

# Honors Teachers and Academic Identity: What to Look For When Recruiting Honors Faculty

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The word “honors” naturally carries distinction. To be a collegiate honors student implies a higher level of academic achievement than other students as well as the more challenging academic experience that comes with smaller class sizes. Collegiate honors teachers have a distinction of their own. Being an honors teacher implies a high level of teaching achievement, and it requires special traits that honors directors need to look for in recruiting faculty. Guidance in determining what traits best characterize excellence in honors teaching is a useful tool for honors administrators who are trying to create an identity for their honors faculty.

Creating a productive balance between work and personal life for all college faculty—much less honors faculty—can be challenging, especially given the variety of institutional types and structures that constitute academic culture (Tolbert; Varia), but discovering a way to get teaching, professional, and personal identities to work together produces benefits not only for individuals

but also for the professional organization in which they work, as Beauregard and Henry and also Rice, Frone, and McFarlin argue in their respective studies on “work-life balance” and “work-nonwork conflict.” Academic identity can combine teaching and non-teaching activities into one identity, and honors teaching is a special subset where this combined identity is perhaps especially important in attracting the right students. Commonalities that exist among honors teachers are thus of special interest to honors administrators in recruiting faculty. The purpose of this study is to help honors administrators recruit faculty by identifying traits they should look for.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Teaching Identity**

The bulk of existing research on teaching identity is focused on K–12 teachers and on development through education and experience (Cooper & Olson; Johnson; Lortie; Miller). Day, Sammons, and Gu identify three components of teaching identity: life outside of school (personal), social and policy expectations of what a good educator is (professional), and direct working environment (situational); their research suggests that effective teachers are those who can balance these three components. Specific traits that other researchers describe as important to teacher behavior are job satisfaction, occupational commitment, self-efficacy, and level of motivation (Ashton & Webb; Firestone; Schwarzer & Jerusalem; Toh, Ho, Riley, & Hoh; Watt & Richardson).

### **Identity and the Academic**

The basic identity of an academic typically includes at least the traditional triumvirate of teaching, research, and service. According to research by Freese, teachers develop their identity through (1) reflection on their professional role, mission, and self, (2) reflection on past experiences, and (3) reflection on how changes in work behavior and habits might affect future outcomes. Agency, or the power to implement change, is a part of identity affected by the specific role an academic has within an institutional structure. Kelchtermans’s work on the role of self-understanding, self-image, self-esteem, job motivation, task perception, and future prospects supports Freese’s work on the role of reflection in identity formation.

Research on teacher identities by the British education scholar Skelton identifies three main roles of the academic: “teaching specialists,” “blended

professionals,” and “researchers who teach.” Teaching specialists typically do not take part in any professional activities outside of teaching. Blended professionals are the more typical academics, with responsibilities in teaching, advising, and scholarly work; these individuals spend the bulk of their time teaching and advising students, with scholarly research or creative activities making up 20–30% of their time. Researchers who teach have a reversed role, with scholarly activities taking up the highest percentage of their time and teaching limited to one or two classes a semester or academic year. One might add administrators to this group, who typically hold terminal degrees, possess experience in one or more academic areas, and spend the majority, if not all, of their service time within the academic unit. Research by MacFarlane identifies traits of academics who are intellectual leaders: role model, mentor, advocate, guardian, acquirer, and ambassador. Academic leaders are typically department heads, tenured faculty, and/or nationally recognized experts in their field.

Most academics operate with a high degree of autonomy yet may collaborate with other faculty in the areas of research, departmental service, and team-teaching. The level of collaboration is at the discretion of the faculty member and is not a constant, suggesting that external forces have less impact on the development of academic identity than on professional identities in other fields.

## **Collegiate Honors and Academic Identity**

Honors curricula are typically structured in smaller sections of existing courses taught by outstanding teachers. As a result, honors programs often enjoy not only the best and brightest students but the best and brightest faculty who have significant experience and demonstrated excellence in teaching. Dealing with high student quality and limited class enrollment should make the role easier, but there may be challenges unique to academics in honors that have yet to be explored, and these challenges may arise from differences between academic disciplines. Research by Coldron and Smith, for instance, suggests that the professional identity of teachers can reflect the teaching landscape within their particular discipline. At the same time, while teachers within a certain discipline may share some common elements of a teaching identity, differing academic roles (Sugrue) and institutional structures (Becher) may prevent them from sharing an overall common academic identity. Two key components of identity development found throughout the research literature, however, are reflection and fluidity, and since identity is always evolving, our understanding of it will always be only provisional.

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

A convenience sample of honors teachers was gathered using contact data (phone and email) provided by the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC). The NCHC provided contact information for 738 honors directors and faculty from 841 institutions belonging to the NCHC. A snowball sample approach was also taken, as participants were contacted via email and asked to pass the survey link along to other current honors faculty within their institution. The number of completed surveys was 269.

### PROCEDURE

An online survey was created using the QuestionPro; it consisted of general demographic information plus Likert-scaled and open-ended questions asking participants to rate aspects of their academic identity. The survey questions addressed the broad areas of individual self-understanding, professional role and expectations, and the influence of situational factors, both internal and external, within these areas, coordinating descriptive statistical information and qualitative and quantitative (years of experience) variables. Participant identity was kept anonymous, and responses were not linkable to any identifiable information. The survey was open from February 10 until February 23, 2015.

The first part of the survey focused primarily on the collection of data on both the assigned and perceived academic role, specific discipline, and teaching experience, with questions based on the research of Skelton and of MacFarlane and using categorical and numeric (years of experience) question items.

The second part included verbal frequency and rank-order questions relating to job satisfaction, occupational commitment, and level of motivation, which were common identity themes found in the literature reviewed.

The third part of the survey asked verbal frequency questions relating to self-efficacy, task perception, and prospective (and perceived level of) influence within faculty roles and institutions informed by the research of Kelchtermans and the General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE) developed by Schwarzer and Jerusalem, which has been used for over twenty years with proven reliability and validity.

The fourth part of the survey asked categorical and numeric questions specific to the participants' experience teaching within honors programs along with open-ended questions asking for qualitative information on their honors teaching experiences and teaching philosophies.

