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Meet the New Boss: An Honors Faculty Member Weathers Administrative Change

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Abstract: The author reflects on the role of honors faculty in effectively responding to short- and long-term administrative change, discussing the value of resistance to deleterious administrative decisions and offering advice for successfully navigating cyclical administrative shifts in honors.

Keywords: higher education—honors programs & colleges; educational leadership; teacher participation in administration; teacher-administrator relationships; University of South Alabama (AL)—Honors College

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I'll tip my hat to the new Constitution
Take a bow for the new revolution
Smile and grin at the change all around
Pick up my guitar and play
Just like yesterday
Then I'll get on my knees and pray
We don't get fooled again
—The Who

When John Zubizarreta's "A Defiant Honors Response to Regime Change" was first distributed through the NCHC email list, the piece landed squarely in the middle of my mid-career crisis. I had just marked my thirtieth anniversary as a postsecondary educator, having taught my first class as a master's student in 1992. I have been a professor and honors faculty member since 1999, and I am eighteen months removed from full retirement

eligibility. Like many academics, I am also acutely aware of national post-pandemic shifts regarding the work-life balance, known variously as the Great Resignation or quiet quitting or leaning out (the movement pushing back against former Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*), from which higher education has not been immune (see Doležal's "The Big Quit: Even Tenure-line Professors Are Leaving Academe"). Zubizarreta employs his considerable honors expertise and inimitable rhetorical skills to inspire other honors directors and deans to resist deleterious administrative decisions, and I would like to use the occasion of this forum, which coincides with the recent abrupt departure of my own institution's honors dean, to reflect on my role as a faculty member in responding to administrative change and the advice I might impart to other honors faculty facing tumultuous times.

Early in my career, I determined that I did not want to become an academic nomad, changing institutions and uprooting my family at the end of every six-year probationary cycle. I also gradually accepted that, as a neurodivergent gifted introvert, I possessed neither the professional ambition nor the personal inclination to advance my standing through pursuit of administrative positions. I have taught at my current institution since 1999, and, in the intervening years, I have worked for quite a number of bosses, including but not limited to three university presidents, three executive vice president/provosts, four deans of Arts and Sciences, three permanent and two interim department chairs, and three writing program administrators. My first year was also the first full year for my institution's honors program, which has since transitioned to a college, and I have worked with three honors directors, four assistant directors, one honors dean, and one interim dean as of this writing. All of these changes occurred for the usual reasons—retirement, resignation, change of position or institution, etc.—and each transition served as an inflection point for the direction of the respective unit, which faculty met with excitement and/or trepidation.

As to be expected, each new honors administrator prioritized short-term and long-term agenda items. Faculty and student advisory boards met more frequently or less frequently, student service requirements increased or decreased, and beloved social traditions faded away or were replaced with different events. Programmatic and pedagogical initiatives were explored and deployed, and some succeeded while others encountered resistance from students, parents, and faculty. After the initial honeymoon period, institutional inertia inevitably hindered progress, and then resources began to be

reallocated. Eventually, someone moved up the ladder or out the door, and another national search was announced. *Plus ça change.*

Zubizarreta's narrative emphasizes responding to and resisting extinction-level administrative decisions. When faced with such an abrupt or onerous change in honors, I assess my response options as a faculty member by considering three factors: how the change will affect my teaching, how the change will affect my students, and what I can do about it. For instance, this past spring, with six weeks remaining in the academic year, our honors college suddenly found itself without a dean. The honors faculty advisory committee convened in executive session, and while some of my colleagues deliberated crafting an official response concerning the dean's departure, I argued that my first priority was to discuss coverage responsibilities for approximately 40 scheduled senior thesis defenses, each of which required attendance from an honors college representative, so that those students would experience as little disruption as possible leading up to graduation.

While triaging acute change-related problems in honors will always compel whatever immediate attention is available, my deeper weariness and wariness stem more from chronic long-term issues institutional change can leave in their wake. For example, the honors curriculum at my institution has been modified several times over the past twenty years in order to streamline requirements and eliminate obstacles to graduation. When the program began, students completed 30 honors credit hours, comprised of 9 hours of required lower-level courses, 15 hours of electives, and 6 hours of senior thesis project. Under a subsequent administration, program hours were reduced to 24 by eliminating the 3 required lower-level courses and creating 3 1-hour seminars. Under yet another administration, electives were redistributed from 2 lower-level, 2 upper-level, and one of either to 1 lower-level, 1 upper-level, and 3 of either. I acknowledge the value of increasing honors completion rates (the goal of each of these curricular changes) from an upper administrative perspective: honors graduation rates impact overall institutional four-year graduation rates; however, I question how much the honors curriculum should be diluted in the service of that goal. One direct effect of such administrative changes on my teaching is that our previously required honors composition course now counts as a lower-level elective, which an increasing number of students who enter our program with dual enrollment credit elect not to take. Many of our honors students will, therefore, have no directed writing instruction beyond high school. Enrollment in my department's upper-division honors seminars has also decreased since the upper-division

