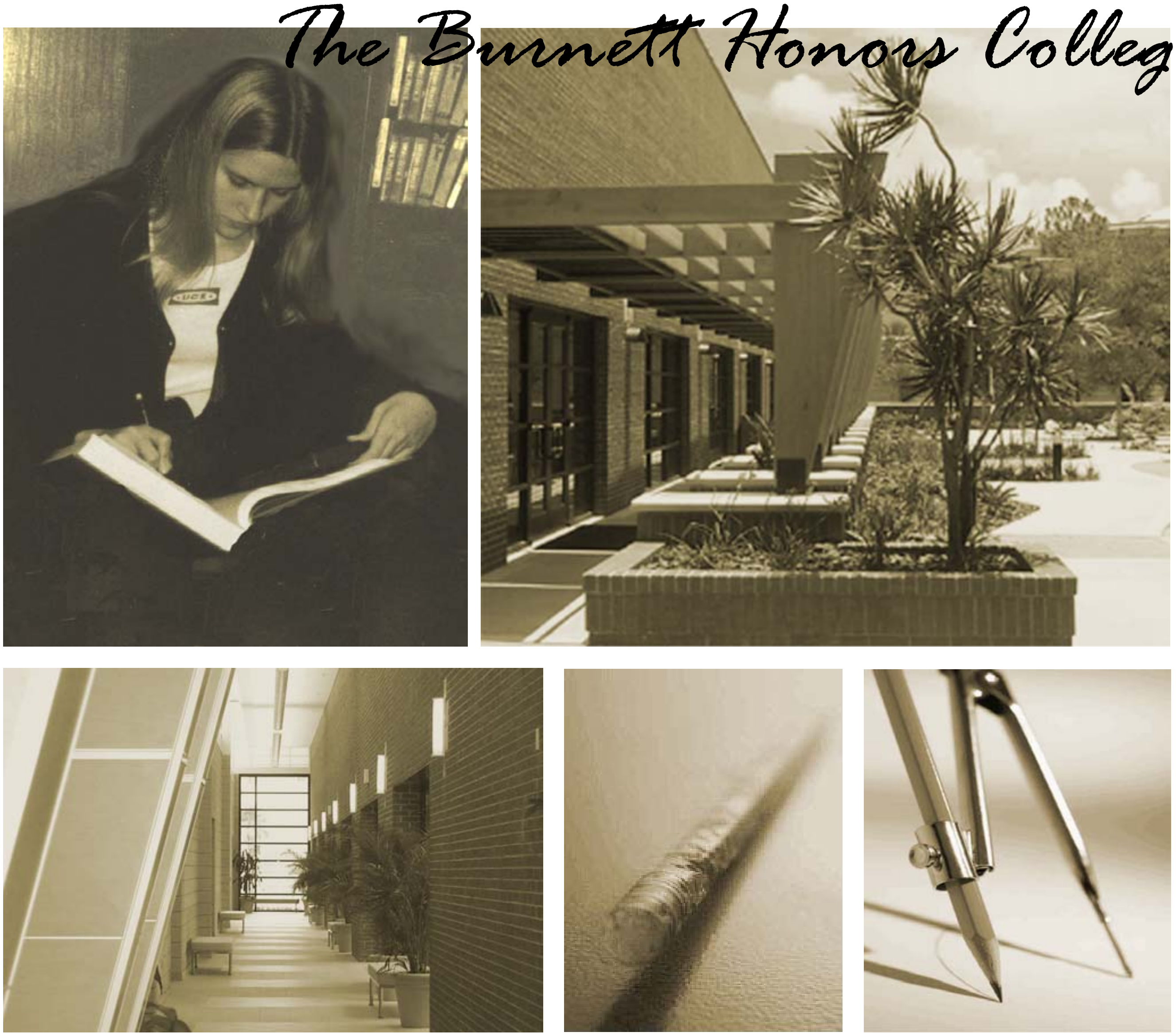
The Burnett Honors College



A Faculty Guide to Teaching in Honors

Selected Readings

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February 2001—Highlights

Speak Out

Do honors colleges weaken general undergraduate education?

YES
William Crain:
Honors colleges produce harmful inequities

Many universities have established honors colleges for highly qualified applicants. Each university hopes that this special college will enhance its overall stature, but I believe that honors colleges basically hurt undergraduate education.

Honors colleges provide small classes, stimulating projects and individual mentoring for the select few, leaving fewer resources for the rest. This situation produces resentment and ill feeling, lowering general morale. What's more, the entering freshmen who are not chosen for the honors college can be made to feel second-rate before they have had a chance to realize their potential.

I am especially concerned about the effect of honors colleges on the students who historically have been denied access to high-quality education--poor working-class students and students of color. Through no choice of their own, these students disproportionately attend underfunded, overcrowded elementary and secondary schools and receive an inadequate preparation for college. In 1969, the City University of New York (CUNY), where I teach, initiated an open admissions policy that has given hundreds of thousands of such students their first real chance to develop their minds and pursue their dreams. Many students have required some remedial work, but this hasn't stopped them from achieving remarkable success.

However, CUNY's current, right-wing board of trustees has curtailed students' opportunities by banning remedial courses in all of the university's bachelor's degree programs. At the same time, CUNY leaders are recasting the university into a tiered structure. They are designating certain colleges as elite institutions with stiff admissions requirements and creating a new, university-wide honors college. The honors college will provide highly qualified students with free tuition, small classes, laptop computers and an expense account to spend on academically enriching experiences such as study abroad.

So, who will gain admission to the elite colleges and the honors college? Not the students of color and working-class students who haven't received an adequate preparation for college. With a few exceptions, they will be admitted to the "lower tier" colleges. Thus, the new hierarchical structure will perpetuate the racial and social class inequities of New York City.

I believe that CUNY's new direction is part of a national trend, and we should oppose it. Instead of focusing on honors colleges, we should work to provide the best possible educational opportunities for all students.

William Crain, a member of the Professional Staff Congress/AFT, is a professor of psychology at the City College of the City University of New York.

NO

Thomas E. Helm:

Honors are at home in the public university

Honors colleges contribute to individual faculty curricular and instructional innovation, to say nothing of faculty rejuvenation. They facilitate new programs and curricular initiatives among departments and colleges. Not the least, they advance the public university's commitment to providing appropriate curricula, programs and services for an increasingly diverse student population.

For faculty who teach honors courses, the experience can be a "teaching sabbatical," a brief time away from the routine of their regular teaching assignments. It might, of course, be argued that this takes the best faculty away from students who need them most. It is more often the case that honors teaching affords the faculty the freedom to explore, develop, and implement new course materials and teaching strategies--materials and strategies that they take back with them to their departments and to their regular classrooms.

Because of its access to resources, its special expertise, and its institutional flexibility, honors in collaboration with departments and other colleges is able to innovate, test, develop and implement special curricular and program options. In the last two years at our university, honors created an electronic portfolio option with the College of Business and Technology, and we are developing a service learning project with the College of Education and Human Services. In the future, we expect these special opportunities, with appropriate adaptations, to be available options for all undergraduates in those colleges.

In a U.S. News & World Report article, "Choosing an Honors Experience," a case was made that for a growing number of academically talented students, honors in the public university represents an attractive alternative to the elite private university. Certainly, one of the historic roles of honors is the recruitment and retention of academically talented students.

Honors students, of course, enrich the whole life of the university. They bring their energy, excitement, perspectives and abilities to all of their courses and to every aspect of university life. It seems then a moot point that they strengthen, enrich and enliven undergraduate education. What we sometimes lose sight of, however, is that the honors cohort itself is a part of the great diversity that the public university celebrates. The honors college and the honors program are fully consistent with the public university's commitment to creating and supporting an undergraduate student population of diverse talents, backgrounds and preparation.

Thomas E. Helm is director of the Honors College at Western Illinois University.

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Honors and Non-Honors Students: How Different are They?

by Thomas B. Harte

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I sometimes tell my students that the difference between honors students and other students is this: when the professor walks into a classroom and says, 'Good morning," the students all say, "Good morning" right back. But when the professor of an honors course walks into an classroom and says, "Good morning," the honors students all write "Good morning" in their notes.

My students know, of course, that I'm just being facetious. After all, I hope they are doing something more productive in my course than merely taking notes in the first place.

But the question of differences between honors and non-honors students is an important one for our current purposes because the goal of carrying honors approaches over into non-honors courses will only be successful to the extent that we clearly understand the nature and extent of those differences. If our attempts to transfer honors approaches to non-honors courses is based on a false perception that the two populations are more different than they really are, we might be more formal in our efforts than we should be. On the other hand, if we see the two populations as more alike than they really are, our attempts to use similar approaches with them will be unsuccessful.

So the purpose of this presentation is to explore briefly what I see as the differences and similarities between honors and non-honors students. (By the way, don't you wish we could find a better antonym for honors than non- honors?) I shall do this from the perspective of having taught the same courses to both student populations.

First, let me tell you a little about the courses. There are two of them, and both are offerings which have been adapted to the honors curriculum, as opposed to courses created expressly for it.

The first is a course in fundamentals of public speaking, which is a freshman/sophomore course, and the other is a course in political communication, which is an upper level course for juniors and seniors.

In both instances I have attempted to adapt the course to honors students in a qualitative as opposed to a merely quantitative way. In other words, I see the difference between an honors section of a course and a non-honors section as I suspect you do: not in terms of how much *more* work honors students must do, but instead in terms of how much *different* their work is.

The difference, of course, can be the result of variations in course content, process, or products.

Thus, for example, in the public speaking course, honors students do the same number of speeches of the same length as those done by students in the non-honors sections. However, the nature of those speeches is different and, I hope, more challenging for the students enrolled in the honors section. Consequently, the final speech in the honors section is done from a manuscript, a more advanced technique which permits greater attention to matters of style and language than is ordinarily possible with other approaches. The non-honors section does the same sort of speech, but there is no demand for eloquence. Similarly, in the political communication course, both sections do a unit on political commercials. But the non-honors section may be asked only to examine political spots and analyze them; the honors section is asked to actually write a spot and produce it. So, while the honors and the non-honors sections of these courses are different, they are still the same courses and they have thus afforded me an opportunity to see first-hand some of the differences and similarities between honors and non-honors students.