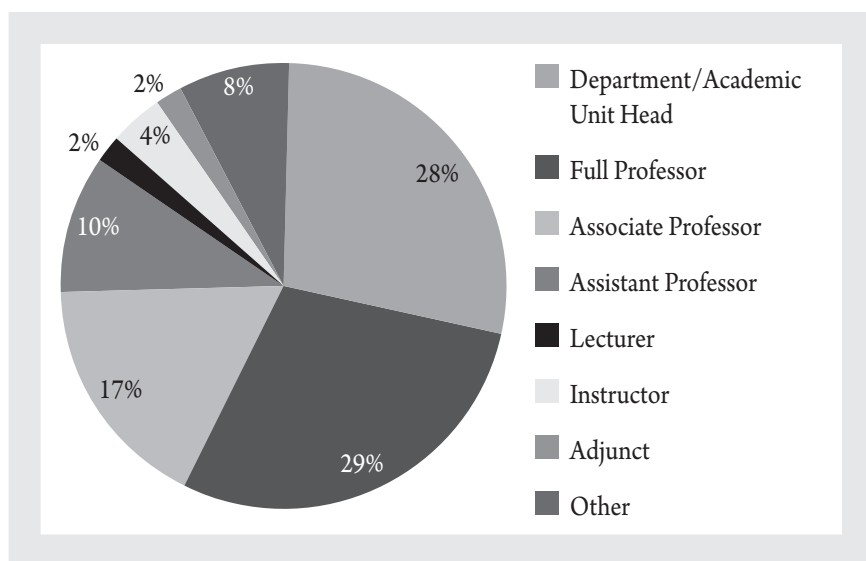
Data analysis included summary statistics of the overall results as well as contingency tables for evaluating the relationship between data on rank, role, and experience, on the one hand, and individual self-understanding, role expectations, and the influence of external factors on the other.

## RESULTS

### Participant Details

From 327 starts, 269 individuals completed the survey, creating an 82% completion rate. No geographic, race, gender, or institutional data were collected. The largest portion of participants indicated the rank of full professor at 29%, with department or academic head at 28% (Figure 1). Sixty percent of participants indicated 15 years or more of teaching experience at the college level, with the largest portion of participants (39%) having completed 1–5 years teaching in an honors program (Figure 2). Thirty-seven percent of participants indicated a blended professional role (primarily teaching, with 25–30% research/scholarship/creative activity), and 28% indicated a 100%

**FIGURE 1. ACADEMIC RANK AND POSITION**



teaching role (teaching specialist category). Of the 32% indicating they held a role other than the choices listed, 72% indicated teaching as part of that role.

As expected, participants with a higher academic rank possessed more overall collegiate teaching experience than those of lesser rank, whereas a larger percentage of experience among the lower ranks comes from honors programs (Figure 2). How participants came to teach in an honors program was more varied, with the largest portions either volunteering (37%) or being specifically requested for honors involvement (36%).

## **Individual Self-Understanding**

Questions relating to understanding one's role and how this understanding connects to the understanding of self and personal motivation were asked using a Likert-scaled ranking of agreement.

### *Meaningful Work*

Sixty percent of all respondents indicated they that found their work extremely meaningful, with no respondents indicating that they found no meaning in their work (Figure 3). When asked to indicate the frequency which they found their work meaningful and difference-making, the majority of respondents indicated either often (50%) or always (39%).

The largest percentage of respondents (44%) reported that their opinions mattered to faculty peers, with 5% feeling their opinions did not matter at all (Figure 4). Sixty percent of respondents stated they often felt easy about expressing their opinions to other faculty and administrators. The majority indicated that they were either very motivated (46%) or extremely motivated (43%) in their work. Fifty-two percent of respondents stated that they often felt appreciated and valued (Figure 5), and the majority also indicated that their immediate supervisor understood their strengths and made sure they used them on a regular basis (Figure 6).

### *Job Satisfaction*

The majority of participants stated they were either satisfied or very satisfied (46% each) with their job (Figure 7). The majority of participants also agreed they were a good fit in their academic unit (Figure 8). Almost all (over 99%) participants stated they found joy in helping a struggling student do well.

In terms of realistic expectations, 37% indicated that the expectations associated with their position were very realistic, with 35% indicating a moderate level and 6% stating not at all realistic (Figure 9).

Over half of respondents stated they found their job very challenging, with none indicating no challenge (Figure 10).

The majority (63%) indicated that their challenges were often positive, with 24% stating that the challenges were always positive. In terms of stress, 34% indicated feeling moderately stressed about their work in a typical week, with 29% indicating feeling stressed very often (Figure 11).

In terms of compensation, 41% of respondents stated that they were moderately satisfied with their pay, with 25% being very satisfied and 8% extremely satisfied. Seven percent indicated being not at all satisfied with their pay, and 19% were only slightly satisfied (Figure 12).

Participants were pleased overall with their current situation, with 58% reporting that they were not at all likely to look for an academic position outside of their institution and 82% that they would not consider leaving academia.

