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Editor's Introduction

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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Faculty new to higher education have entered a world already circumscribed by assessment practices that may seem normal and transparent, but the increasing impacts of these practices have redefined the content as well as contours of teaching and learning in the three or more decades since they started to take hold. Administrations, boards of trustees, accrediting agencies, and legislatures have insisted on accountability without necessarily having experience in what is being accounted for and have fostered a distrust of faculty members as the authorities on their own practices. As a result, higher education has been undergoing the kind of cultural upheaval that took place in elementary and secondary education more than fifty years ago.

Honors programs may have been slower than most academic units to feel the impacts of the accountability movement since they have traditionally carved out their own space for innovation, personal attention, original research, sense of community, and liberal-arts culture within the larger institution, but assessment has come to honors in a big way during the past decade and is now virtually universal in honors programs and colleges. Honors administrators have often tried to take control of the process by developing their own assessment systems—sometimes successfully, sometimes not. In either case, discussions of assessment in honors now tend to focus on the best ways to do it, not on whether it should be done or how it is changing the climate of honors, so it is important to ask these basic questions, and Joan Digby, who has seen it all, both asks and answers.

Digby leads off the *JNCHC* Forum on “Rubrics, Templates, and Measurable Outcomes in Honors” with her essay “My Objections to Outcome [Note the Singular] Assessment.” A Call for Papers went out on the NCHC website and listserv and in the NCHC E-Newsletter, inviting members to contribute to the Forum. The Call included a list of questions that Forum contributors might consider:

Have rubrics and templates made teaching in honors easier or harder? What is the purpose of rubrics (or templates or both)? Whom do they benefit and how? What does a teacher's use of rubrics imply about his or her image of students? What does it imply about a teacher's philosophy of learning? Are rubrics and templates inherently inconsistent with creativity? Under what circumstances are rubrics

(or templates) appropriate and effective in honors education? Do rubrics help students understand what a teacher expects of them, and is this understanding an asset or detriment to good education? What cultural, social, and/or educational trend(s) gave rise to the use of rubrics, templates, and/or quantitative outcomes assessment? Have rubrics and templates improved the quality of honors education, and how? Given the requirements that legislatures, administrations, and the public have made for accountability of academic programs, what are the alternatives to quantifiable data? Is there a generation gap (or a gender gap) among teachers in attitudes about rubrics and templates and measurable outcomes?

The Forum includes four responses to the Call for Papers in addition to Digby's lead essay. To one degree or other, all the responses take issue with Digby and defend measurable outcomes and rubrics.

In both style and content, Digby's essay represents the passion, creativity, and intelligence that we associate with honors, spiced up with humor and a dash of vitriol. With the "tools" of etymology, history, literature, and common sense, she does battle against the tools of rubrics, templates, and measurable outcomes, decrying the reductive, fill-in-the-boxes nature of assessment whereby students become quantifiable data rather than original thinkers. Digby argues that "if we don't defend the virtues of imagination and spontaneity in our classes, we will all be teaching from rigid syllabi according to rubrics and templates spelled out week by week as teachers of fifth-grade classes are forced to do." Her essay is a call to action against the "absurdly regimented, generally fictitious, and misnamed goals and objectives" that kill inspiration and turn education into busywork.

Annmarie Guzy begins and ends her response to Digby's essay with her confession that she measures outcomes and that she might be like Digby's young colleagues at LIU Post: "rather than shouting from the parapet against measurable outcomes, I acknowledge with a grumble, a sigh, and a rolling of my eyes that number-crunching is a permanent part of today's academia." In "An Effective Honors Composition Class Improves Honors Retention Rates: Outcomes and Statistical Prestidigitation," she describes the usefulness of some kinds of data collection, such as the graduation rates of her former honors composition students at the University of South Alabama; at the same time, she objects to the use of such data to dictate teaching methods or to standardize course content. Numbers are useful but also potentially

dangerous, and they are not a substitute for thoughtful discussion and analysis of what is effective in the classroom.

While Guzy offers a highly qualified and restricted defense of objective measurements, Beata Jones and Catherine Wehlburg of Texas Christian University are enthusiastic and unqualified advocates of rubrics and assessment in their essay "Learning Outcomes Assessment Misunderstood: Glass Half-Empty or Half-Full." They argue that learning outcomes and ways to measure progress toward them are essential to good teaching; otherwise, they write, we cannot know if students are learning what we want them to learn or even know what it is that we want them to learn. In support of outcomes assessment as a valuable educational tool, they provide a long list of its advantages to teaching and learning in honors. They compare the responses of resistant faculty to the stages of grief over death or loss, contending that the time has come for acceptance because outcomes assessment is both inevitable and desirable.