So let me turn my attention now to that question: how alike and how different are honors and non-honors students, at least from my vantage point as an instructor of both. My answer to that question is two-fold. My first point is that honors students are more different from their non-honors counterparts than we sometimes realize. And my second point is that honors students are more like their non-honors counterparts than we sometimes realize. Let's look at those two propositions one at a time.

Clearly, honors students are different. Obviously, they are intellectually and academically more able than their non-honors counterparts; that's why they are in the honors program in the first place. Although this is self-evident, it's worth noting how fundamental such differences can be when multiplied over an entire class.

Take, for example, the two sections of our basic speech course that I'm teaching this semester. One is for non-honors students; the other is for honors students. The statistics on high school rank clearly show that these two classes are not at all alike with respect to academic achievement. In the non-honors course, 15% of the students were in the top 10% of their high school class. An additional 10% were in the second tenth and 25% were in the third tenth. That's not too bad: half of these students were in the upper third of their high school class. But look at the honors section. In that course, 65% of the students were in the top 10% of their high school class. And all of the rest of them were in the second 10%! To say that these two groups differ with respect to academic achievement is quite an understatement.

“In other words, we must be careful that we don’t assume that because honors students are intellectually advanced that they have automatically learned certain skills.”

Given this inherent difference in academic performance, it is not surprising that honors students, I have discovered, are, on the whole, more responsible. Although I have also discovered that some honors students can be just as indolent as any others (and I hadn't expected that at first); in general they are less likely to skip class, turn assignments in late, or come to class unprepared. Although they may not necessarily see learning as an end in itself, and in that regard can be just as pragmatic as other students, as a rule they are more serious about their studies. They give the business of being a student a high priority.

A few weeks ago, for example, I asked students in both of my sections of the basic course to submit their speech topics to me so I could provide some feedback as they embarked on their next assignment. Since the topics were turned in on a Thursday and the class did not meet again until the following Tuesday, I told them that I would have my written reactions available to them at my office the following morning so that they would have access to my comments over the weekend. As you might have guessed, virtually all of the honors students showed up the next day to pick up their papers, some as early as eight in the morning. A much smaller percentage of the other students showed up, the rest contenting themselves to wait until the next class period to receive their feedback. In fact, I think there are still a couple who have yet to pick up their papers!

No doubt this behavior reflects another difference between honors and non-honors students: their concern with grades. If you think students in general are grade conscious, wait until you teach an honors course. At first I was simply not prepared to deal with the genuine anxiety that results when you give an honors student a “B,” let alone a ‘C.” It's gotten so bad with one of my colleagues that she now threatens to lower a student's grade by ten points anytime he or she brings up the subject. That may take care of the problem for her, but it nonetheless underscores how important the GPA is for these students. While on the one hand we might admire or take advantage of such motivation, it may also discourage such students from taking risks as learners so that what we have, ironically, is a situation where the very students who are best equipped to be academically and intellectually adventurous are sometimes the least apt to be so.

So honors students are fundamentally quite different from other students in terms of their approach to academics. And it's those differences that can make teaching such students so exciting. But we need to be careful that those differences don't blind us to the similarities which honors and non-honors students share. Differences in one area do not necessarily spell differences in others. Thus, my second point, that honors students and non-honors students are really much more alike than we sometimes think.

Let me turn to that topic. First, I think it is important to realize that while a bright person may have less trouble learning certain skills, intelligence alone is no guarantee that they will have automatically been learned. Thus, we should not be surprised, as I was at first, to discover that some honors students may have deficient study skills, or be mediocre writers and speakers, or lack basic knowledge.

Take writing skills for instance. Although as a group, honors students are generally effective at written expression, even honors students can have serious writing problems. After all, competent writing is a learned behavior and, for a variety of reasons, even bright people may not have learned how to do it. Indeed, our English department tells me that last semester out of fifty honors students in freshman English, not a single one tested out into the advanced course.

I have found the same thing in public speaking courses. Often honors students are more poised and expressive oral communicators, but often they are not. Effective public speaking, too, is learned behavior. Moreover, honors students are not immune to communication apprehension or stage fright just because they are academically able. In fact, they may suffer from it more.

In other words, we must be careful that we *don't* assume that because honors students are intellectually advanced that they have automatically learned certain skills. Indeed, we should not assume that just because they are advanced academically that they are necessarily advanced in any other way. Especially, we should not assume that they are more mature than their counterparts. They usually aren't.

I've seen studies, as I'm sure you have, which say they are better adjusted socially throughout their lives, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they are any more grown up than their counterparts at any given stage of life. In fact, we've had some experience that the very opposite can be true. On our campus right now, the greatest behavior problems in the residence halls erupt on the floors where the honors students live.

Finally I suspect honors and non-honors students are pretty similar in the way in which they respond to their learning environment. We know that a good honors course should cultivate critical thinking, encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning, and should use active rather than passive instructional strategies. What I have discovered is that honors students do not always respond automatically to such an approach. Like other students, they often have to be prodded. What is more, I have discovered that non-honors students, with sufficient prodding, will likewise respond to such an approach, perhaps not to the same degree as honors students, but in the same manner. In the long run I believe such an approach makes for better learning regardless of the student population.

So what does all of this mean in terms of course design? It means, perhaps, that while honors courses must be different from non-honors courses, maybe non-honors courses should be more like honors courses as well. Just as we should not be so quick to assume that what works well in a non-honors course will work in an honors section, maybe we need to be just as cautious about assuming that what works well in an honors course won't work in a non-honors one.

My own limited experience leads me to question not whether I have done justice to my honors students, but whether I have too often not served my other students as well as I could have. I suspect my teaching might be better were I to treat all my students as honors students to the extent that I want them to be active, independent learners for whom I have high expectations. I may be disappointed often enough if I start from that perspective instead of a contrary one, but why not start there? Increasingly, I find myself wondering why I waited until I had an honors course to try some bold project, assignment, or method of instruction.

In the final analysis, I truly enjoy my honors courses and I hope I will continue to teach them. But as a result of my experience teaching honors students, I am also struck by the need to do more to carry honors approaches over into my other courses as well. Both types of students will be better for it.

12. Creating an Active Learning Environment

by Faith Gabelnick, Mills College

Spring 1994

Any of us who have walked into a classroom as a teacher has been immediately aware of the challenge of establishing some relationship with the assortment of individuals seated before us. Even honors students bring a variety of backgrounds, interests, and skills to the course, and they operate as a group in a manner which we may experience as irrational, or, at best, unpredictable. Walking out of that classroom we may shake our heads in dismay or silently pat ourselves on the back because the class "worked" or "didn't work." Sooner or later it dawns on us that fine preparation in our discipline is only part of the reason why students learn from us; from my perspective, it is only a small part.

Emphasizing the people as well as the subject helps us to understand why the teaching environment is important. We've all heard the old saw: Two's company, three's a crowd. Another way of looking at that configuration is to say two's a dyad or pair; three's a group. A family is a group; a class is a group. In a group, leadership is vital. If we are a teacher of a course, we must realize and acknowledge our leadership responsibility in a particular environment.

As a leader of a class, we have a seemingly paradoxical task: to create a structured learning environment where open but competent dialogue and work can occur. When teachers are really teaching, they're simultaneously attending to group life and to the work the group is assigned. Both functions are necessary. The class needs to learn, then, not only the overt material (content of the course) but will need to learn how to function efficiently in the group we are creating. All of us conduct this type of adaptation daily as we move from one situation to another. My point here is that we, as teachers, must pay attention to this adaptive process because we can influence it profoundly.

Before we enter that classroom to face that assortment of individuals, we are creating an environment for our students. We design our course by selecting course texts and other materials, preparing a rationale and a syllabus, and advertising our course in various honors publications. Thus we create a learning model through our class materials, our choice (or lack thereof) of room, the types of discussions we have, the kinds of evaluative exercises we use. Each student reacts individually and as a member of a group to these experiences. Together, these responses and their manifestations in the classroom form the character or *culture* of our course.

Although there are many factors which comprise the teaching culture and have an impact on the life of the group, the primary one is our *person*. We carry the work *role* of teacher, but we present it through the person of a black, white, old, young, male, female, full-time or part-time faculty member. What we wear, how we talk, where we sit or stand, what religion we espouse, what social or material position we occupy, all affect our teaching in some way. One of my students recently was complaining about her Math teacher, whom she describes as boring. When I asked her to clarify her description, she responded: "Well, he has one pair of Fall pants, one pair of Spring pants, and an all-year-round tie!" The student was speaking synecdochally: she had used the lack of a provocative wardrobe to point to the lack of a stimulating teaching style. One wonders whether changing the culture in the class might have been as simple as wearing a new pair of slacks and a bright-colored tie. Her point, however, is important: what students see or perceive about their teachers, their fellow students or their classroom space influences their attitudes towards their work.

A way that we can work with the culture of the class is through the realization that classes, as groups, proceed through identifiable stages of development and that teaching styles need to change to suit these stages. Although there are various models of group development, we can clearly distinguish three general stages in the life of any small group: (1) the *pre-affiliative* or *dependent* stage, (2) the *affiliative* or *cooperative-competitive* stage, and (3) the *individualizing* or *closing* stage. These stages correspond roughly to the first three weeks, the middle ten weeks, and final two weeks of each semester.

