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Richard Badenhausen

Westminster College, rjb@westminstercollege.edu

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Shunning Complaint: A Call for Solutions from the Honors Community

RICHARD BADENHAUSEN

Westminster College

Abstract: While members of the academy are particularly adept at complaining and poking holes in most proposals that cross their paths, we are less comfortable with offering solutions. This essay asks members of the honors community to consider some of the major challenges facing honors education today and propose solutions that might be adapted on a variety of campuses. Rather than asking respondents to take up rather straightforward issues that commonly face honors program and colleges, this piece urges readers to dig into more intractable problems like access, mental health, innovation, and the position of honors on campus.

Keywords: honors, challenges, administration, innovation, liberal education

Academics are really good at complaining. We poke holes in proposals, tear away at suggestions, and like nothing more than bringing down a project with which we disagree. These tendencies are partly habitual, and we are also falling back on our training, having spent many years sifting through arguments, exposing the weak underbelly of positions, and burying opponents in counterarguments. We often call this behavior “critical thinking” although sometimes the word “critical” can cut a few different ways. Among the many reasons it is hard to enact change in colleges and universities, our habit of criticizing proposals surely plays a role in slowing things down.

Such conduct should not surprise: the academy has always been grounded in this kind of rigorous, aggressive, critical reflection that often highlights objection and refutation. From Plato’s account of Socrates playing the gadfly and peppering his companions with challenging questions to Zadie Smith’s portrayal of feuding professors in her delightful novel *On Beauty*, we have many models of intellectual disputation from which to choose. The very

academic air we breathe seems infused with complaint. When an NCHC committee asked me to write a brief Forum piece on challenges faced by the honors community, I encountered no shortage of voices listing the ways our industry is beset by dire circumstances. When it came time to discuss solutions, though, the room grew quiet.

To counter that silence, I would like to generate a Forum discussion around solutions. My plan is to enumerate significant challenges faced by those of us in honors and encourage respondents to pick one or another weighty problem and lay out the path through that challenge. I invite writers to provide a map that helps us navigate particularly significant challenges in the belief that such guidance will benefit our honors colleagues throughout the country and around the globe. Because so many of us face common problems, I am asking us to put aside our critical lens for a moment in this discussion, identify a challenge, and unfold a solution, which Emerson personified in his poem “Solution” as a “muse” who can “lead / Bards to speak what nations need” (173–74).

In the last decade, I have served as a visiting consultant or reviewer at sixteen campuses with honors programs or honors colleges. The task is fun and interesting but also difficult, for it combines the relational work of getting strangers to open up about their everyday professional lives with the strategic work of sifting through dozens of pages of interview notes to pull out the handful of key areas the institution should focus on. The interview subjects—students, faculty, staff, and administrators—are always particularly good at identifying problems. Sometimes I feel more like a therapist than a program reviewer. The problems can typically be divided into two categories: 1) granular, tangible, manageable problems that have clear, relatively easy solutions, which thus provide the opportunity for “quick wins” in administrative parlance; and 2) larger, more intractable, sticky problems that have no easy answers and require complex solutions, strategic thinking, long-term effort, and collaboration with multiple units. Most of our institutions are resistant to this type of work, and many administrators, including those in honors, who first trained as teachers do not naturally possess the skillsets necessary to navigate such challenges.

In that first category of manageable problems that often surface during peer reviews, I include a lack of community among students, a stale curriculum, an absent or incoherent mission, uninspiring programming, bad advising, and poor leadership. These self-inflicted wounds have internal causes and can be worked on directly. Such issues surface repeatedly as topics of interest in the program of our annual conference, where sessions provide excellent playbooks for how to overcome the challenges.

Other issues have more external sources—lack of appropriate resources; administrative neglect or, its other extreme, administrative meddling; incompetent admissions offices or enrollment management outfits that play too large a role in determining the size and makeup of an honors cohort—but they have similarly tangible solutions. These solutions are a little harder because they require engagement and negotiation with external constituencies, but they are not intractable problems and are often addressed in NCHC’s “Basic Characteristics.” Some are simply a matter of degree: living on the extreme edges of problems (with a program that possesses too many or too few students, for example), many of us search for a Goldilocks situation of getting things “just right,” or in more academic terms, we hope to follow Aristotle’s path in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he proposes famously that “virtue aims at the median” (43). Just as moral qualities can be destroyed by deficiencies or overabundance, so too can our programs suffer from extremities of degree.

