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CHARLIE SLAVIN

Defining Honors Culture

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Most of us in honors have a general sense of what the phrase “honors culture” might mean but would be hard-pressed to define it. Those who have been involved in honors education for any length of time realize that this thing we call “honors” varies widely across institutions. We also know that the components of honors culture at even a single institution include multiple and transient populations of administrators, staff, faculty, and students. Many of the recent writings on college culture by columnists like David Brooks and Thomas Friedman focus solely on undergraduate students, but a culture, if there is one, includes all participants and is shaped by relationships among members of successive generations that change over time.

The challenge of identifying an honors culture also involves distinguishing it from, or at least characterizing it within, the larger campus culture. To define honors culture, we need to identify a particular characteristic or group of characteristics that differentiates honors students, honors faculty, or the honors community from the corresponding university-wide group; this is not an easy task since, in many ways, members of an honors community may not differ all that much from their non-honors counterparts. The challenge is further confounded by the disparities among colleges and universities with different populations, missions, and structures, disparities that are reflected in their honors programs and colleges.

I will not, however, toss in the towel. I posit that an honors culture exists and that such a culture, which may appear in different guises at our institutions, always involves some common characteristics. My goal in defining this culture is descriptive, not normative, although it is based on my experiences and hence my own predilections.

One striking illustration of honors culture is that this essay is written by a mathematician, not an anthropologist, sociologist, or historian. My attempt to define a culture despite my lack of formal training in fields that normally might be devoted to such investigations illustrates one cornerstone (I leave the other three to my respondents and critics) that is common to the culture of honors: taking intellectual risks. My predecessor at the University of Maine, Dr. Ruth Nadelhaft, sponsored a series of all-university luncheon discussions about best educational practices with the title “Risky Business.” All

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administrators, faculty, and students in honors are involved in this kind of risky business.

When talking with perspective honors students, I often find myself coming back to the term “motivation.” It might be tempting to say that honors is a culture composed of motivated individuals. However, after reflecting upon the individuals who most embody what I think of as honors culture, I contend that motivation is not the dominant trait. We surely all know students who are motivated, either by internal or external factors, but are not at all interested in taking risks or in stepping outside their comfort zone academically, socially, or culturally. Indeed, I am reminded of students I knew both as an undergraduate and as a faculty member who were highly motivated to be the best whatever (fill in the blank with your favorite profession) but did not want to take any course that might somehow thwart or slow their progress toward their job/graduate school/professional school. They were motivated by their personal economies and expended all their capital (time, emotion, mental energy) on their prescribed goals, looking for the least expensive (easiest grades, least amount of time, least challenging) way to satisfy any additional requirements. In my experience, such students are least likely to be interested in the challenges of honors education.

Students in honors are willing to take intellectual risks both in their discipline and outside of it; they enjoy the challenge. They are the exceptional English students who revel in discussions of quantum mechanics and the outstanding engineers who can't read enough history. Their personal economies guide them to get the most out of their undergraduate education. Sure, sometimes they are bored or turned off by topics they view as irrelevant to their education, but they are willing to explore and often find themselves surprised at their interest. They're willing to take the risk.

And what about faculty members? Do they take intellectual risks? The question is a bit thorny as we explore an honors culture that is universal enough to include the broad spectrum of honors curricula from totally interdisciplinary models to those that have their academic content solely within disciplinary departments. In the University of Maine Honors College, where the curriculum is constructed around a four-semester core multidisciplinary sequence, faculty members have to take intellectual risks. They are teaching texts and facilitating discussions in areas that are far outside their academic silos. In one semester, students are studying topics that include Dutch genre painting, evolution, nineteenth-century American poetry, and Marxism. Preceptors in the course, who include chemists, sociologists, and economists, are all taking intellectual risks. Faculty members teaching disciplinary honors courses also take risks, often pedagogical in nature, e.g., experimenting with new teaching methods, adopting new texts, or expanding the scope of a

course. The thirst for new ideas evidenced by their students pushes all of these faculty members, regardless of the course content, to expand their repertoires, to take risks.

If intellectual risk-taking is a fundamental characteristic of honors culture, it makes sense to ask why it arises in the disparate models of honors in place at the disparate institutions we inhabit. I would argue that intellectual risk-taking is catalyzed by another important and pervasive facet of honors culture, which I can best introduce with an example. Several years ago, a faculty member, having taught departmental-based service courses for years, started teaching in our multidisciplinary core sequence. About two weeks into the first semester, he came into my office expressing his delight with teaching in honors: “For the first time in my life, all of the students in the class are there because they want to be!” Suddenly what should have been obvious became clear to me: both students and faculty are involved in honors because they want to be. Students choose to accept our invitations or apply for admission to honors; they aren’t forced to do so (this is the major reason I refuse to have honors-linked scholarships, but that’s another essay). They elect to take these risks. Likewise, faculty choose to teach honors courses or to be part of an honors faculty. An honors culture that was not based on this idea of self-selection—among qualified candidates, of course—would not foster the intellectual risk-taking that I perceive to be at the heart of honors.

Having gone this far without addressing my principal audience is probably a bad idea. What role do honors administrators play in this culture? I contend that administrators play a key role in establishing this honors culture. More than any other unit administrators, honors directors and deans are personally involved with the faculty, students, curricula, and graduates of their programs and colleges. They establish the personality—dare I say the culture?—of honors at their institutions. While this is particularly true for new or revitalized honors programs, it holds true even for more established ones. Administrators have often taken risks themselves: leaving their academic departments, stepping off the tenure-and-promotion train, starting a new and usually under-funded program. They not only personify but also perpetuate honors culture when they recruit faculty and students by extolling the rewards and opportunities that derive from this risky intellectual business we call honors.

Most of us involved in honors could provide numerous illustrations of those rewards and opportunities. Here is one that I find irresistible. To graduate from honors, our students must write a thesis. In itself a thesis is not necessarily a risk; for most, while it is a stretch, at least it involves the discipline in which they have been trained. However, in addition to completing their thesis and then defending it before a five-person committee, they must also

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create and discuss a reading list consisting of twelve to fifteen texts, defined liberally, that “have played a significant role in their academic development.” The second hour of their oral defense is an extended conversation based on their reading list. I am always struck by the trepidation with which students view both the construction of the list and the subsequent discussion. From their perspective, they are taking a great risk, baring their academic and sometimes personal souls in front of five well educated and experienced elders. By this point in their honors careers, they are willing to take the risk. Even though they are already part of an intellectually risk-taking culture, this experience still makes them anxious, and anxiety is always a component of risk.

Many of the discussions about reading lists are captivating. In a complete role reversal, the student is intellectually engaging five faculty members without any peers for support. The conversation starts with the annotated reading list provided by the thesis student and often winds up several academic light-years away. The interconnections among the texts and their intersections with the interests of the student and committee members become richer as the discussion progresses. Our students come out of the experience on a tremendous high, one that is a direct consequence of intellectual risk-taking.

A culture of individuals who take intellectual risks and who participate in this community only because they choose to: does this completely describe the honors culture? As a mathematician—you knew I would get that in here somewhere—I might suggest these are necessary conditions, but they are not sufficient. Certainly they do not entirely characterize honors culture, but I am comfortable suggesting that they must exist in honors culture. I trust my colleagues will not only provide those other three cornerstones but will shore up mine or, if necessary, replace it completely.

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