> *"The more specific a teacher can be at the time when the students are most needy, the more solid will be the foundation upon which later discourse and decisions can be conducted."*

As I have stated, the teaching role provides the structure around which this development can elaborate. In the pre-class work, the teacher prepares for the group its work activities and the location of its work. During the early weeks, the teacher sets her course in motion by encouraging open introductions of persons and texts, discussing expectations students and teachers have, uncovering, if possible, biases people may bring to the study of the material and answering specifically questions about the course content and course procedure. The more specific a teacher can be at the time when the students are most needy, the more solid will be the foundation upon which later discourse and decisions can be conducted. A culture develops quickly, and by the fourth week when a paper has been written or already returned, the roles in the class have been established and the play commences.

The middle weeks of the semester are perhaps the most challenging. Students who have walked out with me on the last day of class spouting paeans to my teaching ability are often the ones who have confronted me during every class in the middle period, either by asking unanswerable questions, by complaining about the texts, by giggling with some students or by writing notes to others. These students can be seen as the attention-seekers, clowns, or children. If I do not understand that groups "use" such students to express their own uncertainties, dislikes or childish antagonisms, I might respond more directly and more sharply than I do. The middle stages of the group life demands a teacher's patience and keen attention to the particular fantasies, stereotypes or myths the group has developed. Against all efforts to sway her, the teacher needs to remain faithful to her work task of teaching yet to hear questions or even book discussions *in the context* of the group culture. When Sue Bridehead and Jude Hawley discuss marriage or career possibilities in *Jude the Obscure*, their words are meaningful in the context of Hardy's *Created World* and within the context of readership. How Sue is seen in a class discussion is as much a function of the reader's private views as it is a function of the group pressure to express certain views.

The paradox embedded in this stage of development is that if the teacher has allowed the class's dependency to flourish, the break towards autonomy will feel like challenge or even rejection. Students can challenge leadership through passivity, late papers, inattentiveness, as well as through active, rigorous discussion. The competitiveness can find expression in subgroups who vie with each other for air space or by a massive quietness: If we see these challenges as somewhat inevitable and recurring, we can help ourselves and our students to work on them. The degree of competitiveness, cooperation, passivity, varies, of course, from class to class because of some of the variables we have mentioned. The creative aspect of teaching, however, occurs with our ability to work with students on issues which these variables produce.

"We are being naive if we think that once we design a course and hand out an assignment sheet we can relax and simply deliver the course content."

The final stage precedes the death of the group. Students who have been actively involved in the course begin to talk about next semester or summer jobs. Reading is less well-prepared; papers are finished with a sigh of relief. The commitment to the group is slowly being withdrawn and good-byes begin to be prepared. Marking this turn with the group and allowing for some reminiscences, some suggestions for next semester's class, some unstructured time for leave-taking will produce a clear, needed closure for the class.

If teachers understand their leadership position in a class, they can deal intelligently with many aspects of class life. As the leader, the teacher has the responsibility for the management of the course. Not only does she order books, write a syllabus, assign and grade papers and exams, she teaches her students how to behave in her classroom. She points out time constraints and the necessity of starting and ending promptly; she emphasizes a consistent attendance by noting absent members and pointing out the presence of others; she stresses group responsibility by stressing the timely reading of assignments and the contributing of ideas to a class discussion; she builds group solidarity by pairing students for small group exercises or creating small work groups for longer class projects; she provides a time during each class or at least on a regular basis for feedback about the readings, interactions and teaching style. All of these tasks assist in building a strong class culture because they involve interaction around boundary issues. As we know, the boundary is the point where two people or a person and an event meet. What occurs at this juncture is what defines the nature and quality of teaching.

Robert Frost's "Mending Wall" summarizes the issues we have addressed by examining the meaning and importance of boundaries in creating and maintaining one's environment. The poem begins: "Something there is that doesn't love a wall," but it ends: "Good fences make good neighbors." The body of the poem wrestles with these antithetical propositions. Although there doesn't seem to be a need for a wall, the neighbors do have a fence or boundary to mark their properties. While they survey their own lands and wall in need of repair, they "keep the wall between [them] as [they] go." Maintaining this boundary, however, allows for dialogue, neighborliness and new reflection about the nature of human interaction, as well as for specific work on the wall. Tending to the maintenance of this wall thus becomes the occasion for creative thought.

The parallels between teaching and Frost's poem are clear: being aware of who we are when we teach and of the many tasks which both separate and unite us with our students allows for a continuous, creative learning culture. We are being naive if we think that once we design a course and hand out an assignment sheet we can relax and simply deliver the course content. As Frost reminds us, there are many factors, some beyond our immediate view or control, which undermine our plans and compel us to repair and rebuild and negotiate with our neighbor. And here is where we meet the paradox of teaching which Frost so elegantly and simply expresses: the narrator of the poem who claims he does not like fences is the one who calls to his neighbor to help him in the mending. His leadership arises out of his skepticism *and* his care of his property, just as our leadership in our classes arises out of our idealism and our cynicism. Part of us knows that teaching is an impossible dream born of necessity and hope; part of us knows that teaching is our mundane landscape, and that tending fences is the best work we can do in an imperfect world.

Faith, once dean of the Honors College at Western Michigan University where she directed the planning of an honors building, is now Provost and Dean of the Faculty at Mills College. An abbreviated version of this article appears in the Jossey-Bass publication: *Learning Communities: Creating Connections Among Students, Faculty, and Disciplines*, by Faith Gabelnick, Jean MacGregor, Roberta S. Matthews, and Barbara Leigh Smith, Number 41 in *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, Spring 1990. We are fortunate to have the expanded version here.

"An honors program in the best sense should avoid the temptation to become a closed society, one that is as self-satisfied as it is self-involved. It should not let self-interest blind it to its obligation to the larger community. Far from being a mechanism for elitist self-aggrandizement, honors is above all an open invitation to explore and to inquire fearlessly with like-minded students and faculty and, in the process, to develop a love of excellence and to reach new and profoundly satisfying levels of scholarly achievement and self-understanding." *Richard J. Cummings, University of Utah.*

13. Avoiding the Lintilla Syndrome

by William R. Whipple

Spring 1988

Herb Snowden looked glum as he walked into my office.

I like Herb. Like him and respect him. A full professor at 36, with an impressive array of publications and an editorial position on his disciplines's leading journal, Herb was one of our faculty's brightest stars. And a dedicated teacher, too; he worked hard to make his classes interesting, and received good reviews from his students. I remembered how hard I had fought to get him released from teaching in his department so that he could offer an honors course. His department chair had grumbled about my always wanting her most valuable faculty members, and in the end I had to get the dean to exert some pressure. I recalled Herb's excitement when we finally negotiated his release; he had been looking forward to teaching in the honors program for a long time.

And now, halfway through the semester, he was giving me a dejected stare. He sat down wearily. "We've got problems," he said.

I knew we did. Throughout the previous weeks, students from Herb's class had been filing through my office, all with the same story. The class was impossible: there was too much reading, the assignments were hard to understand, the grading was too tough. A few students had burst into tears, confiding that they were spending more time on this one course than on all their other courses combined — and still barely earning C's. Some of them had decided to give up, to "blow off" Snowden's course and devote their time to their other work. Others were still struggling, but felt that the odds were insurmountable.

The syndrome was familiar, and I had been expecting Herb to come in. Now here he was, and I suspected I knew what he would say. He did. "Bill, are these really the best students you can find? They seem bored and lazy, they cut classes, they don't do the reading, and they're unresponsive in class. They are absolutely obsessed with grades; if I give them anything other than an A, they act offended, as though getting an A were their natural right. Dammit, to earn an A in an honors course one ought to do something beyond the minimum. I've got plenty of students in my non-honors course sections who are a lot better than these. How the blazes do you select these students, anyway?"

I tried not to look as though I had heard this speech before. But I had. On the average of once a semester, actually. Herb's problem was as common as that of the sophomore determined to go to medical school but unable to pass biology. But whereas I have become accustomed to and skilled at counseling sophomores with identity crises, I have never found it easy to counsel faculty members who find themselves in Herb's situation. And it is indeed the faculty member who needs help here. Herb's distress is genuine and understandable: but he is wrong about the students. Other honors instructors find these same students eager and enthusiastic, hardworking and ready to participate. Herb's misery as well as that of his students is caused by his own unrealistic expectations about honors students. He and his class have become victims of a syndrome almost universal among honors programs. It affects instructors in every discipline, regardless of age, status, or teaching experience. It is most prevalent among faculty teaching their first honors course, although veteran honors instructors are not immune. It wreaks havoc on promising curricula, drives wedges between students and faculty, and accounts for numerous gray hairs among honors directors. Worst of all, once it has developed fully, it is almost impossible to cure. It can, however, be prevented. The first step in prophylaxis is to understand the roots of the syndrome itself.

"Herb's misery as well as that of his students is caused by his own unrealistic expectations about honors students."

Underlying much of the problem is the fact that Herb finds the demands of his everyday teaching to be frustrating. He took up education as a profession because of his passionate interest in his subject matter and the delight he remembers when he, as a student, first began to understand the beauty and complexity of his discipline's knowledge. He has always wanted to convey that sense of passion and delight to his students; and occasionally he does find an undergraduate — an unusually talented major in his department, perhaps — who sees in the subject something of the heady excitement which Herb has always perceived. Such students are the sunshine in Herb's life, but they are far too rare; they come along at a rate of one every two or three years. For the rest, he finds himself teaching heavy loads, primarily in general education courses, to students whose curiosity about the subject matter appears to be limited to wondering what will be on the exam.

A good professional and a determined teacher, Herb has swallowed his private desire to teach more upper-level students, more graduate students, more courses in his specialty. He suppresses his temptation to bewail the deficiencies in his students' preparation: their inability to think critically, their weaknesses in writing and speaking, their inadequate background in literature, history, and mathematics. It is, he argues to himself, not the fault of the students that they are poorly prepared or that they do not understand why they should have to take his general education course when they plan to major in another area. Once in a while he will sit down over a beer with a colleague and grumble about these matters, but he then returns to his office, revises the lecture notes for his ten o'clock class, continues the futile search for a really good textbook for his eleven o'clock class , and tries to think up an especially imaginative class project for his two o'clock discussion section. He works at his teaching and it shows; as mentioned above, his students like his course and his evaluations are always good.

