achievement, engagement, and loyalty. When honors invests in faculty, faculty invest in honors, and the institution at large is made better by validating and promoting a relationship that ultimately benefits our students. Everybody wins.

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