Like Jones and Wehlberg, Giovanna Walters of Minnesota State University, Mankato, defends the use of rubrics as important to good teaching in her essay "On Assessment, Imagination, and Agency: Using Rubrics to Inform and Negotiate the Honors Experience." Walters argues that the design of rubrics is, in itself, an act of creativity when it produces "a working, fluid, and negotiable document that allows students to pursue success in a variety of ways; it should state what students need to accomplish without being prescriptive in how they get to that point." She further argues that teachers, like students, cannot know if they are successful in meeting their goals if they do not know in advance what their goals are. Rubrics provide a means to define the goals and measure success, ensuring accountability in a way that provides necessary guidance to teachers as well as students.

We conclude the Forum on "Rubrics, Templates, and Measurable Outcomes in Honors" with an interesting suggestion of how to reconcile rubrics with student-centered learning and empowerment. In "Collaborative Design: Building Task-Specific Rubrics in the Honors Classroom," Ce Rosenow describes an innovative strategy she uses at Lane Community College for blending rubrics with creativity. In her capstone honors seminar, the students design the rubrics themselves, collaborating with each other to develop the criteria by which they will be assessed, making them part of the assessment process rather than the targets of it. While Digby describes rubrics as a means "to measure students based on preconceived expectations," if the students themselves establish the expectations, then rubrics can become a space for

critical thinking, creativity, and active learning. Rosenow offers specific and useful ideas about how to incorporate her collaborative approach to rubrics into various components of an honors seminar, including a final symposium.

An analogy to foreign travel arises from the essays in this Forum. Digby advocates unscheduled travel in which the voyager has a sense of the territory but chooses to wait and discover what there is to find. In contrast, most of the responders use rubrics and measurements as a kind of preset itinerary to make sure that they arrive on time at the places they have decided to find.

The first research essay in this *JNCHC* issue is “Using Iceland as a Model for Interdisciplinary Honors Study” by Kim Andersen and Gary Thorgaard, who advocate a holistic approach to honors-level study: “Interdisciplinary teaching always focuses on disciplines as well as the connections between them, the ‘disciplinary’ being balanced by the ‘inter.’ What is sought is another consciousness, a practical understanding liberated from disciplinary perspectives.” They offer the example of an upper-division course on Iceland they have taught in the Washington State University Honors College. In this course, Andersen’s research background in Icelandic sagas and Thorgaard’s in the genetics of fish broadened into a focus on “culture, environment, genetics, and economics.” Along with a reflection on the nature and value of interdisciplinary study, the authors have provided a model for a place-based, interdisciplinary honors course and a fascinating analysis of the bridge between Iceland’s past and present.

In “Generative Intersections: Supporting Honors through College Composition,” Heather C. Camp of Minnesota State University, Mankato, provides arguments in favor of maintaining first-year composition as a key component of honors education. She notes that the increase in Advanced Placement courses and dual-enrollment programs has led to the gradual displacement of first-year composition in honors programs, a trend that has diminished the quality of education we offer our students and worked to the detriment of their future success. She suggests that three recent developments in the field of writing studies should make first-year composition more valuable to honors programs than in the past: “the field’s increased attentiveness to reading as an area of emphasis, its growing interest in metacognition and learning transfer, and its potential for facilitating digital engagement.” Honors administrators who have allowed composition to atrophy within their curriculum would do well to take another look at the value of first-year honors composition.

The final two essays in this issue of *JNCHC* focus on honors education at community colleges, starting with “Honors and the Completion Agenda:

Identifying and Duplicating Student Success” by Jay Trucker of the Community College of Baltimore County, Dundalk Campus. Having noticed that “many of today’s honors success stories at CCBC were yesterday’s dropouts and underachievers,” Trucker designed a research project that, after tracking the success of developmental students in honors at all the campuses of CCBC, recommended strategies for recruiting for honors from that population of students. He argues that honors can help developmental students succeed in college, provide the advantage of honors to a larger population of potentially strong students, boost the size of the honors program, increase the program’s diversity, and improve the transfer and graduation rates of the institution. Based on his research, Trucker suggests that honors programs in two-year and/or open-admissions colleges would benefit from “partnering with developmental education and college orientation programs, institutionalizing the solicitation of honors recommendations, and enlisting honors program students to serve as unofficial travel guides.”

Finally, in “Why Honors is a Hard Sell in the Community College,” Deborah Engelen-Eigles and Janice Levinsohn Milner of Century College echo some of the themes in Jay Trucker’s research. The authors address the seeming contradiction between the academic focus of honors and the current tendency to define the role of community colleges as job-training for low-level employment. They suggest a subversive role for honors programs at community colleges given their potential to disrupt the social, racial, and intellectual stratification that starts in grade school and hardens in the implicit tracking that takes place in college options. Honors programs can address and rectify the often false assumptions by and about students at two-year colleges.