But when he began to think about an honors course, Herb's imagination started to soar. Here, at last, would be teaching as teaching ought to be: a chance to engage in an intellectual dialogue with students who would find his material exciting, who could understand some of the subtle interrelations which he never dared present in other course, who could read primary sources instead of textbooks carefully selected to be not too difficult. Here was a chance to work with students who would care more about what they learned than about their grade. Herb allowed himself to look forward to his honors course as though it would be filled with the equivalents of those exciting and excited students whom he encounters so occasionally. He thought of reading assignments which would challenge those rare students and filled his syllabus with these. He picked topics for discussion that presumed a sophisticated understanding – topics which he would not dare not use in ordinary course – but after all, these were honors students. But bit by bit, and without realizing it, Herb endowed his students with superhuman qualities. He had fallen into what I call the Lintilla syndrome – named after a character from *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. In that dramatic series, Lintilla was a remarkable young woman produced through genetic engineering: a brilliant archaeologist, artistic, sensitive, beautiful, intelligent, virtuous and wise – the perfect candidate for citizenship in Plato's republic. (In the series, Lintilla's cloning machines became jammed and produced hundreds of millions of identical perfect super beings, which led to problems very different from those Herb Snowden found himself facing.)

And now here were Herb's Lintillas, complaining about the readings, about the written assignments, about the lectures, about their grades: no different from the run-of-the-mill students which Herb found so frustrating, except perhaps a little more argumentative. Herb tried to motivate them: "Come on, you're honors students – you really should be able to handle this." That made the students anxious; maybe they were not really honors material. They tried again, and still found themselves unable to keep up with Snowden's expectations. Anxiety turned to resentment, and they started skimping on the assignments. That angered Herb, who began quizzing them on the reading in class; the students responded by cutting classes. By the time mid-semester grades came out the situation was spiraling out of control; whatever Herb tried to do the class resisted, so that almost no learning was taking place in the class at all. The instructor was disheartened, the students desperate, and the course in shambles.

I wish I could say that I was able to step in and straighten out the problems in Herb's class. But when mutual trust between students and instructor has been shattered, it is unlikely that a healthy learning environment can be restored quickly. About all that the honors director can do in this situation is to encourage the instructor to devote some class time to dialogue with the students, to give them a chance to air their frustrations, and to hear the other side. This is more damage control than cure; but it is probably the best possible use of the class time, given that things have developed to a point where no learning is taking place anyway. At least it will probably slow down the spiral into which the class has become trapped.

> *"But when mutual trust between students and instructor has been shattered, it is unlikely that a healthy learning environment can be restored quickly."*

Actually, both Herb Snowden and his ill-fated course are fictitious. They are, in fact, composites, based on numerous real-life cases. But the problems which they illustrate are endemic in honors programs. And they are preventable problems. Listed below are some concrete suggestions to honors faculty which may help to prevent sliding into the Lintilla syndrome

1. *Teach the students you have, not the students you wish you had.* It is relatively easy to teach a class full of Lintillas. Real-life honors students, while they are especially intelligent and capable, are not super-beings. To design courses which challenge them without attempting too much is very difficult, although it is also very rewarding.

2. *Avoid defining "challenge" in quantitative terms.* It is tempting to make an honors course different from its non-honors equivalent by attempting to cover more material. Honors students do not read faster than other students;

in fact, they often read more slowly (but more thoroughly). Make the special challenge of your honors course the way in which the material is approached — not the quantity of material included.

3. *Accept the fact that honors students will be concerned about their grades.* Most honors programs require students to maintain a minimum GPA; they *have* to be concerned about grades. If you really want students to attend to the course content without concern for the grade they are earning, take your courage in both hands and offer the course on a pass/fail basis.

4. *Remember that your course is only one small part of your students' academic agendas.* Instructors frequently pour most of their effort into honors courses, and are frustrated when their students do not seem to do so. Your students are taking approximately five courses, and several of these may be honors courses. You are within your rights to expect them to spend about two hours in preparation for every hour spent in class, but to ask for more is unfair and destructive to morale.

5. *Never compare honors students with majors in your department.* Students who choose to major in your subject area have an acknowledged interest in and aptitude for that discipline. Most of your honors students are majoring in something quite different from your subject. Some are taking your course because they are required to do so. On the average, honors students display more interest in general education courses than do other students, but you are almost certain to draw a few students who find the topic uninteresting.

6. *Discuss problems with your class, and be flexible.* Herb Snowden might have forestalled the disturbing decline in his class had he had a few quiet talks with his class as problems began to erupt. Do not assume that when students make a request they are trying to "get away with something." Honors students are not immune to this vice, but often their requests are reasonable, and even helpful. Talk to them and maintain a sense of mutual trust between them and you.

7. *Do not become defensive of your authority in the classroom.* The true authority in any classroom is the learning that takes place there; the instructor's responsibility is to foster that learning. Behavioral techniques which instructors adopt to define their authority are often perceived as arrogance or pompousness by honors students. Approach them with simple, honest respect and they will respect you.

8. *Finally, whatever happens, maintain your sense of humor.* Emerging problems can often be nipped in the bud by a light touch, whereas a heavy-handed one usually exacerbates the situation.

Honors courses are difficult to teach. But when they are well designed and well executed, they are a source of immense satisfaction to all concerned. Keep your expectations realistic and maintain a collaborative, rather than an adversarial, atmosphere in the classroom, and your course will be one which both you and your students find stimulating and fun.

"The true authority in any classroom is the learning that takes place there; the instructor's responsibility is to foster that learning. Behavioral techniques which instructors adopt to define their authority are often perceived as arrogance or pompousness by honors students."

"The closer interaction of students and faculty in which the teacher is more a guide than an authority figure, the relative ease with which experimentation can take place and the value put on this development of new approaches would all place the honors movement in the tradition of shaping a democratic education. But paramount to honors work is the idea of honors as a learning community, not in the sense of a cloister where pure speculative thought is guarded from contamination by the world, but as a place where imagination is nurtured in the service of a democratic society." — Betty Krasne (Winter 1988)

15. The Imposter Phenomenon

by David Sanders, East Carolina University (retired)

Winter 1984

Granted, many factors are at work in qualified students' decision to take or not to take honors courses. Much has to do with the quality, reputation, and the offerings of the honors program, the packaging, the rewards, the recruitment, procedures, and the enthusiasm of the participants. And then students may feel they can garner a better average in non-honors courses and be more easily accepted into professional or graduate school; some may really want to be with "normal" students; others may not be sufficiently motivated.

Still another factor has been the subject of recent research. That is what is being called the Imposter Phenomenon. The students who exhibit the Imposter Phenomenon are those who, all test scores, grade averages, and faculty recommendations to the contrary, do not think they are good enough to be in an honors program.

The term describing this factor was coined in 1978 by two psychologists, Clance and Imes, who noticed its presence in women in gender-atypical careers who felt they were put in positions they did not deserve: they exhibited "an internal experience of phoniness common among high achieving women who persist in believing they are not bright, capable, or creative, despite ample evident to the contrary" (Imes and Clance, "Treatment" 2). These were women who were highly motivated and who had won various accolades and recognitions but who nevertheless did not enjoy their success or take pride in their accomplishments because to a large degree, they attributed their success to luck, a quota system, their looks, someone's faulty judgement–to everything but their own intellectual abilities. They felt like intellectual phonies, imposters.

Subsequent studies (Stahl *et al*, 1980) indicated the phenomenon was not limited racially; it was present in black female high school science students. It was also determined (Harvey 1981) to be prevalent among men who saw themselves as being in some place they did not belong:

> Simply perceiving oneself as "out of place" in terms of a seemingly irrelevant characteristic may be interpreted as evidence that one does not "belong" among one's peers, and is thereby an "imposter." ("Issues" 4-5)

Harvey constructed an instrument to measure the subjects' self-perceptions. Her I.P. Scale consists of fourteen declarative statements such as "In general, people tend to believe I am more competent that I am," and "I find it easy to accept compliments about my intelligence," on which students rate themselves on a seven-choice scale from "not at all true" to "very true."

In validating her I.P. Scale, Harvey administered it to a group of 36 typical achievers and 36 juniors and seniors in the honors program at Temple. She found the phenomenon to be intense among people whom society considers superior.

> Because honors students are publicly classified as high achievers, self-doubts about their intellectual capacities may be more likely to lead to an imposter experience.... If they fail to internalize [their] role, they are likely to feel alienation from it and thereby more vulnerable to the imposter phenomenon than those who are not expected to be high achievers. ("Failure" 39)

Harvey also determined that people in new or unfamiliar roles — particularly those not attained by other family members — are most vulnerable to imposter feelings.

This year Susan McCammon, Michael Penald, and I were involved in administering the IP Scale to (a) 58 high school seniors who had been invited into the honors program at East Carolina (on the basis of 1200+ SAT and GPA 3.5) and to (b) 52 honors students already in the freshman/sophomore program (3.4 GPA). The response to the questionnaire did indeed suggest the presence of imposter feelings among both prospective and current honors students at East Carolina.

In fact, the survey produced several interesting results which, without further substantiation and verification, should not be taken as certain generalizations but which are put forth here as observations.

It is obvious that in general the fear of being an imposter increases with the degree of social recognitions and expectation. It is higher in honors students than in students of average skill. It seems to be higher in college than in high school.

It surfaces with each new role or situation that students face. College freshmen tend to be more vulnerable than they were as high school seniors when they find themselves in a course in a new format (e.g., a first seminar) than in a second course in the same format, in an interdisciplinary approach than in a single discipline.

First-generation college students seem particularly susceptible to imposter feelings, since they are going beyond the security of their family history: they may feel that people think they are more competent than they could possibly be.

On the other hand, students from college-educated families are prone to considering their personal accomplishments inadequate for their stage in life in comparison with their families, and they also feel like phonies.