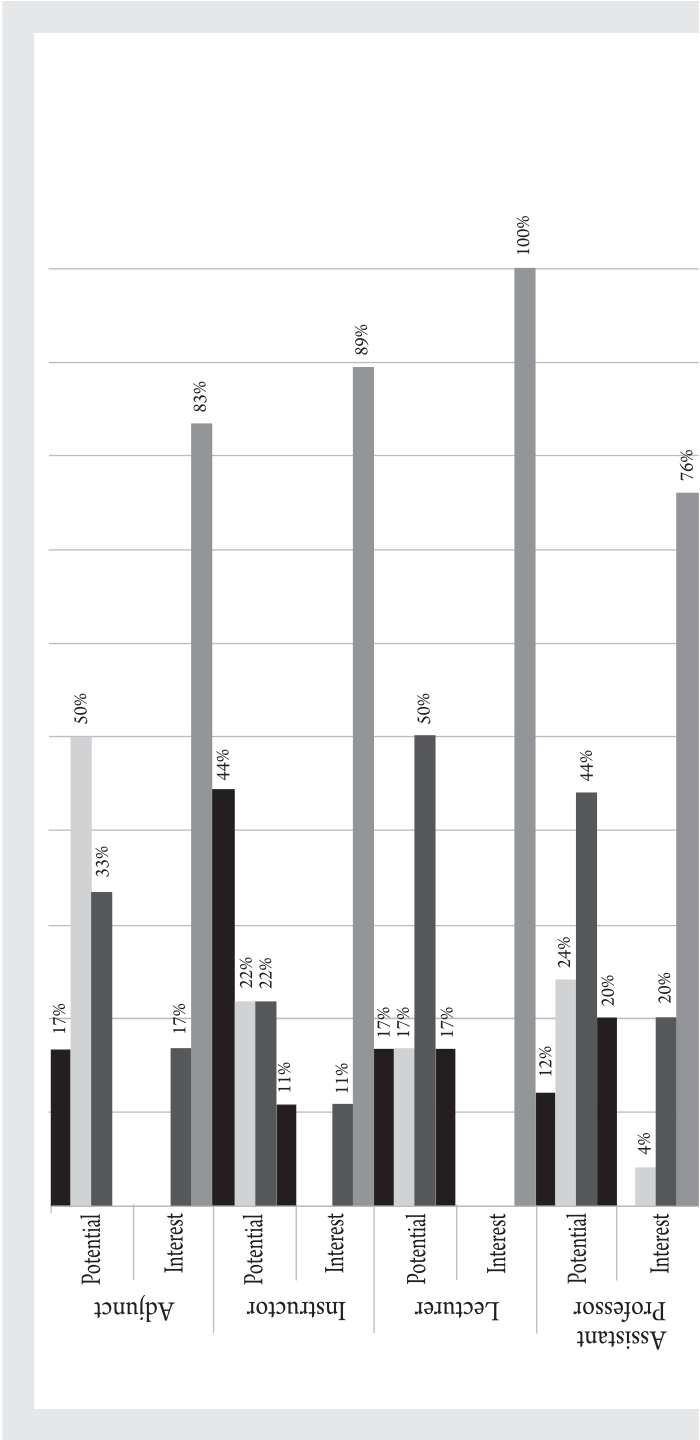
### *Self-Efficacy*

This study included 10 questions (Figure 13) based on the General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE) developed by Schwarzer and Jerusalem. The instrument uses a four-point scale, with 4 indicating that the statement is 'Exactly true' and 1 indicating 'Not at all true,' creating a range from 10 to 40, with a higher score indicating a higher level of self-efficacy. The mean, median, and mode among participants were 32, indicating a high level of self-efficacy (Figure 14). The majority of participants believed they could always manage to solve difficult problems (98%) by finding several solutions and could deal positively with opposition (79%), with just less than 1% indicating a lack of confidence in dealing with unexpected events or situations.

### *Work-Life Balance*

When asked about balancing personal and professional roles, the results were more diverse. While the largest portion (41%) agreed that they have a good balance between roles, approximately 22% indicated a lack of good balance (Figure 15). The majority of participants either agreed (47%) or strongly agreed (38%) that they could easily incorporate their own beliefs into their role as educator (Figure 16).

