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Risky Honors

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Abstract: Most educators today are likely to proclaim a commitment to teaching critical thinking. Willingness to take intellectual risks such as questioning orthodox teachings or proposing unconventional solutions is an important component of critical thinking and the larger project of liberal education, yet the reward structures of educational institutions may actually function to discourage such risk-taking. In light of the extra importance placed on grades and high-stakes entrance exams in an increasingly competitive educational marketplace, this problem might presumably be magnified among honors students. This essay concludes by calling on honors educators and other interested parties to contribute their voices, their questions, and their proposed solutions to a new *JNCHC* Forum focusing on the tension among talented students between taking intellectual risks and a desire to avoid the personal struggle and possible failure that sometimes come from taking such risks.

Keywords: collegiate honors, intellectual risk-taking, failure, courage, critical thinking

Students, especially the bright and sensitive ones, need to go through a necessarily painful period of self-analysing, of reexamining values, of questioning the safe and easy. . . . Not all students in the honors program achieved this awakening. Sadly, there were two whose autobiographies revealed they had chosen to stay wrapped snugly in a cocoon of acceptable grades. With little insight, courage, or self-confidence, they chose to make their college experience scarcely more than a superficial encounter with courses and examinations dutifully and successfully passed.

—James H. Robertson, “The Superior Student: Characteristics, Aspirations, and Needs”

But it does move.

—Galileo

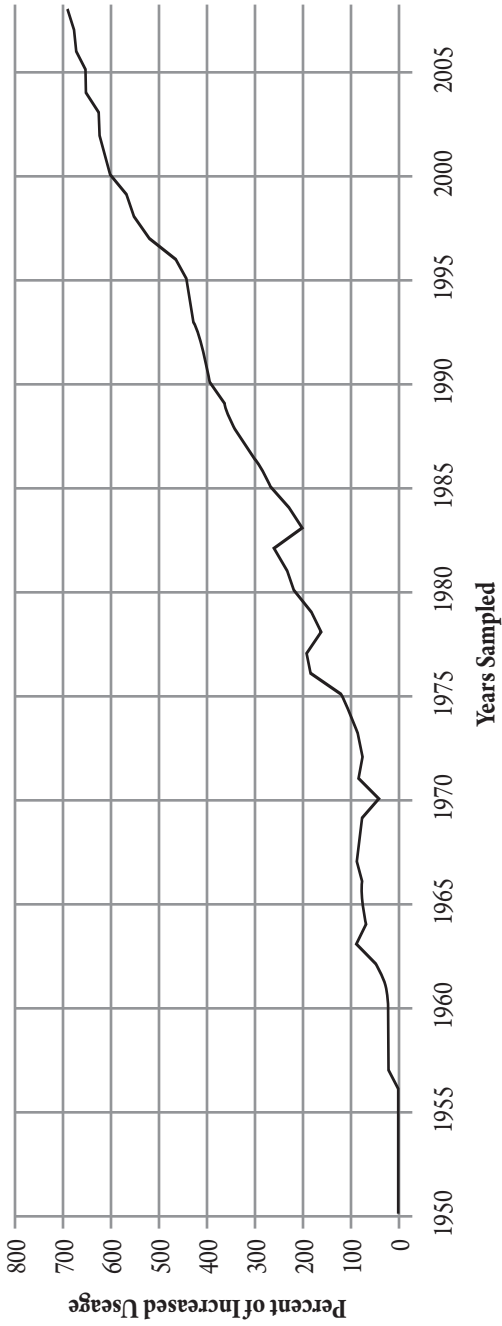
I'm going to go out on a limb: I don't think that we in the honors community do a very good job of managing risk. Risk management has become a bit de rigueur in recent decades. Figure 1 presents a Google Ngram tracking published occurrences of the phrase "risk management" over time. Use of the phrase popped onto the scene sometime in the middle of the last century, started to gain traction in the 1960s, and increased dramatically after that. By 2005, occurrences of the phrase were about fifteen times what they were around 1970.

Most of the time, talk of risk management concerns the risk of financial or other material loss. The *Oxford English Dictionary* entry for "risk management" links the first usage to a 1948 publication in the *Journal of Marketing*. The risk I'm talking about, however, has more to do with concern about the loss of status, which many people might care about even more than financial wealth. Conversations about risk can easily overlook status since it does not occupy space in the same way that corporate assets or navy fleets do, even though many status markers can and do occupy space. Status generally exists in social space, and so it is harder to pin down. We all have some kind of status within social space, but generally what we want is the high kind; as elusive as the criteria for reputable status may be, most of us know that we want the high and not the low kind. Attainment of high status usually requires considerable time and effort while losing status can happen overnight. One bad grade, one crazy idea or interpretation, one misstep can easily shatter the image that we have deliberately tried to construct of ourselves as responsible, smart, cool, successful, or whatever trait is the basis for status in a given setting.