The problem is probably so common as not to deserve the label of abnormal. But it represents another matter to be taken into account when assessing the success of a program to reach its intended audience. It is a phenomenon honors faculty realize consciously or unconsciously every time they try to persuade students they're bright. It is a problem in recruitment, retention, and program success. It is even more important if it prevents students from enjoying their personal success in life.

Students suffering from the problem are by not means all the same type. They may be the obviously introverted, the perfectionists, the sensitive, the tense, the overwhelmed, or the procrastinating. They may be those who avoid competition or fear success. They may get ruffled at criticism or react negatively to positive feedback. They may even be those who "psych out" every teacher or use their charm to ensure their grades.

"The students agreed there are four times when they are most vulnerable to imposter feelings."

Becoming aware of the problem is obviously a first step in confronting it. But what can we do to alleviate the problem in recruitment and in dealing with students already in the program? A group of directors, faculty, and students met in a workshop in Memphis to consider the topic. The students agreed there are four times when they are most vulnerable to imposter feelings: in the recruitment process, as new students, in new formats such as seminars, and in beginning the process of writing the senior thesis. Together, faculty and students came up with a list of suggestions which might help meet the challenge.

In the recruitment process the director should be certain that the very first communication with students states that the program emphasizes a qualitative rather than a quantitative difference from the regular curriculum, that the students' past successes are exactly those the program is seeking, that the program offers a number of options and does not need or want intellectual clones, and that there is no A to F curve required in honors courses. Students agreed than an open program that allows qualified students to take a single course is less intimidating than one that required full commitment. Even the policy of letting students know they could have exploratory or provisional acceptance into the program warrants consideration.

Two important groups of people often overlooked in the process are counselors and parents. High school guidance counselors need to be informed of the standards and goals of the program so that they do not discourage students from participating. Parents need to be reassured of their childrens' abilities and the benefits of participating.

Orientation for honors students should be separate from the regular one and should be as personal as possible. If they are properly trained, students may act as mentors. Certainly, honors students should be employed as models for the new freshmen. Even the preparation of "College Survival Kit" seems like a good idea.

After the students are in the program, they must experience a sense of belonging. An honors program with early pre-registration, a center, and an advisory system has an advantage over one without. In addition, the program should aid students in internalizing and understanding their self-doubts. Honors advisors need to be honest in assessing the students' abilities and pointing out problems. A detailed description of the objectives and expectations helps students in pre-registration and at crisis points in the semester as well. Peer advising, sharing sessions, and support groups go far in minimizing students' fears. Honors teachers must not be seen as detectives setting out to expose student frauds. Rather, they must help students accept praise and benefits from positive criticism. In sum, honors faculty members need to remember their own self-doubts as students. And help students overcome theirs.

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FROM AROUND THE COUNTRY

Common Problems Encountered by Beginning Honors Teachers

by Shirley Forbes Thomas (John Brown)

Although I now thoroughly enjoy teaching honors classes, my first experience (three and a half years ago) in teaching an honors composition class was roughly analogous to standing naked under a bare light bulb in a room full of fully-clothed, analytical people. Metaphorically speaking, I felt quite sure that warts, scars, and wrinkles I hadn't thought about in years were being exposed. Worse yet, I discovered some blemishes that I didn't even know existed. The greatest shock, though, was that I had naively believed that I was going to enjoy every moment of teaching the pilot honors course of a new program at John Brown University, although I have taught for more than twenty years and should have known better. I kept wanting to say, "Are we having fun yet?"

At first I thought there was something wrong with me or with the pilot group of students. At the risk of sounding ignoble, I must confess that I told my colleagues that as a whole the new honors students were incredibly humorless and afraid of taking risks, rather than openly blaming myself. I was just hoping that no one would notice what a rotten job I was doing. I have since discovered, with a mixture of relief and chagrin, that the phenomenon I experienced is fairly common and that JBU's first honors students were quite normal.

Negative feelings usually have their genesis in two basic areas: unrealistic expectations of one's self and unrealistic expectations of one's students. I hope that an exploration of these problems will help a nervous teacher or a beleaguered honors director somewhere.

Before I say more, though, I must make a disclaimer: I have no pretensions to being a psychologist, not even of the armchair variety. My area of specialization is Renaissance literature. However, the phenomena discussed in this article are so obvious that they are readily apparent, even to a Renaissance literature person. In cases where behavior characteristics appeared so pronounced that I thought they might have a technical name, I consulted Dr. David Johnson, chairman of John Brown's psychology department; he very graciously either answered my question or steered me toward the right books for an answer.

Almost everybody who teaches an honors class for the first time comments on the difference in his or her expectations and the actuality. Sometimes this difference is a pleasant surprise — for example, finding out that one is capable of growth or that teaching honors students really is sometimes an exhilarating challenge. However, often the gap between expectation and actuality does not seem totally pleasant.

Honors teachers come in all shapes, sizes, and personalities, of course, but I have discovered from talking to my colleagues at JBU and at NCHC that a good many of us apparently share enough personality traits that complicate our honors teaching to merit discussion of a few of the more common traits. Not surprisingly, the profile of an honors professor bears a marked resemblance to the profile of an honors student that Schuman outlines in his *Honors Programs in Smaller Colleges* (17).

One of the most troublesome problems of beginning honors teachers is that we as a group have extraordinarily high and often unrealistic expectations of ourselves. Most of us suffer recurrent bouts of perfectionism. As a general rule, we go into honors thinking that we have to be brilliant, energetic, and scintillating at least 95% of the time to be a success. When, after a few weeks of teaching a new and untested class, we begin to get tired and make some very human mistakes, we often feel a keen sense of failure. After all, we have always believed that if we just had students of this calibre we would be brilliant, energetic, and scintillating teachers.

The shock of the letdown may be so great that a teacher may experience, as some of us at JBU have, what social psychologists such as Fisk and Taylor cite as "objective self awareness" (199) — that is, a professional, qualified professor may suddenly feel that he is watching his own faltering performance and seeing himself as his students see him. This experience is most uncomfortable. One of my particularly secure, brilliant colleagues said to me after having stormed into my office and stated categorically that he would never teach another honors class again: "I could see myself looking really stupid and incompetent and could hear myself stuttering. I'm an experienced, competent professional, and I've published. I don't know what's the matter with me."

A parallel problem is that honors professors, in an effort to create an impressive intellectual climate, often forget that honors should be something different, not necessarily something more difficult. Most fear being branded "easy." Consequently, many devise impossibly difficult or grandiose schemes which have to be revised in the reality of the classroom. Projects which look great on paper fall apart, as the sample case cited later in this article illustrates. Even if we are not too difficult, we sometimes try to include so much "enrichment" that our classes suffer a certain loss of coherence.

It is threatening for some of us to accept that there are no easy answers to the question of evaluation. Because honors classes are often non-traditional, with the professor serving more as facilitator and mentor than as lecturer and test giver, it is often difficult even to know how to evaluate student performance. Also, it is sometimes necessary to allow students to fail in a project without the failure affecting their grades. It is necessary to be frank with students about such problems and perhaps even to involve the students themselves in determining grade policy at the beginning of the semester. However, such relinquishment of control may threaten some professors.

Not only do beginning honors professors often have unrealistic, or faulty, expectations of themselves, but we also often have exaggerated expectations of our students.

One of the most obvious problems that beginning honors teachers everywhere experience is the failure to recognize the developmental levels of honors students. To expect a freshman in an honors general education class to appreciate a stranger's cerebral jokes two weeks into the first semester is not realistic, even if less-talented seniors in the major have previously caught the joke. Total silence and hostile stares in such an instance can be disconcerting. In every area except academic accomplishment, honors students are much the same as their less-gifted friends. As Schuman points out, these students are not necessarily freer of problems, more emotionally mature, or inherently more daring than non-honors students of the same age (17). One of my honors students says quite succinctly, "It is silly to expect brains to equal anything more than brains."

However, honors students do have some special qualities that may cause problems, especially for beginning honors teachers. Most such students have extremely high expectations for themselves. Some are embarrassed at being considered bright; and some, unfortunately, have suffered ridicule by peers (and sometimes even by teachers) because of their gifts. As Schuman says, because of those factors, honors students will sometimes seem to have more counseling needs than their non-honors peers (17). When one scratches the surface, a rather amazing number suffer from what Pauline Rose Clance, as well as others, calls the "Imposter Phenomenon": they, like some honors faculty, are quite sure that their academic success thus far is an accident, or a fluke; that they are really not very bright; and that sooner or later they are going to be unmasked. Slightly over 80% of my last two honors composition classes have indicated by a show of hands that they have experienced such feelings on a fairly regular basis. Many of these students have astronomical ACT and SAT scores and perfect grade point averages. Such students are not afraid of making *B*'s instead of *A*'s; they see each graded exercise or exam as a potential *F*.

Honors professors do well to recognize that they are dealing with students who have learned to navigate the usual currents of academia successfully; in fact, most of them have learned well enough to receive impressive scholarships which are dependent upon their grades. It should, therefore, be no surprise that they seem upset by ambiguity, ambivalence, and risk taking. We need to remember that their parents are even more upset when scholarships are at risk. These students have more to lose than the average student. They usually want things spelled out; the honors teacher quite often wants honors students to figure things out for themselves. For the sake of peace, some sort of compromise may be desirable. That is not to say that honors students should be pampered, but it may be necessary to prepare them more than the average student for assignments that differ radically from what they have come to expect.

The situation is complicated by the fact that honors students, as a rule, analyze their instructors' strengths and weaknesses more than non-honors students. And worse yet, from the point of view of an exhausted, over-extended teacher, they are often more insistently vocal and more articulate in their criticism. These are qualities we always think we want in our students — until they are directed against us.

One humbling experience that I had in Honors Composition will serve to exemplify practically all of the preceding problems. The first year that I taught the class, I planned what I thought was a brilliant project, a group visit to one session of a symposium in nearby Fayetteville, preceded by dinner at my home.