FIGURE 2. COLLEGIATE AND HONORS TEACHING EXPERIENCE





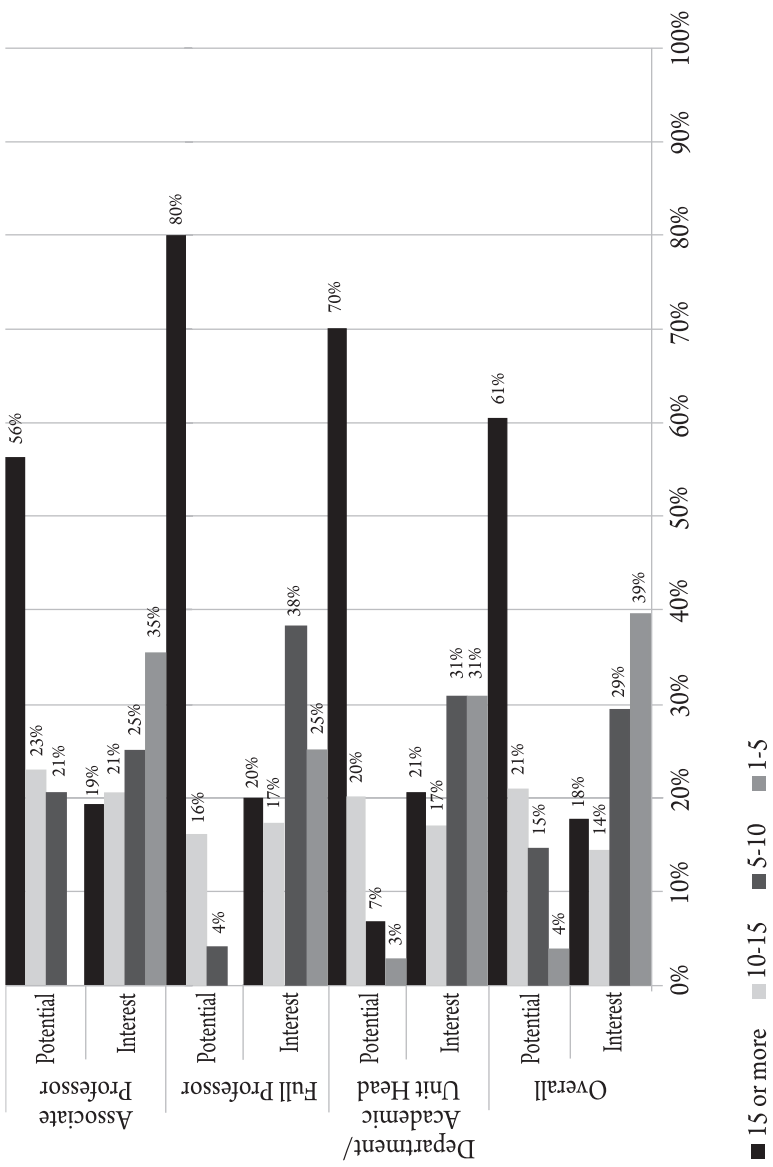


FIGURE 3. LEVEL OF MEANING FOUND IN WORK

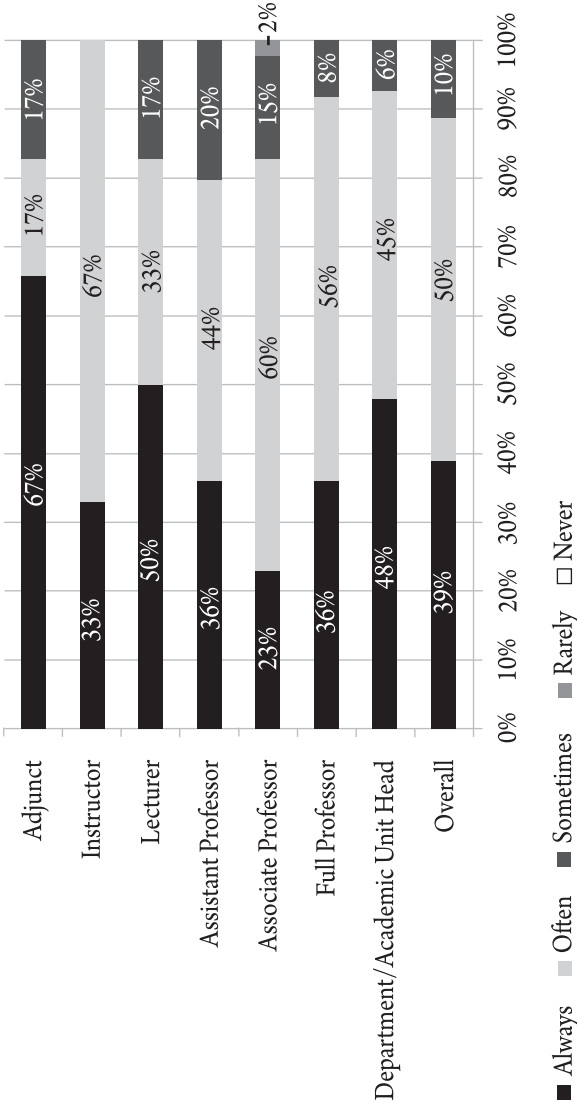


FIGURE 4. FELT THAT OPINIONS MATTERED

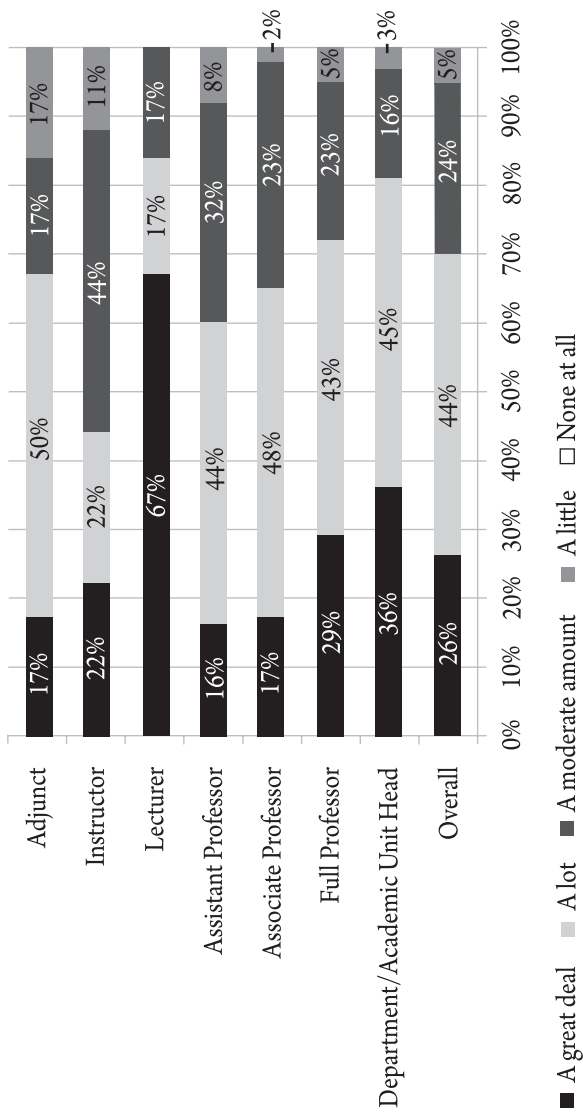


FIGURE 5. FELT APPRECIATED & VALUED

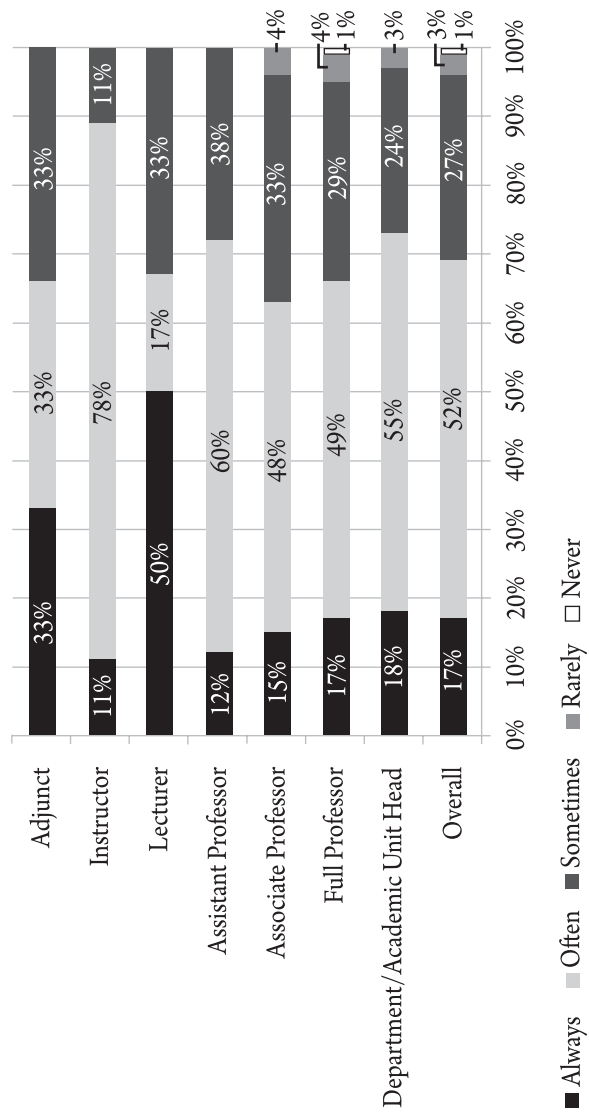


FIGURE 6. SUPERVISOR UNDERSTANDING OF INDIVIDUAL STRENGTHS

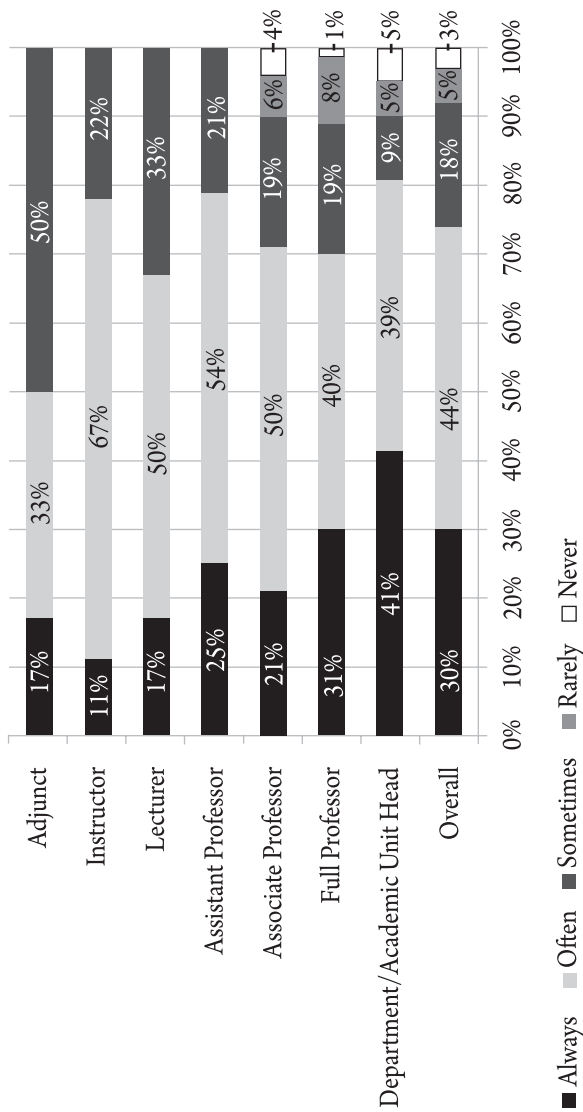


FIGURE 7. OVERALL JOB SATISFACTION