requirement was halved; even my previously popular Hero's Journey honors seminar, which used to fill on the first day of registration, struggled to make enrollment in spring 2022, and my colleague's spring 2023 Post-Apocalypse seminar had to be cancelled due to low enrollment. Risk-averse students naturally prefer taking a lower-level elective that satisfies requirements for both honors and general education and that carries a less strenuous reading and writing load than an upper-level English elective.

Since my fundamental disinterest in pursuing an administrative career has limited my ability to effect change in programmatic policymaking decisions, I choose to focus my attention on personal forms of resistance. My first recommendation to honors faculty facing uncomfortable changes from either without or within honors is to cultivate an honors life outside of the institution. Participating in national, regional, and state honors conferences and taking advantage of online development opportunities through low-cost or no-cost honors institutes, colloquia, and webinars will help to forge connections with honors faculty at other institutions and provide fresh perspectives on acute and chronic problems. Reconnecting with my undergraduate honors alma mater, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, also provided insight into my foundational beliefs about honors education and why I have resisted some so-called "best practices" that have been attempted at my institution. Whatever information and materials are gathered from elsewhere can then be shared with honors administrators at home and serve as prompts for new approaches to resolving difficult programmatic dilemmas.

Diversification within one's institution is possible, as well. Unless faculty have a specific teaching or administrative appointment within honors, their main responsibility is to their academic unit. As passionate as I am about honors education, the majority of my workload happens outside of honors. Seventy percent of my teaching load is non-honors, and I serve on multiple committees at the department, college, and university level that are completely separate from honors. I maintain diverse disciplinary interests in rhetoric and technical communication, secondary composition pedagogy, horror studies, and young adult literature that I can shift among when I need a respite from debating the efficacy of an administrator's interpretation of best practices in honors. Also, because honors frequently operates on the willingness of faculty volunteers for anything from advisory boards and curriculum committees to major scholarship preparation and thesis mentoring, honors faculty face the potential for a substantial amount of uncompensated service work, especially in times of transition between administrators when

faculty feel pressed to pick up the slack. “Honors educators finding fulfillment in *doing it for the students*” is a common argument that frequently disguises the reality that faculty carry a significant load of unpaid emotional labor, a problem all the more serious for female faculty and BIPOC faculty, who are historically susceptible to service overloads; for example, see Shalaby, Allam, and Buttorff’s discussion of the pandemic’s added service burden for women faculty and its negative consequences for their careers (“Gender, COVID and Faculty Service”). I recommend that faculty list all their honors activities on the annual report, diligently determining the most appropriate categorization for teaching, research, and service most likely to optimize weighting in the final quantitative score used by administration to measure faculty productivity and effectiveness.

When all else fails, the appropriate faculty response, if I might indulge in a bit of denominalization, may be to Bartleby the situation, invoking the refrain of Melville’s infamous scrivener: “I would prefer not to.” Zubizarreta refers to the recent *Honors in Practice* article on “Professional Transitions in Honors: Challenges, Opportunities, and Tips” (Bhavsar et al.), which focuses on administrative transitions into and out of honors, but for honors faculty with no contracted honors appointment, the honors membrane is far more permeable. New initiatives do not always come with new resources, and faculty can choose whether or not to teach an honors class on overload, accept yet another committee appointment, participate in twice as many application interviews, or attend an increasing number of community events. Sometimes, the preferable course of action is to “lean out,” keep your head down, attend to your business, and let the administrators handle it.

In the end, the most productive strategy that faculty have for weathering administrative change, whether short-term or long-term, is to promote open and transparent communication among honors administrators, staff, faculty, students, and disciplinary deans, chairs, and colleagues. Official channels such as group email lists and LMS announcements are useful mediums for documentation of on-the-record information that can be expediently shared across all relevant disciplinary silos, academic departments, and student majors. Of course, pressing situations will also activate unofficial channels, and if hallway whispers among faculty travel quickly, student social media is exponentially faster—a student-run honors Discord will disseminate bad news with lightning speed. Just as Zubizarreta advocates that honors administrators foster strong relationships with faculty, I agree that honors faculty can help administrators in times of crisis by effectively and openly communicating concerns

both up and down the chain of command, both to and from administrators, students, and colleagues. Maintaining strong lines of communication can strengthen faculty engagement in honors and, with luck, mitigate some of the circumstances that can cause the new boss to transition into the old boss.

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