The symposium was a re-examination of the integration crisis that occurred at Little Rock's Central High School in 1957, with world famous (and infamous) figures debating and reading papers on the civil rights movement and the calling out of the national Guard. Advertisements for the symposium included dramatic pictures from that era, showing hostile faces of white adults, terrified and poignant faces of the little group of black students, and stoic faces of armed soldiers. The symposium looked like the stuff of which memorable honors experiences are made. I talked incessantly about what a wonderful learning opportunity it would be. I built it up in my mind and in the minds of the students as a significant kick-off for the honors program at JBU.

The session I had chosen featured a federal judge (a constitutional attorney) who was both black and female, a fact which I thought would make a statement to my students about equality. The whole project seemed to be a marvelous opportunity, the "teaching moment" famous in academic circles.

It was a dismal failure.

I failed to take into account several factors. This event took place just two or three weeks into the first semester of college for these students. They were still trying to adjust to college life. Seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds are not often accustomed to hearing scholarly papers read, and I did not think to prepare them adequately for the fact that the judge would actually be *reading*, although I had used the expression "read a paper." I fed them one of the first homecooked meals most of them had had since leaving home for college; they ate well. They were sleepy when we arrived shortly before 8 p.m. The hall in which the program took place had comfortable theater seats.

I had not heard the judge read before. She read what I am sure was one of the most thoroughly-researched and inclusive accounts of the civil rights movement in the federal courts ever read. Unfortunately though, one of the most dramatic times in U. S. history was reduced to a dry case-by-case listing. For an hour and a half (which seemed much longer), the good judge read in a monotone without ever looking up. She herself appeared to doze occasionally.

Because they were polite people and because they were supposed to write papers in response to what was presented, my students made a truly heroic attempt to stay awake the first 30 minutes; then most gave up the fight.

When we left the hall, one student said, "I think I'm too dumb to be in honors; I didn't understand a word she read." Another ominously quiet little voice asked, "Are all honors classes going to be like this?"

The class in which this occurred was the first honors class offered at JBU. I thought I had killed the program in its infancy. I am still reasonably sure the students forgave me only because I continued to feed them occasionally, because I changed the writing assignment to something other than a response to the judge's paper, and because I promised never to do anything comparable to that again.

It is a legitimate question for a beginning honors teacher to ask, "Is there any way I can avoid some of the pain?" The answer is, of course, to accept one's own fallible humanity, learn to laugh at one's self, and learn as much as possible about the experiences of others who have taught honors classes. Furthermore, honors directors should do everything they can to help prepare new professors for their first experiences.

It is an equally legitimate question to ask why anyone would want to teach an honors class the second time. The answer lies in the nature of honors teachers. We cannot stand defeat; we learn from our failures; we like challenge. After our initiation by fire, we want to see if we can do it better next time, and we usually do. The ancient Greek playwrights spoke the truth when they said that suffering brings knowledge. Most of us ultimately appreciate honors students and classes.

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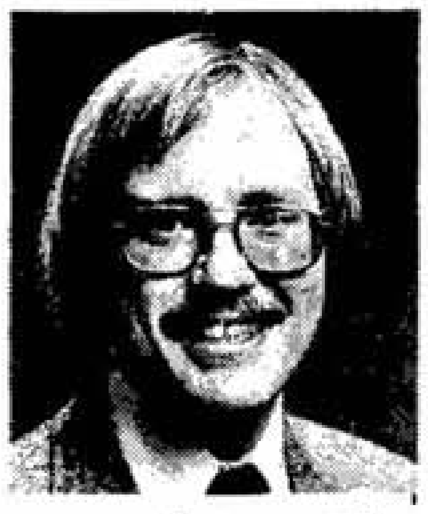
Challenges Of Leading Honors Seminars

by Robert T. Rhode (Northern Kentucky

An earlier version of this paper appeared in the introductory issue of an NKU in-house journal, Celebrating Teachers and Teaching Newsletter.



Well over thirty Northern Kentucky University faculty members have led honors seminars, and many more intend to become involved in the challenges of honors learning. Such strong interest justifies my sharing ideas about teaching honors participants.

While not an elite, the people in honors colloquia are generally better prepared or more accomplished than the typical student. Honors learning is alternative learning — not eggheads engaging in a mutual admiration society. As the pedagogical method in honors, the seminar affords a unique strategy of educating a diverse group of people. In a seminar, the focus of attention shifts from one person to the next, and distinctions between faculty and student disappear. All share the authority equally, no matter how different each person is from every other. The variety of majors, ages, talents, and personalities represented in honors poses the exciting challenge to the faculty member. Participants in honors share only one trait — the motivation to stretch their minds. They, otherwise, resist general description.

In the honors menagerie are frisky colts leaping fences, well-fed lions yawning at potential prey, frightened kittens that must be coaxed out of hiding, ostriches who prefer the sand that they know to the sky that they distrust, hyenas laughing cynically at danger, lone wolves, and pythons that digest big wisdom slowly. Leading an honors seminar can bear a resemblance to touring a zoo and appreciating the diversity of the world. Greater variation exists in the population of honors participants than in the multitude of non-honors students. If anyone suggests that leading an honors seminar is easier than teaching a non-honors course, that individual probably has not yet led an honors seminar.

Many honors participants exhibit a weird rebelliousness, and the faculty member must channel that energy constructively. The classroom atmosphere must be quick (in the sense of "alive") — charged with the anticipation of discoveries about to happen. The classroom environment has the most dramatic effect on whether or not honors people contribute their full potential.

If the vitality of the discussion is anything less than total, students may skip class on occasion, turn in papers a day or two late, write hastily without making the fullest use of their intellect, and mouth threadbare opinions without having examined the rich fabric of original thought. At the first sign of a dimming of the classroom's vibrant light, certain honors participants may rebel in these annoying ways. Honors teachers must know how to share their authority so as to keep boosting the seminar's energy. They must recognize when to lead, when to follow.

In addition to the dynamics deriving from the diversity of the honors population, the problem of competition can thwart the best plans of the well-intentioned professor. Too frequently, honors participants wait to speak until they have evaluated the intellectual abilities and discussion strategies of the others. So long as their taciturnity does not become habitual, the teacher can expect the discussion to begin to flow on that day when the majority of students have resolved that they have equal chances at success. That day resists forecasts and results from the arcane chemistries of the individuals who comprise the class. Honors students were not necessarily exceptional intellects in their previous educational experience; they may have been keen competitors for top grades. This potentially-harmful competitive urge can cause a seminar to be deadly quiet for the first few weeks. For the teacher to yield the power to such a laconic group may lead only to more silence. (Several honors faculty members have stated that honors seminars are initially more quiet than non-honors courses!) The temptation is for the faculty member to talk more, but the successful leader of a seminar must forgo this lure. The best pedagogical technique, I think, is to diminish the elements of competition while accentuating the idea that everyone is to nurture everyone else's learning. I make statements directly addressing this concept, and, surely enough, the conversation begins to flow. . . . and I stay out of it.

The quality of participation faces another obstacle — because students tend to perceive an honors seminar as a humanities course (even though half of the seminars are not strictly humanities-based), participants majoring in humanities may have skewed expectations of seminars which are not primarily humanities-oriented; furthermore, those students majoring in fields other than the humanities may believe that humanities-based honors seminars do not apply to their main areas of interest. People who are reluctant to speak up in honors courses may indeed be shy, but they may also be feeling that the courses are tangential to their primary concerns, that the information is foreign to them, or that they do not know enough about the subject. These fears prevent certain students from participating actively.

I find that to confront these misperceptions early is the best plan. I make an issue out of the true relevance of my course. I seek to convince the participants that my seminar benefits people from any conceivable major. I reassure people that I am taking into account the diversity of their backgrounds and that I want them to contribute their special expertise to our discussions. I try to eliminate fear, to squelch worry, to dismantle misconceptions, and — most of all — to inspire excitement. All the while, I limit my conversation, so as to allow the people in the class to discuss the "applicability issue" freely and openly.

Honors teachers, furthermore, must be careful to give clear explanations of fundamental concepts. Even though participants already possessing this background information could become bored, honors faculty members must attempt never to overlook the obvious. What is obvious to some is occult to others. Honors participants want to *understand* concepts, whereas non-honors students, more often than not, think it is enough to *memorize* concepts. It is incumbent upon the honors faculty member to bear constantly in mind that honors participants desire full comprehension of ideas and that they are not content to commit to memory terms standing for ideas imperfectly realized.

That each participant be given the opportunity to be on as equal a footing as possible with every other participant is essential. The educational paths of certain students have not yet led them to such preliminary materials as the honors teacher would wrongly assume everyone would know. In honors, teachers perform a dance between stimulating the intellect and insulting the intelligence. Avoiding either condescension or complication, they provide clear definitions and examples while they dance.

Finally, honors faculty members get what they expect. When they expect brilliance from their students, they get it —

if and only if the professors demonstrate flexibility and know when to change the comfortable rhythms of a seminar in progress. Honors teachers must seize the moment most propitious for surprising the class by an abrupt change. They may dispense with the preordained syllabus, so as to follow a divergent path that is, at once, more exciting than the road first chosen. By generating surprise, the honors faculty members create concurrently the sense of awe. The classroom becomes a place of wonder! Masters of pacing, the honors teachers realize that timing is all. They work the trick of magic with perfect sleight of hand.

Better yet, when faculty members sense that the participants, themselves, are about to veer from the predicted way, the teachers should have the courage to permit this foray into the unknown . . . for it may well be that the ensuing journey of the seminar participants will lead the faculty members to new realms of thought — to insights stimulating the professor's mind. Such inspiration may well redirect the teacher's own research and stimulate her or his own breakthrough discoveries. The prerequisite faith of allowing the participants to teach the teacher may well be the most exciting challenge of all.

NHR COLUMNISTS

So You Wanna Teach an Honors Course?

by Earl B. Brown, Jr.