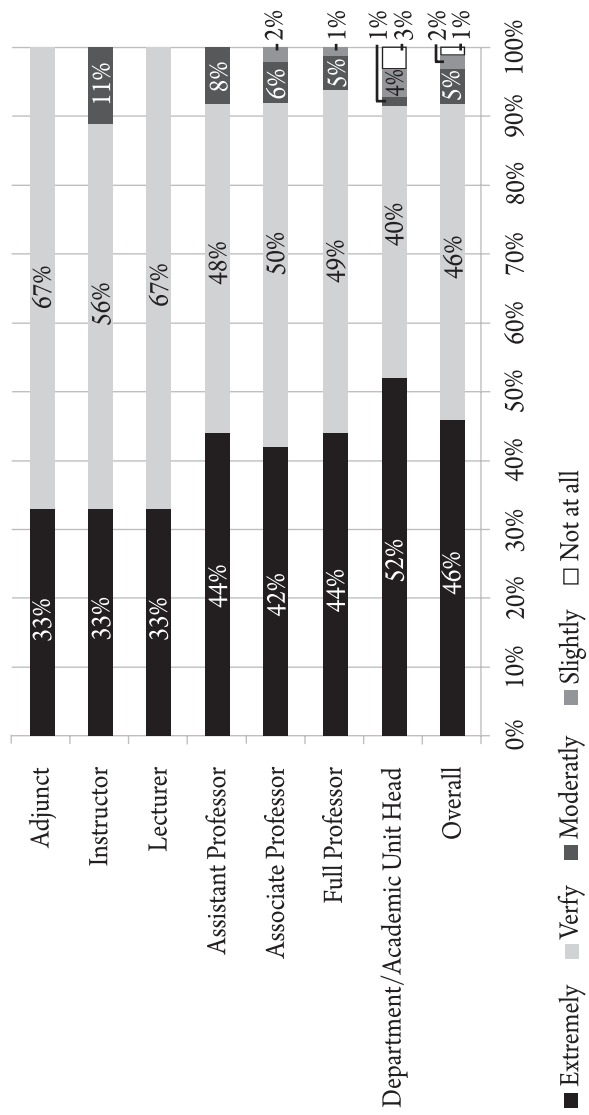


FIGURE 8. GOOD FIT WITH ACADEMIC DEPARTMENT

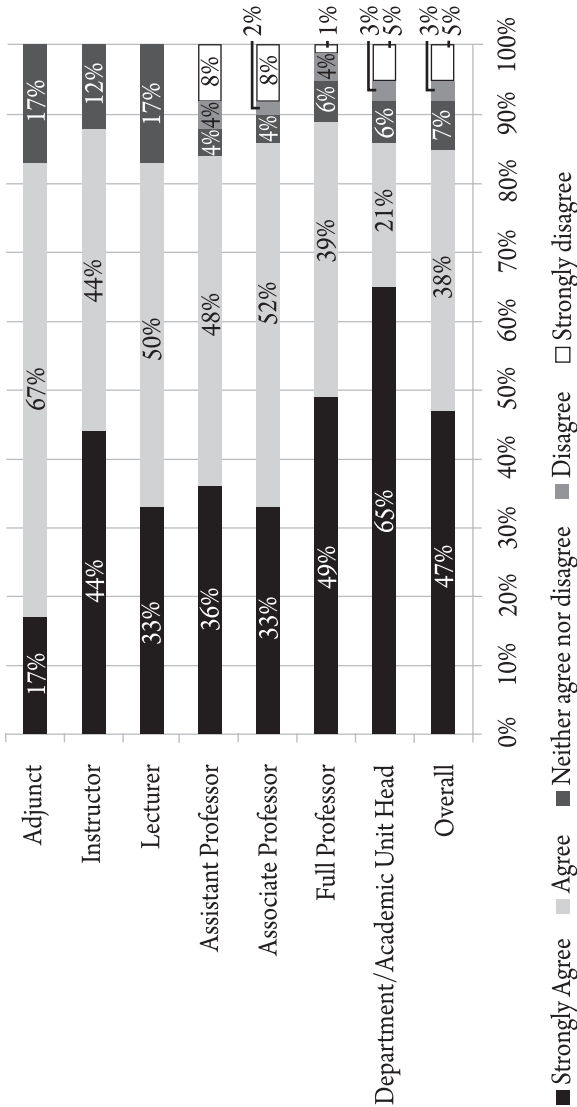


FIGURE 9. REALISTIC EXPECTATION OF ROLE

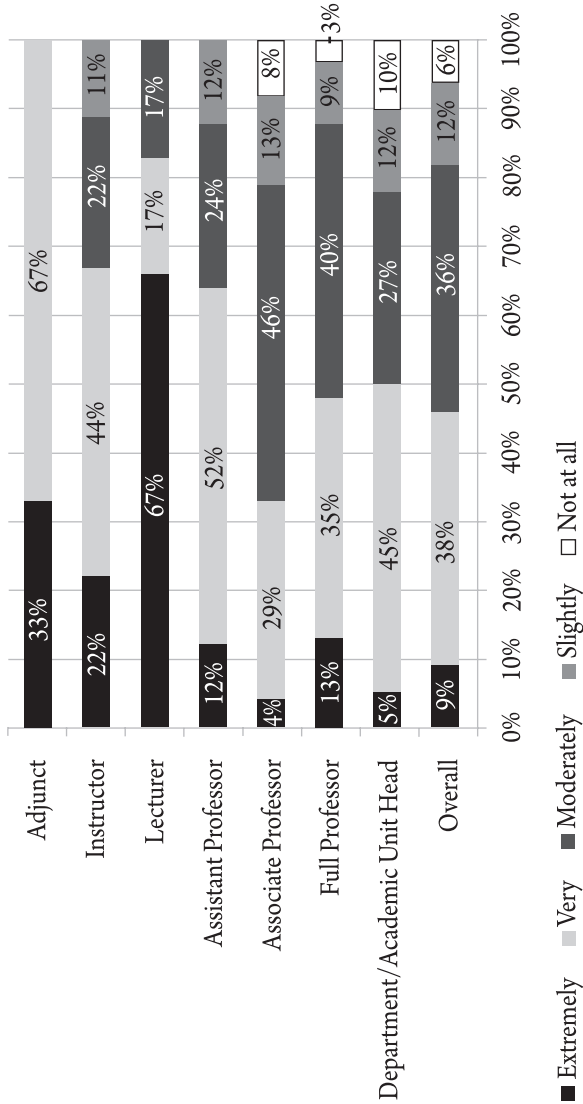




FIGURE 10. LEVEL OF CHALLENGE

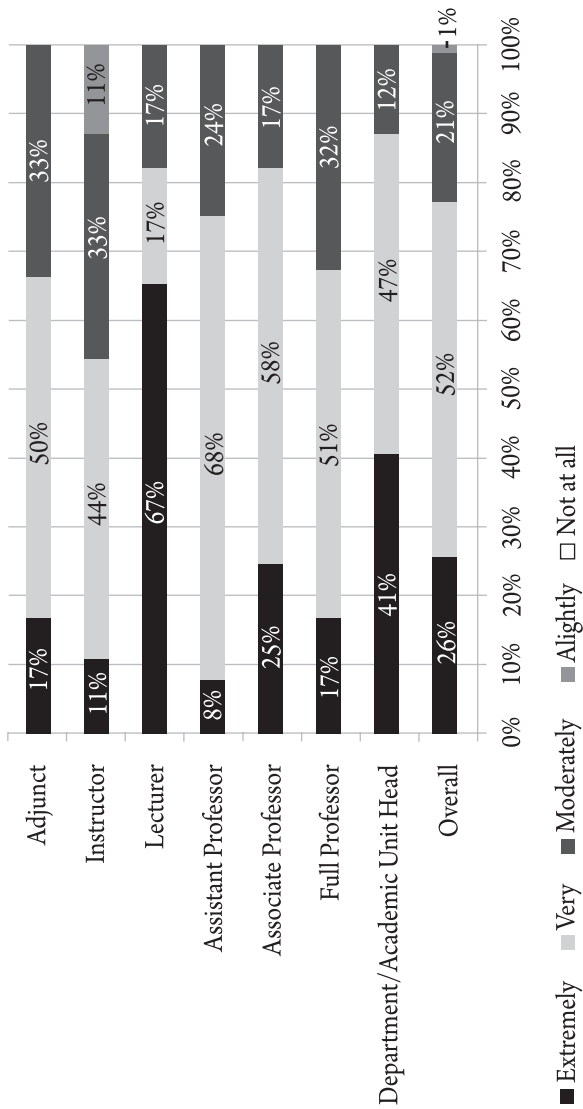


FIGURE 11. LEVEL OF STRESS IN A TYPICAL WEEK

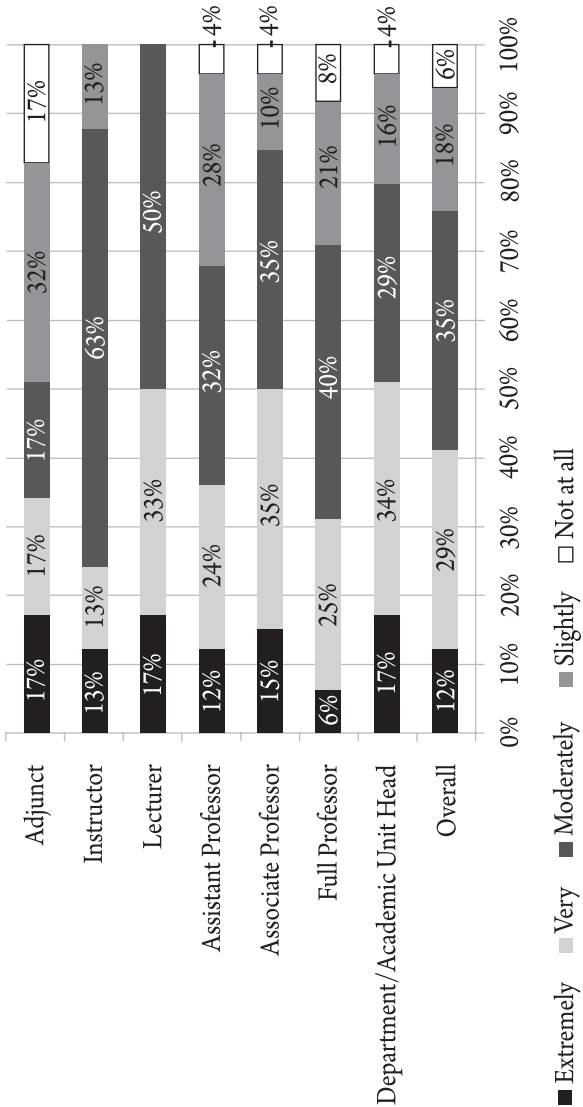
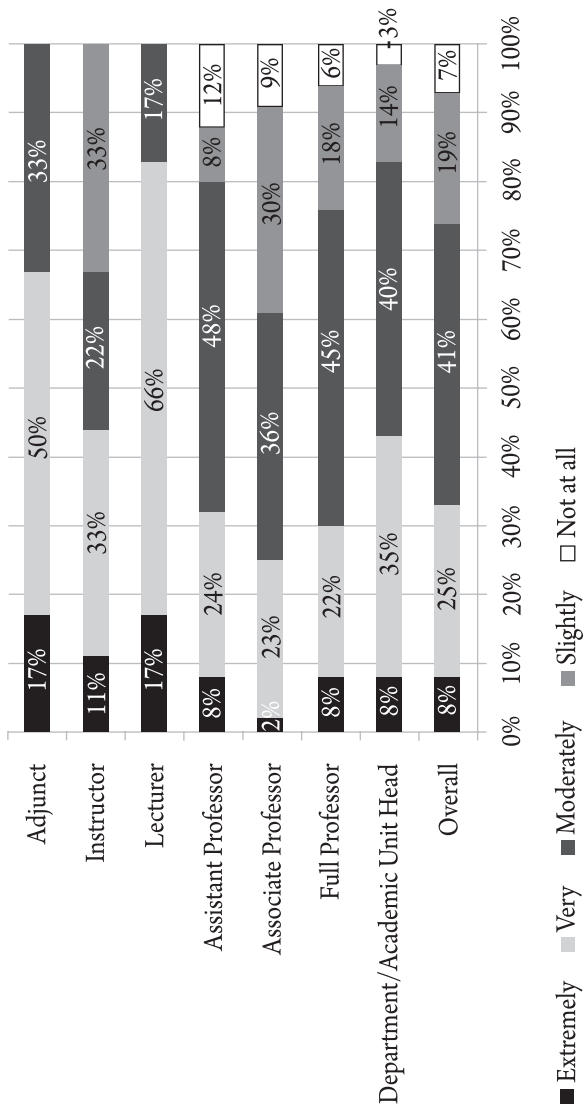


FIGURE 12. SATISFACTION WITH PAY



The open-ended question responses indicated that participants' favorite part of teaching in an honors program was working with the students and creating interesting experiences in the classroom. Personal teaching philosophies cited student learning as the core concern, in particular thought-provoking instruction and critical thinking skills. Students were also the main challenge to participants, with their focus on grades and the demands they make of honors courses.

