

For Whom the Business Bell Tolls: Honors in America

JEFFREY A. PORTNOY

GEORGIA PERIMETER COLLEGE

In past pages of *JNCHC*, I have argued the inappropriateness of believing that educational institutions should adhere to a business model or think of students as customers (“Business”). For supporting evidence, one need not peer far beyond the Savings & Loan Crisis, the housing bubble, the insider manipulations and profiteering on Wall Street, or the relationship between college tuition and the real costs of educating a student. I worked on Wall Street and at Rockefeller Center in the mid-1970s as a junior businessman. I was involved with the silver bullion trade when the Hunts manipulated the market, sending silver prices skyrocketing to unprecedented heights before the inevitable collapse. The playing field in the world of finance is not level: the brokers on Wall Street have access to information that the public does not.

The inner workings of academic institutions can be as mysterious as Wall Street shenanigans. Recently, a past president ran Georgia Perimeter College into a debt of five million dollars a year for five years running before someone noticed the twenty-five million dollar shortfall. This five-year fiasco took place under the leadership of a University System of Georgia chancellor who had been hired to implement a business model and had been selected at least in part because of his purported business acumen. Fiscal responsibility does matter at institutions of higher learning, especially when they are public and supported by taxpayers, but colleges are not businesses. The consequences of irresponsibility profoundly affect students, faculty, and staff as well as teaching, research, and service activities. Witness the repercussions at GPC of almost three hundred people losing their jobs because of financial mismanagement. Not just they but their families, colleagues, students, and communities suffered the loss of these employees. The faculty who were left behind to do their work and more—higher teaching loads and more classes—struggled to restore the institution to financial solvency. Students especially suffered the consequences despite everyone’s best efforts to maintain quality with diminished resources.

Fiscal responsibility, however, while critical, serves as only one barometer for assessing a business or a college; moral and ethical behavior matters as well. As Gary Bell aptly notes, the goal of a business is to be profitable, and that is far from the *raison d'être* of honors programs and colleges. "Honors has always been," writes Bell, "in supermarket terminology, a 'loss-leader,' a below-cost service designed to attract excellent students to the institution." The bottom line of enrichment for non-profit institutions of higher learning is the education of students; in contrast, for-profit colleges enrich the investors' coffers. The missions are not the same. I expect Georgia Perimeter College and its honors program to adhere to a certain standard of academic and moral integrity, and I expect the same of organizations to which I commit myself like the National Collegiate Honors Council and its Publications Board. When these standards are not met, I am not passive or silent about my misgivings, as I recently demonstrated in my passionate resistance to NCHC's drive toward certification, which in my view emanated from a flawed and troubling executive process. In taking stands against authority, I hope that I serve as a model for my students; I want them to challenge authority, to speak and act when they perceive that a process and subsequent results have gone awry.

At that operational level and in the realm of process, I am concerned with the business strategies and practices of the company that distresses Bell: American Honors. The buzz about AH, especially among the membership of the NCHC's Two-Year Committee, caught my attention at the 2012 annual conference in Boston when a representative from the NCHC Executive Committee came to a session for two-year colleges, ostensibly to assuage the concerns of that group. That effort was not successful; in fact, this representative spoke favorably of AH and its endeavors and characterized his own role, as the official minutes of the meeting reflect, "as a conduit between NCHC and AHI [sic]." I have no idea what serving as "a conduit" means in these circumstances. I do not know what that expression means or signifies within the context of NCHC, nor do I know if that conduit still exists or ever existed. But what I do know is that the conjuring of that image and that language from an officer of this organization is troubling. I know of no other entity being identified with and enjoying conduit status with NCHC or sharing that descriptor. I do suspect, though, that NCHC at some point may need to formulate a position on its relationship with for-profit "honors" organizations.

Shortly after the Boston NCHC conference, I was forwarded an email that the president of American Honors had sent to four people (not me) on the Sunday before the conference, with the subject heading "Re-Introduction to American Honors, coffee in Boston?" What was profoundly disturbing to me was that beneath the text was posted a list of twenty-five names that included some close and valued honors colleagues, as well as my own name, with

academic affiliations and email addresses. Inclusion of this list could not have been an accident; admittedly, my technological skills could use some honing, but I have never accidentally appended twenty-five people's names, colleges, and email links to a message after my signature. The email did not identify why this catalog of twenty-five names appeared in the letter, but its placement between the AH president's signature and his corporate affiliation certainly implied that these people, including me, were endorsing his enterprise.

Like all good Americans who believe that their name and reputation have been commandeered, I contacted my lawyer. On advice of counsel, I contacted the president of AH on 28 January 2013, and the following is the bulk of my message to him:

I have been forwarded an email that you apparently sent on 11 November 2012. . . . Note that you did not include me as a recipient of that email. A copy of that email is attached below.

At the bottom of your email is a list of people that includes my name. I did not give you or your organization my permission to use my name, nor was I asked for permission. Had I been asked, I would not have agreed. I do not understand why or how my name and contact information came to be included on a list generated by you and part of the correspondence to these people without my consent. I am most distressed by this inappropriate and unauthorized use of my name because it implies my support for your organization, which I did not and do not support. It is an unwarranted usurpation of my standing and reputation in the honors community. Such behavior is antithetical to the academy and how it conducts business and to my standards of behavior in and out of the academy.

For the record, I neither endorse nor support your enterprise, and I am writing to you to request that you cease and desist from including me or my name in any future communications and further that you take the steps necessary to correct the deliberate misimpression that you created by listing me in your email. I expect a complete and full accounting of the text and recipients for any and all correspondence that included unauthorized use of my name. In addition, I would appreciate your copying me and my attorney on all correspondence that you send in order to rectify this situation.

I have copied my legal counsel. . . .

My request for an explanation and retraction generated a terse reply that AH would happily comply, would not use my name again, and looked forward to meeting me.

I decided to drop the matter having made my point and assuming that AH was now fully aware of me and of my stance vis-à-vis their operation. That assumption proved to be inaccurate. On 24 July 2013, AH sent a query to GPC's interim president trying to establish a business relationship with the honors program, a program that I have nurtured since 1992. That email was not copied to me. Fortunately, my relationship with the GPC administration is a good one, and they hold the honors program in high esteem as I have described in an earlier *JNCHC* essay, "An Honors Koan." The interim president forwarded the email to me, seeking my input and ultimately putting the decision in my hands. Not surprisingly, GPC passed on the opportunity to engage the services of AH.

Process matters. If I wanted to engage with an institution's honors program, I would want to make sure that its director was privy to and part of the negotiations from the onset. I would insist that any opening gambit to a college's president be copied to the honors director. Moreover, I would make sure that the director was copied on all correspondence.

One of my GPC colleague's favorite admonitions is not to confuse conspiracy for incompetence. Perhaps AH was merely using data base information and a computer without human oversight to generate emails and the program reached the letter "G." I am deeply troubled, though, by the modus operandi of American Honors, which may be typical of the way things work in the business world but which is unethical in my world of honors. One of the courses recommended for business majors at Georgia Perimeter College is housed in the philosophy department: Logic and Critical Thinking. I am pleased that the Faculty Senate just approved an honors version of this course that will be offered next year, but I now wonder if that philosophy/business course needs relabeling: Logic, Critical Thinking, and Honorable Practices.

REFERENCES

- Portnoy, Jeffrey A. "Business and Educational Values." *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* 7.1 (2006): 47–51. Print.
- . "An Honors Koan: Selling Water by the River." *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* 14.2 (2013): 47–51. Print.