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Misplaced Modifier: Honors Students and Honors Education

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The challenge posed by for-profit educators to the existing system is a real one that is not likely to go away any time soon and is, in fact, likely to intensify. Gary Bell's essay is a thoughtful exegesis on how we came to this point. He roots his narrative in the explosion of the profit motive, citing several instances of privatization in other industries here and in other countries. Bell understandably laments that the wave of privatization has made its way to the shores of honors education, and he spends considerable time dissecting the argument of start-ups like American Honors. In calling attention to these issues, he has done a useful service to the honors community.

I harbor many of Bell's predispositions. I share his belief in the transformative power of higher education. As one of its products, I see publicly funded higher education as a necessary public good, a means by which Americans should have the right to self-improvement. I see accessible higher education as more important than ever to keeping our democratic traditions alive, our shared cultures preserved, and our workforce globally competitive. I decry the continued losses in public funding for higher education, and I share Bell's wariness toward outside efforts to offer honors educational experiences to colleges and universities in a turn-key, soup-to-nuts fashion.

In the spirit of good historical debate, however, I would frame the narrative differently and therefore diagnose the problem and solution differently as well. While Bell's argument has its roots in the Progressive movement's faith in the power of government to solve social ills, I believe it might be useful to view the dilemma in the context of two different historical narratives. The first is the longstanding struggle for accessible, affordable education that dates back to the founding of the republic, a struggle I see as often explicitly related to social and workforce development. Early advocates Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Rush couched their advocacy of public education in terms of public goods like civic literacy and economic development. The advent of land-grant institutions and the first explosion of higher education at the end of the nineteenth century were tied directly to industrialization, and the second expansion

after World War II was related to the GI Bill, which was aimed at retraining and absorbing the returning military population. To be sure, educators along the way have advocated the holistic pursuits of an enlightenment education, but the arguments that have tended to carry the day in legislatures typically deal with local and regional economies. In this sense, the current demands on higher education are only the latest chapter in a long debate over the purpose and value of education.

What I think is new, however, is the disruptive (yes, I used that word) technology of the Internet, and I would like to situate our issue in the history of communication technology in this country, which itself has been a tale of successive disruptions. In the twentieth century alone, we have witnessed the rise of new communication technologies that that have created, recreated, and decimated whole industries. The advent of film all but wiped out a thriving vaudeville circuit; the rise of radio grievously wounded orchestras, big bands, and other live performers; and the spread of television transformed radio (as the networks migrated to television to survive) and weakened Hollywood until the studios decided to embrace, rather than attempt to strangle, the new medium. Now we are living in a digital age, the impact of which we cannot fully comprehend. We have already seen a galvanic impact on existing industries such as journalism, music, and film, as well as the creation/expansion of whole new industries such as social media and gaming. What the digital age portends for higher education we still cannot see; what is clear, however, is that challenges by American Honors and other for-profits would not exist without the ability to offer their education online.

The current demands placed on higher education, combined with the profound developments of the digital age, come at a time when the economy has presented significant challenges to higher education. During and after the Great Recession, tuition costs have escalated as many states continue to cut funding for public higher education. Tuition at private colleges in particular continues to skyrocket even as they claim that the tuition they charge is not able to pay for the student's education (Chow). As students graduate with increasingly large amounts of debt and still dismal job prospects, uncomfortable questions arise. In a 2013 report, the Center for College Affordability and Productivity claimed that almost half of college graduates in America in 2010 were in positions that did not require a college degree and that 37% were in jobs that required at most a high school diploma ("Underemployment of College Graduates"). A Gallup-Lumina study published in 2014 revealed that 77% of Americans believe that American higher education has become unaffordable for those who need it while seven in ten business leaders say that they would consider hiring someone who has no degree over someone who has one ("What America Needs to Know"). When coupled with the research presented

in the blockbuster *Academically Adrift*, which suggests that students are not learning much in college, the context for challenges to the traditional college experience becomes clearer.

In this context, I am not surprised that honors education is being challenged since my impression is that honors programs historically have not fared well during difficult times for higher education and have been vulnerable in periods of retrenchment unless protected or supported by a powerful benefactor or generous endowment. When short-sighted administrators look for places to cut during hard times, I have seen “non-essential” programs like honors be hit the hardest if they are viewed as a luxury, an add-on, an extravagance—in other words, if they are seen as peripheral to the core mission of the institution. The health of honors budgets is a constant concern as evidenced in NCHC conference sessions and publications (see the *JNCHC* Forum on “The Economy of Honors”). The allure of American Honors and other for-profit initiatives illustrates this vulnerability most effectively: their offer to community colleges to outsource honors offers a way out for colleges that want to keep honors but do not want to pay for it.

I would argue that our peculiar vulnerability is in large part our own doing. In structuring our programs primarily to cater to a subset of the population, namely honors students, we almost by default place ourselves on the periphery of the institutional mission, not to mention leaving ourselves open to perennial charges of elitism. If we begin with the assumption that our programs and colleges first have to define and identify “honors” by some pre-established criteria like GPA, SAT/ACT, and/or interviews, and we then figure out what extra or different features to provide them, then we begin at a disadvantage when making the case for our centrality of our to the university mission. We threaten to weaken this tenuous relationship further when we implement additional initiatives that further segregate honors from the rest of the institution (Selingo 2).

I believe that the best way to protect ourselves in this environment is to wrap ourselves in the mission of our institutions, to situate ourselves so deeply in the institution’s DNA that it would be almost impossible to remove us. One way to achieve this objective is to rethink the honors modifier (and hence the emphasis). If we focus first on defining honors education as the most cutting-edge pedagogy at the institution and then define our students as those who are willing to take these courses, we position ourselves for stronger integration into our institutions. Such an approach would weaken charges of elitism by making us open to all students who have the willingness and academic confidence to tolerate the experimental nature of honors courses, and it would also place honors at the heart of academic innovation, providing a clearer relationship between innovation and the general curriculum. More specifically, it

would enable honors to reclaim much of the pedagogical innovation that has already been developed and is now being touted by AAC&U and others as High Impact Practices (HIPs). Reclaiming HIPs as honors education would enable honors to play a central role in the path-breaking research that suggests that these pedagogical approaches can have transformative effects on under-represented and underserved populations.

Fortunately, such a position follows and supports a strain of thinking that has been present in the honors community for several decades. Indeed, #13 of the NCHC's Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program recommends that honors serve "as a laboratory within which faculty feel welcome to experiment with new subjects, approaches, and pedagogies. . . . [which] can serve as prototypes for initiatives that can become institutionalized across the campus." An honors program or college that follows this recommendation and is fully engaged in improving the teaching and learning environments for all students would be almost impossible to outsource.

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