## **Professional Role and Expectations**

### *Intellectual Leadership*

Sixty-four percent of full professors indicated the role of mentor as the best representation of how they see themselves in their current academic position, with those in administrative roles indicating a mentor (40%) or advocate (36%) role. All other ranks (associate professor, assistant professor, lecturer, instructor, adjunct) also indicated seeing their primary intellectual leadership role as that of mentor.

### *Involvement*

The majority of participants indicated that they had either a moderate amount (33%) or a lot (31%) of ability to implement change in their position (Figure 17) and the potential to advance into a leadership role.

Honors teachers indicated a great deal of autonomy in teaching (57%), with 1% indicating only a little autonomy and no respondents indicating a complete lack of autonomy (Figure 18).

The largest portion of respondents indicated a desire for more influence over policy, with significant percentages wanting more influence over faculty collaboration and work environment (Figure 19).

### *Professional Development and Advancement*

Forty percent of participants indicated that they are given opportunities for professional development very often, with 37% indicating a moderate level of opportunities (Figure 20). In terms of personal initiative for improvement, the majority of all participants strongly agreed that they make a conscious effort to improve their teaching skills (Figure 21).

As for promotion potential, those with the higher academic ranks indicated higher levels of potential than lower ranks. Among current administrators,

32% indicated a great deal of promotional potential with 27% indicating a lot of potential (Figure 22). The highest level of interest in promotion existed among lecturers.

## DISCUSSION

### Shared Aspects of Academic Identity

While some variation occurred based on academic rank, collegiate honors teachers in this study appeared overall to share common aspects of an academic identity.

#### *Job Satisfaction*

Participants in this study were not only satisfied with their work but truly enjoyed their jobs. Working with honors students presented both the greatest challenge and reward. They often felt stressed and challenged in their work, but in a positive way. They felt that the expectations associated with their position were realistic, and they experienced opportunities for professional development and promotion. Participants were very content in their

**FIGURE 13. THE GENERAL SELF-EFFICACY SCALE (GSE)**

1.	I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough.
2.	If someone opposes me, I can find the means and ways to get what I want.
3.	It is easy for me to stick to my aims and accomplish my goals.
4.	I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events.
5.	Thanks to my resourcefulness, I know how to handle unforeseen situations.
6.	I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort.
7.	I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities.
8.	When I am confronted with a problem, I can usually find several solutions.
9.	If I am in trouble, I can usually think of a solution.
10.	I can usually handle whatever comes my way.