Earl Brown directs the honors program at Radford University and writes regularly for NHR.

The director of your honors program has approached you about teaching an honors course. She said that you are known to be one of the better instructors on campus, and that she would like you to teach an introductory honors course in your discipline.

Of course, you are excited. What an opportunity. You readily assent. Later that day you stop to reflect. Do you really want to teach an honors course, and if so, why? The obvious reason is that you want to have a smaller class filled with students eager to learn, students whom your colleagues have told you are the best and the brightest. You also know that the administration looks kindly on faculty involved in the Honors Program. And, besides you can teach that textbook you've always wanted to try out.

All of these are certainly valid reasons to teach honors courses, but they should not be the only reasons. Look back at the reasons listed above. Do you see any thought about your learning from your students? Do you see any reflection on the interaction, the dynamics, involved in such a teaching situation. Your desire to teach honors courses is for basically selfish reasons -- what you can get from it: better students, better evaluations (maybe even promotion), and an opportunity to experiment with a new textbook -- do textbooks, in fact, belong in an honors course?

Even more to the point, what experience have you had teaching honors students? What experience have you had with guiding/leading a discussion? What experience have you had in developing a community of learners? In other words, why should an honors student want to take a course from you? I know we are all outstanding teachers; that's a given in our profession, but outstanding as what? Lecturers? Outstanding in dealing with a wide range of students? Outstanding in creating tests that allow us to separate the wheat from the chaff? What makes us think that our experiences in one situation are transferable to another?

Let me stop for a minute and ask that you grant my hypothesis on the format and structure of an honors course. What I have spelled out above -- smaller class size, discussion format, classroom interaction and interchange (a community of learners), primary sources, students taking more responsibility for their own education, open-ended assignments sometimes involving primary and original research, and perhaps hands-on if not first-hand experience -- characterizes what I believe to be more typical than atypical of honors courses throughout the country.

The solution to being an effective honors teacher seems simple. We'll just turn ourselves into discussion leaders, into builders of communities of learners. It should be easy to do, right? How does a lecture class differ from a class whose emphasis is on discussion, on interchange? How do we become good discussion leaders? Two recent articles in the *NHR* on "Avoiding the Lintilla Syndrome" (Spring 1988) by Bill Whipple and on "Common Problems Encountered by Beginning Honors Teachers" by Shirley Forbes Thomas in which she discusses what she refers to as the "Imposter Syndrome" (Spring 1990) point out the difficulties and fears inherent in such a change.

The first step is clear: we'll arrange all the chairs in a circle. We'll create a community. We'll decenter our classroom (whatever-in-hell that means). By having our students sit in a circle, we'll empower our students. They will have control in this class. There's the key word, empower. If we can just give them power, we will become good honors teachers. How do you empower students? How can you empower students? If we give them power, do they have it? And, when the ultimate power lies in the grade, who's fooling whom? Besides, if we give power away, can't we always take it back? Have we really created a community of learners? As long as the ultimate authority rests in the grade, giving power away, like sitting in a circle, is the appearance of community, not a true community. It's like asking questions--to give the appearance of learning from each other -- when there is one and only one answer, and we have it in our little hands. When we ask (or is it, tell?) students to sit in a circle, aren't we still controlling the classroom?

Let me tell you about one of my many failures in this regard. I forced my freshman composition class to sit in a circle. When they did not do so willingly, I threatened them with sitting in rows alphabetically. When that didn't work and after they were in rows alphabetically (having to move when a student came in late), I assigned one student the role of teacher -- to stand at the podium and lecture at the other students. Then I asked the students if they noticed any differences between sitting in rows and discussing or hearing a lecture. They gave all the right responses. I then asked them the ultimate question -- which way would they prefer to sit? They said, "It doesn't matter."

Turning an honors class into a learning community requires more than circling the chairs and initiating discussion.

So, we're back to the question, how do we become good honors instructors? How do we change appearance into reality? One of the first things we need to do is give them more responsibility. Let them decide what to do each class -- I know we're still in control, we've made the assignment, and in most classes, I'll put on the board the various possibilities for that class. But, when students can decide what they need to use class time for, we're beginning to let them make some of the decisions. Each class let a different student be "teacher." She will decide what to cover and how she wants to cover it -- lecture, discussion with the whole class, discussion in small groups, or, even, oral reports. If we would like to contribute -- as invariably we all will, we will have to raise our hands just like any other student.

I remember an early experience I had with this method. A student came to me after class to say that something she wanted to cover wasn't covered that class period. I told her she would be in charge of the next class in order to cover it. After the next class, she came up to me to say that the students were right, they didn't need to cover it, they already knew the material. But, she said, "reaffirmation never hurt anyone." So, I learned to leave items on the board for about a week.

While we're making students teachers for a class, why not take it a step further. Have the student come to the class with a problem or issue to discuss based on reading or previous class discussion. The student presents the problem with each student -- including ourselves -- writing a solution. The student who presented the problem will collect all the papers and write comments on them, that is to say, evaluate them. I did this with ethical scenarios and found it quite effective. The student became the expert, the authority, on that particular problem or situation. But what was most extraordinary was to read the comments. The tone of these comments was couched in the voice of authority: they were providing a genuine evaluation of the answers, even the teacher's. The confidence gained was immeasurable. And, it underscored that all of us were both teacher and student in the class.

Another method to give them responsibility is to set up class mentors. Let students learn from each other. We all know about group work, so I won't belabor that method. But there are other variations on group work that can be very successful in putting the burden of learning on the students. If one student, say, has succeeded at an assignment, why not let that student help other students who did not understand the assignment. Given the fact that all students have different strengths, invariably each student will be both teacher and learner during the course of the semester. I have found this also works with understanding ideas being discussed in class. At the end of a class period I may ask students to write a question or a comment about a problem they had with class today -- usually it will be something they did not understand. I will then ask the class to swap papers and answer the question for the other student by the next class period. What generally happens is that students will respond with helpful advice. Even when they asked similar questions, they will try to answer their peer's questions, using words such as, "That was my question, too, but here's what I think the solution is." This also has the advantage of reinforcing the notion that when a student asks a question in class, that it wasn't a dumb or silly one -- a defense mechanism I frequently hear before the student blurts out her question (I know this is silly, but . . .).

Another variation on this approach is to let students be a resource for each other -- what one of my students calls the "buddy system." If the class will discuss each other's paper topic during class -- a form of brainstorming -- to help in getting additional ideas, why not let students pair up and share their ideas in advance. In this way the buddy can present the writer's topic to the class and can lead a discussion of it while the writer takes notes. Another variation is to let the buddy write a draft for the writer. This has several advantages: it can demonstrate that the topic is doable; it can provide the writer with additional ideas about content as well as structure and format; it can teach the importance of acknowledging other's work and how to document that acknowledgement; and finally it can give them someone to turn to when they have questions or run into problems. The writer is not allowed to revise the buddy's draft to be turned in. The buddy's draft is like any secondary source -- a resource for the writer.

What all of this does is create a different atmosphere in the classroom, an atmosphere conducive to true honors learning. The teacher is no longer the sole purveyor of rightness, especially if the teacher can avoid the what's-in-my-hand syndrome when asking questions and is willing to listen rather than filling up the silence with noise. What we then are moving towards is a true circle, a true community of learners. We must not delude ourselves into thinking that we can empower others -- for we, as teachers, always hold the ultimate weapon, the grade, but we can learn how to make our classrooms as open as possible so that we all can share in the teaching and learning.

Austin, C. Grey. *Honors Programs: Development, Review, and Revitalization.* National Collegiate Honors Council, 1991.

Rationale and Objectives

In any institution in which the student body is intellectually heterogeneous, two groups of students are disadvantaged by the regular curriculum offerings. At the one end of the continuum are those whose ability or preparation renders them incapable of meeting the challenge of the full program, and at the other extreme re those of such ability and previous achievement that the regular program provides insufficient challenge. There is no difficulty in recognizing that the former group needs specialized counseling, a degree of curricular flexibility, and courses at an appropriate level of difficulty. The premise governing programs for the disadvantaged is that all students should be encouraged and enabled to develop the talents they have. The same premise furnishes the rationale for honors education.

An egalitarian mood is sometimes responsible for charges that honors programs are elitist or undemocratic. Most of these charges are quieted by the response that both democratic and educational principles require not that the same programs be offered to all but that all persons have the opportunity to develop their talents to the fullest. Honors education becomes elitist, at least in the pejorative sense, only when it departs from meeting educational needs and engages in the favoritism of providing special privileges.

Building on the rationale stated above, the Halverson (1973) report posited both educational and institutional objectives. The educational objectives of an honors program are: (1) to identify students whose ability and motivation are so high that their academic needs would not be met adequately by existing programs: (2) to provide academic opportunities of such caliber that the students thus identified are challenged to perform at the highest level of excellence of which they are capable and through which they may become independent learners; (3) to establish an environment that will encourage the aspirations of and the achievements by these students and that will foster in them dignity, self-esteem, and a sense of their potential; and (4) to derive from the program benefits for the wider academic community, such as focusing attention on quality education and a concept of excellence, giving faculty members the psychic reward that derives from working with gifted students, and attracting to the campus scholars and speakers who would not otherwise be there.

Beyond these educational objectives, certain institutional objectives may also be served by an honors program. These include the following:

First, honors programs assist in attracting students of outstanding academic ability. Many candidates for participation in an honors program have already discovered what it is to be bored by an insufficiently rigorous secondary school program. Those who are worthy of being designated as "honors students" will be seeking a program that will challenge them to the fullest. The very existence of an honors program attracts those students who can benefit most from such a program. These students are an asset, not only for their participation in the teaching-learning process, but also for their contributions in leadership roles and for the enhanced possibilities of winning Rhodes, Marshall, NSF or other prestigious scholarships.