A casual search online for the word "risk" reveals no shortage of inspirational quotations from a who's who of famous and historical figures from Anaïs Nin to T. S. Eliot to Herodotus to Mark Zuckerberg. Some of these quotations are of dubious origin, but the volume of pithy passages urging us to take risks in order to stretch ourselves, to accomplish "great deeds," or to discover "how far one can go" is striking. The spirit behind these simple messages seems to capture a cultural truism that is, if not universal, nonetheless widely held. Galileo, Gandhi, Parks, Tiananmen Tank Man: we celebrate those who take risks for ideas that matter and in so doing elevate us all.

Taking risks is not for the faint of heart, though, which probably has something to do with all of the quotations urging us to do so. Most of us aren't that jazzed about taking risks. Risks take courage, persistence, and a willingness to lose something of importance: maybe financial standing, maybe reputation, maybe freedom, maybe life itself.

FIGURE 1. GOOGLE NGRAM OF "RISK MANAGEMENT," 1950-2005



Source: Google Ngram Viewer <<http://books.google.com/ngrams>>; See Michel et al. (2011).

Most educators today are likely to proclaim a commitment to teaching critical thinking, and doing that right is a risky proposition. Yet willingness to suffer exposure to threatening material or to question orthodox teachings, propose unconventional solutions, or question one's own assumptions are important components of critical thinking and the larger project of liberal education. In Joseph W. Cohen's edited collection *The Superior Student in American Higher Education*, Robertson (1966) aptly captures the importance of threat and risk:

Specifically, the abler students want to be involved in a meaningful dialogue with their instructor, their peers, and with themselves; they want to be "threatened," i.e., compelled to question and to reexamine. . . . (p. 54)

Quoting from an honors student at the University of North Carolina, Robertson continues:

[T]he classroom experience must pose a threat. The student must be threatened; he must be driven outside himself; he must be compelled to question himself and his values and the values of those among whom he lives. (p. 54)

Yet the reward structures of formal educational institutions may function to discourage such risk-taking and willingness to endure threat, and so I wonder just how much Robertson's claim describes what honors students today actually want versus some romanticized version of what he and I hope they will want.

Whether we like it or not, and whether our own vision for honors flows from the noble impulse for erudition rather than the mundane impulse for elitism, honors education is implicated in these concerns. The extra importance placed on grades and entrance exams in an increasingly competitive educational marketplace might magnify this problem among honors students. We live in a moment that encourages aspiring middle-class youth to pursue higher and higher levels of education, with a growing interest in the idea of universal post-secondary education. Whether the whispers of "college for all" are mere political lip service, and whether they are realistic or desirable, higher education is clearly a high-stakes enterprise, and grades are the most visible currency in that enterprise. "Is that going to be on the test?" "What is my grade?" "How much is that assignment worth?"—these are questions that many educators will recognize, perhaps especially from honors students.

While it is hard to quantify, some measure of the desire among students—and the parents who advise them from the shadows—to join an honors program is probably the status and distinction that such membership confers. As educators, many of us will advise students about the importance of taking intellectual risks, asking penetrating questions about theories, and challenging our claims and those of their peers in class, but we should hardly be surprised if students are suspicious of that advice. At the end of the semester, they know that we grade them. That kind of environment does not exactly encourage what we say we value, and so we need to seek strategies that allow us to ameliorate the tension that talented, creative, and conscientious students experience in balancing risk and reputation.

A colleague of mine in the honors college at St. Mary's College has for many years used what she calls an "automatic A" policy in her college writing classes. The policy comes with several fairly rigid parameters, so it is not the easy-A situation it sounds like on its face. For example, students must have near-perfect class attendance, and the policy on late submission of papers and other assignments is unforgiving: if students submit their work late or with missing elements, or if they exceed their small allowance of absences, they lose the right to an automatic A. Students can still earn an A under a fallback system of rules that looks more like the one on a standard syllabus, but an A is no longer "automatic." As she explains it, the idea is to set up the classroom with a sense of heightened responsibility: treat the class seriously by meeting or exceeding the basic requirements. Thus, those students who meet and exceed these basic expectations of professionalism enjoy wide latitude to experiment with their writing and can be bold in their expression of ideas.

I, too, have experimented with my colleague's idea on certain assignments in honors seminars that are writing-intensive. I wonder if the approach works in writing-intensive or similar humanities courses better than in others, but I like the idea of starting a relationship with students based on the assumption that they will succeed, as opposed to setting up the classroom with an expectation that students must prove that they're not failures. The strategy may be somewhat of a rhetorical ploy, such as articulating an "academic fraud" policy instead as an "academic honesty" policy, but I believe that words matter, so I am delighted with the simple beauty of turning the grade distribution on its head right before students' eyes and highlighting the A rather than the threat of F. To solve big problems, we sometimes need to think outside of the proverbial box, turn the box upside down, or maybe even break it down and see what else we can make.