For this Forum, though, I ask writers to take up our larger collective challenges and dig into a conversation about how we can go at them as individuals, as programs, as institutions, and as a membership organization. Here are some examples:

- How do we create pathways into our honors programs and colleges for students from underrepresented groups when faced with the reality that honors programs and colleges are still predominantly white? In what ways do our practices ignore the monumental demographic shifts taking place in our country and universities, and how might we better serve all members of our communities? The statistics indicate that we seem to be ignoring the significant shifts taking place in our country and universities while also indicating that our programs are not serving all members of our communities.
- How do we directly address the fact that many of the students sitting in our classrooms are overwhelmed by mental health problems, difficult family responsibilities, and economic challenges? It is hard for students to unpack the meaning of a sonnet with a group of peers or study for a difficult physics exam when they are beset by anxiety, holding down two part-time jobs, and plagued by food insecurity.
- How should we manage external headwinds created by the dual beasts of concurrent enrollment and equivalency credit awarded for performance on AP or IB exams? This trend shows no sign of abating and threatens to make some honors programs—particularly those in which

the curriculum satisfies general education requirements—superfluous or redundant, given that the most likely consumers of these transfer equivalency credits will be the high-achieving students who typically get funneled toward honors.

- On a related matter, how should those of us in public institutions that are beholden to legislatures respond to legislators' ignorance or indifference to the value of honors education? For example, in some cases federal aid dollars may not be applied to coursework that is outside the major or does not apply directly to a degree. Should we adapt our programs to align with these constraints, or should we push back aggressively against such limitations? What would such resistance look like?
- How should we innovate inside and outside our classrooms in a world that claims to reward innovation but defines that term in narrow ways, often in ways that emphasize minimizing costs and eroding quality? If we are to innovate, how does the honors community do a better job of taking credit for and owning the innovation, given our mixed track record in that regard? While we have often been leaders in areas like experiential and place-based learning, interdisciplinary education, and civic engagement, we have not typically been directly associated with those practices in the higher education industry and have been left behind by groups like AAC&U, which have done a far better job of branding work like "high-impact learning practices" that have been a staple of honors education for decades.
- How do we put honors programs and colleges at the center of the institutional lives of our colleges and universities, not simply as a "laboratory" where faculty might "experiment" with new ways of teaching that might eventually drift "across campus," to use the language of NCHC's "Basic Characteristics," but as essential and central units to which institutions look for leadership and on which the institutions depend?
- How should we situate honors education in a culture that devalues the written word, has little time or patience for reflection and critical thinking, valorizes violence against those among us with the least amount of power, and imagines that truth itself as something of little consequence? What responsibility do we have to orient our work with students toward these horrors?

Many other conundrums are worth identifying, and I am asking colleagues to wrestle with the hard problems that possess no clean, easy, obvious solutions.

How should the honors community respond to these challenges? What is an honors director or dean to do?

I realize that solutions to complex, sometimes intractable problems are not easy. The word “solution” does not appear in any of Shakespeare’s works, not even once. Certainly his characters are beset by many problems, so we would assume someone would eventually show up on stage to trot out a couple of solutions. While the plays have no shortage of Polonius-like characters proposing fixes that end up making matters worse, no one actually uses the specific word, as if Shakespeare realized that the world we inhabit is so complex and vexing and the human beings within that “great globe” so imperfect that he could not stomach writing the word “solutions.” I nevertheless feel that our honors community is equipped to step in and help. We are made up of optimists who care deeply about the learning environment of the classroom, the craft of teaching, and the well-being of students. We are a charitable bunch who like to get things done, even in the face of meddling by the Menos of the world, those who are so certain in their definitions of excellence but who are really mired in *doxa* or mere opinion. The antidote to such foolishness, according to William Deresiewicz, is liberal education, for it “liberates us from *doxa* by teaching us to recognize it, to question it, and to think our way around it” (80).

I’m done complaining; now have at it.

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The author may be contacted at
rjb@westminstercollege.edu.