Second, honors programs can assist in attracting and retaining faculty members committed to quality education. The opportunity to teach honors students, like the opportunity to teach graduate students, has a special attraction for many college teachers. Outstanding teaching talent is always in short supply, and honors teaching may attract and hold those whom the institution would least like to lose.

Third, honors programs can assist in attracting funds that would not otherwise be available. A significant number of honors programs have participated in projects funded by both public and private agencies and donors.

Finally, honors programs can enhance the public image of the institution as a place where superior scholarship is honored and encouraged. A college that maintains an honors program exhibits to the world that the cultivation of learning is a value that is cherished. Phi Beta Kappa asks institutions that apply for a chapter to provide a description of the honors program and evidence of strong student participation.

Curriculum

Enrichment. Although honors programs differ in many ways, they have in common the offering of rigorous, coherent, and integrative academic experiences and a high degree of student-faculty interchange. In smaller institutions and in some comprehensive universities an honors core curriculum will consist of, or include, sequences of interdisciplinary courses or colloquia. In universities that prescribe distribution requirements the honors courses are likely to be rigorous, low-enrollment, faculty-taught versions of regular courses, with integration achieved through individualized curricula that are required to be coherent as well as rigorous and that may include interdisciplinary seminars. An honors education is often capped by an individual research experience that culminates in a senior thesis and an oral examination. The tutorial relationship that characterizes the senior research project is sometimes extended to other facets of the curriculum as well.

Most honors curricula may be subsumed under one of two categories: general and departmental honors. General honors refers to alternatives to the regular general education program. Subject matter is explored with greater intensity and depth, concepts are examined, and research patterns are introduced. The sections, courses, or interdisciplinary colloquia are taught by faculty members who are adept at the seminar approach and who are able to work particularly well with students of exceptional ability and commitment to learning.

Honors classes are small (eight to 25 students), because, as McKeachie (1969, pp.79-80) points out, bright students learn better than other students in a highly participatory process and because the target audience is never more than a small percentage of the student body. Wherever appropriate in such courses, primary sources and original documents replace textbooks. Lecturing is at a minimum, and the subject matter is usually approached selectively. Honors courses in the sciences, mathematics, and certain other fields require attention to the sequence of study, but they can be taught imaginatively with challenging problems that go beyond the "cookbook" approach, extended laboratory hours, and an introduction to independent research. The honors-section approach need not be limited to basic or lower division courses, but the need is most evident at that level. This approach is economically most feasible as an alternative to a large lecture class.

An honors approach to teaching, combining intensive attention to content with participatory learning and close student-faculty collaboration, is designed to match developmental functions. The intended outcome of an honors education is a knowledgeable and effective person. Consequently, thee is concern not only with how information may be transmitted most effectively but also with how it can be integrated with other knowledge the student possess and with his or her developing skills, appreciations, and perspectives. In an increasing number of honors programs, faculty are applying William G. Perry's (1968) theories of cognitive and ethical development, experimenting with the building of effective learning environments, responding to differences in learning and teaching styles, and planning courses in accord with what is known about structures of knowledge in various disciplines and in interdisciplinary areas. These factors affect both formal instruction and the informal interaction that characterizes life in honors housing, honors lounges, and other aspects of the honors community.

The mainstay of departmental honors is independent study in a tutorial relationship with a faculty member --an apprenticeship with a practicing scholar and an invaluable experience for the prospective graduate student. In most such programs the project will span the senior year or even the junior and senior years. The culmination of the project is the senior honors thesis or creative project on which the student is examined by a faculty committee. This experience is enhanced if it has been preceded by or carried on concurrently with honors seminars in basic concepts and methodology. Many universities now support the research projects by awarding undergraduate research scholarships or grants.

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Hooray for Honors

by Frank Hartigan, University of Nevada, Reno

Douglas Coupland's 1991 book *Generation X* created a label and set a tone for an entire generation of young Americans. I was introduced to Coupland's book one day in a bookstore when I encountered some collegians who had attended high school with my daughter. We caught up on news and discussed various issues before the conversation turned to this term, "Generation X." I asked what it meant and what they thought of it. In answering these questions, they led me to the book and urged me to read it. As I thumbed through it, we discussed how terrible conditions were and how truly lost this generation is. The term "slacker" was soon on our lips followed by the names of individuals from their high school class whom they regarded as genuine slackers. I bought the book and headed home to read it and get depressed. I read it; I got depressed.[1]

Our original honors program barely achieved orbit and then, rather than emulate one of NASA's great successes, it limped along like the Russian space station MIR, never falling from the sky but requiring repair after repair.

At the time, my honors program was in its third year as a completely new edition of an older program that was launched in 1962 along with John Glenn, but without the preparation he enjoyed. Glenn's mission was a great success and he entered into the pages of history. Our original honors program barely achieved orbit and then, rather than emulate one of NASA's great successes, it limped along like the Russian space station MIR, never falling from the sky but requiring repair after repair. One thing was clear, the old honors program had fallen from the radar screen of the students and few students even knew it existed. Finally, the old honors program was called home, and we determined to begin again. The responsibility of creating a new program fell to me.

I point this out because in 1991 when Coupland's book appeared, I did not have enough experience in honors to challenge Coupland or the army of pundits lamenting the state of our youth. A few voices were raised in defense of youth, but these were lost amid the cacophony of hammer blows from the media whose noisy rhetoric of hyperbole and alarm was being echoed by the complaining adults. In a nation hungry for labels, we had slapped one on our youth to go along with those on our clothing, shoes, and handbags. They were "Generation X" and this meant that they were "slackers."

Concern for the state of our youth continues to sound alarms. The annual survey of college freshmen by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program of the American Council on Education conducted by UCLA for fall, 1997, found our collegians in a sorry state. The *New York Times*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and local newspapers across the country reported the results with somber and alarming headlines. *The American Freshmen: National Norms for Fall 1997*[2] found record levels of academic disengagement, political interest hit a new low, and freshmen even engaged in record levels of smoking.

Recently Arthur Levine and Jeanette S. Cureton published *When Hope and Fear Collide: A Portrait of Today's College Student.*[3] The authors' note that about 1990 when we began to label the youth as "Generation X," a marked change in student attitudes occurred. In previous research about students in the 1970's, Levine had found students "optimistic about their personal futures but pessimistic about the future of the country." He called this the "Titanic ethic": the ship is doomed but students were "determined to make the voyage as luxurious as possible and go first class." Students became more self-centered, more materialistic, and more interested in the "platinum professions" of business, law, and medicine. Vietnam and Watergate had negatively shaped their generation's experience, causing students to turn away from politics and government. Their focus shifted from national issues to local issues and from social policy issues (civil rights, for example) to consumer concerns. Levine further found that students were less well prepared academically, but they were receiving higher grades.

In his current publication, Levine and his colleague, Jeanette Cureton, report that students are optimistic, but they are also scared because "everything seems to be falling apart." Socially, students are less connected to one another and to the campus because "more of them work and for longer hours, attend college part-time, and live off campus." They tend to be more socially isolated and afraid of getting hurt. Their life goals include "belief in the American dream more than ever but fearful about jobs, student loan debt, and even moving back home with their parents."

As the director of an honors program, I wanted to know more about my students. I had many questions concerning them. Why did they want to be part of any honors program? What did they expect from an honors program? Did honors affect their decision to attend my university? Did they believe honors would help them academically? intellectually? socially? and even personally? How would honors influence their careers? What are their academic values?

To answer these questions, I developed a brief survey designed to take little time or trouble to administer. The questionnaire is academic in focus. Such important issues as family life, sexual issues, religious and political beliefs are not part of this survey. Moreover, the survey concerns honors students only. I sought to gain a snapshot of student views at the moment they entered the university but before classes began. I wanted to know what they expected of us. Accordingly I asked honors deans and directors at five western universities to administer the survey at the initial gathering of their students at pre-semester retreats, orientation sessions, convocations, and the like. I wanted to survey the students after they had clearly left high school behind and before they were swamped with college work and activities: that moment when their attention was fixed directly ahead on the college career that lay before them. In short, I wanted to know who was entering honors programs and why, and did these students differ from the stereotype of "Generation X." The results of the survey enabled me to come to know this generation of honors students better, and the results help guide my honors program. The results were shared with the universities involved and presented in my plenary address to the Developing in Honors section of the NCHC meeting in Chicago in 1998.

Most rejected the idea that honors is elitist, while slightly fewer than half reported that honors influenced their decision to attend their university.

According to the survey, students have a surprisingly high commitment to learning. When asked to arrange in order thirteen possible reasons for choosing honors, students selected "high quality education" as their first choice, "better classes" was second, and "career goals" was third. When asked what they expected from honors, students put admission to post-graduate school first, enhanced undergraduate experience second, and third place was a tie between "more faculty contact" and career goals. Most students thought honors courses would involve more work than regular courses, but few felt that participation in honors would lower grades. Most rejected the idea that honors is elitist, while slightly fewer than half reported that honors influenced their decision to attend their university. Student comments written on the survey forms included statements such as "get me into medical school!" and "hooray for honors!"

What conclusions can we draw and what do these results mean for developing our honors programs? Our students are definitely interested in academic quality and are determined to gain a good education. Students today are beset by many problems not covered in this survey: high cost, dysfunctional families, global economy, corporate downsizing, racial and ethnic issues. Only a Dr. Pangloss would dismiss the importance of these problems in shaping today's student. But if we look at the academic interests of entering honors freshman, we can take heart. These Generation Xers possess a solid commitment to learning. Vocational goals are indeed a strong motivation among honors students, but they are in balance with intellectual goals. It is our task as honors educators to build on the excitement and commitment of these entering freshmen and to see to it that they receive the challenge they crave and the education that they deserve.

Students expect that honors will improve their undergraduate experience, they expect close contact with faculty, and above all they regard honors as a stepping stone to graduate and professional school — "get me to medical school" remains a common mantra among them. As we develop our programs, honors educators must do our very best by, for, and with these students so that "hooray for honors" becomes proclaimed throughout the land.

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