FIGURE 14. SELF-EFFICACY AMONG COLLEGIATE HONORS TEACHERS

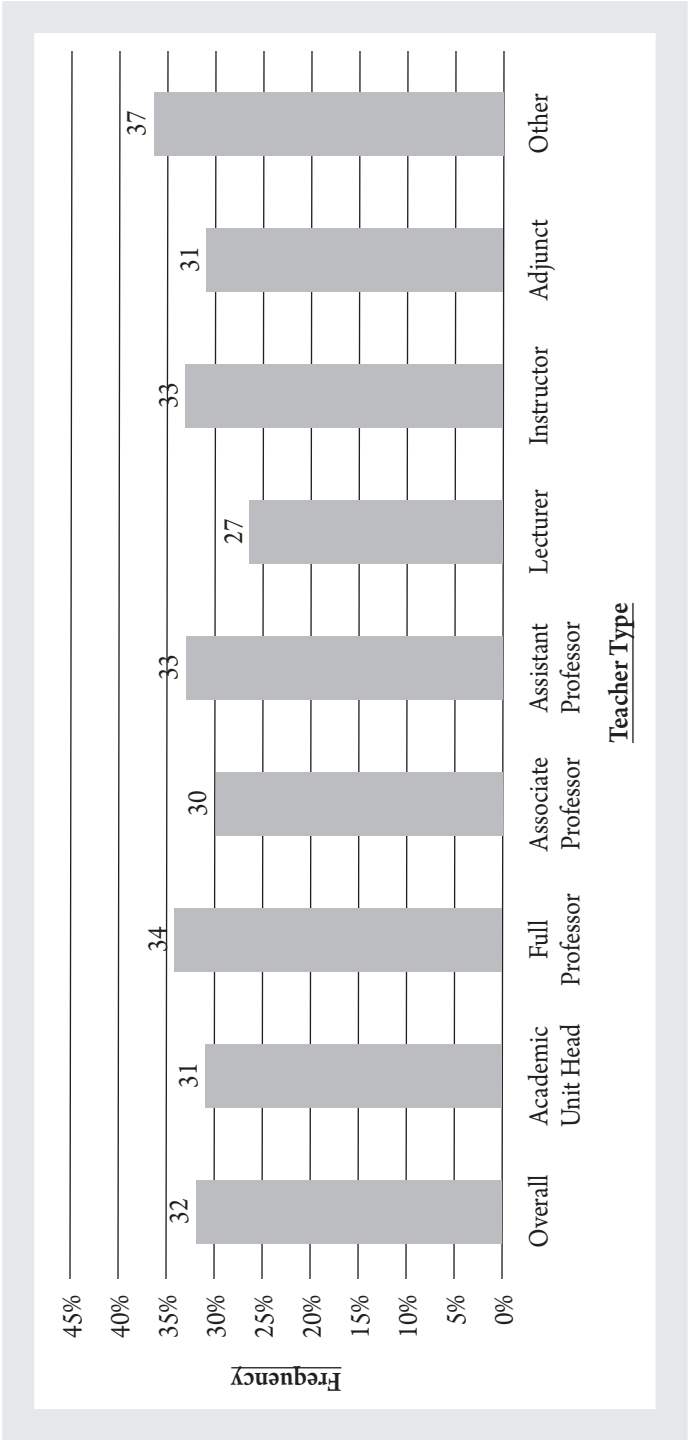


FIGURE 15. GOOD WORK/PERSONAL LIFE BALANCE

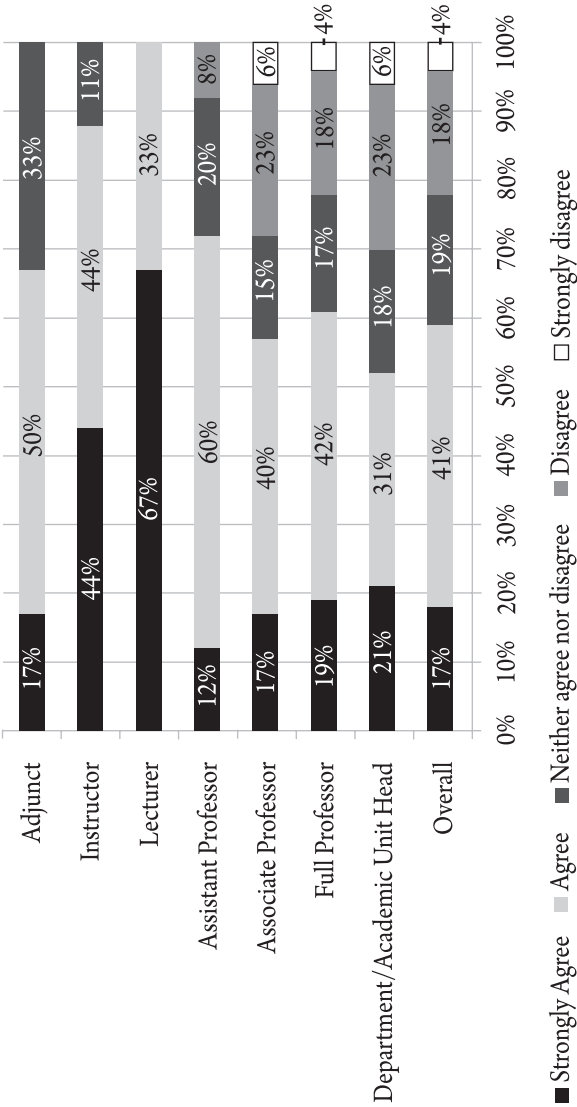


FIGURE 16. ABILITY TO INCORPORATE BELIEFS INTO ROLE AS EDUCATOR

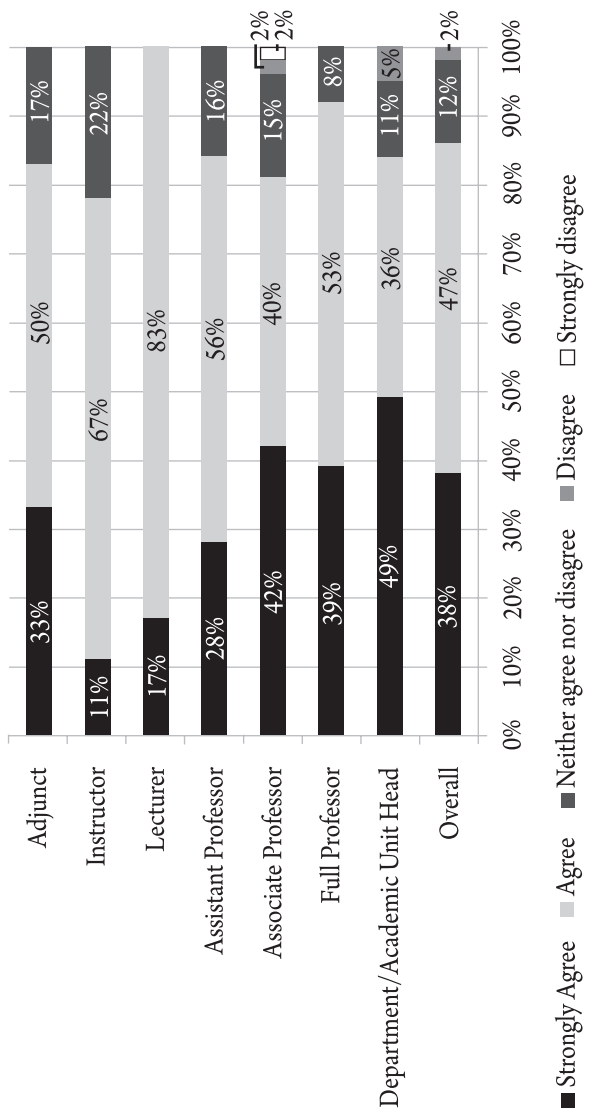




FIGURE 17. ABILITY TO IMPLEMENT CHANGE

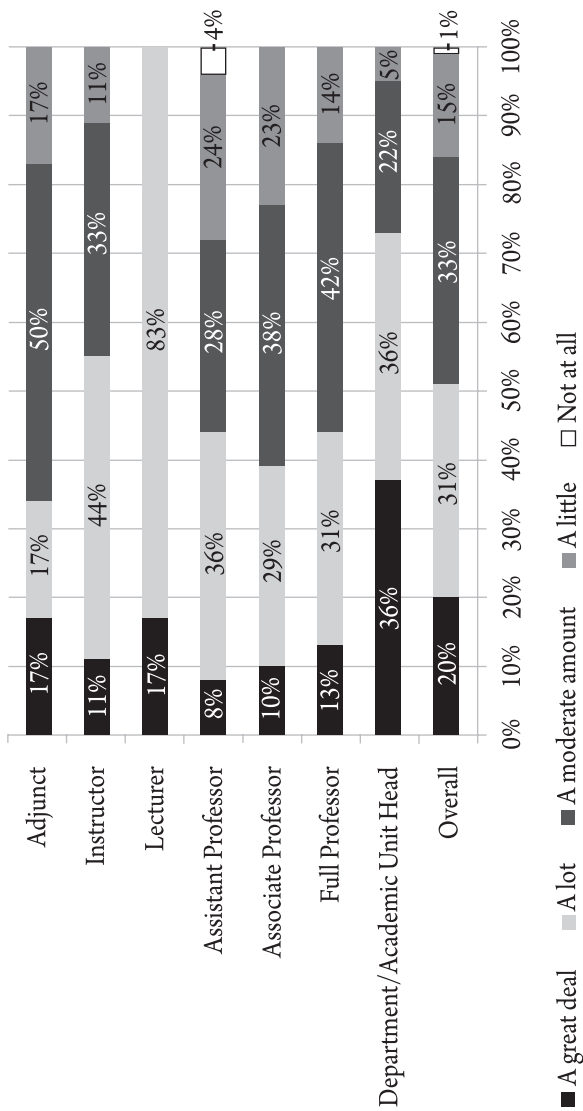


FIGURE 18. LEVEL OF AUTONOMY

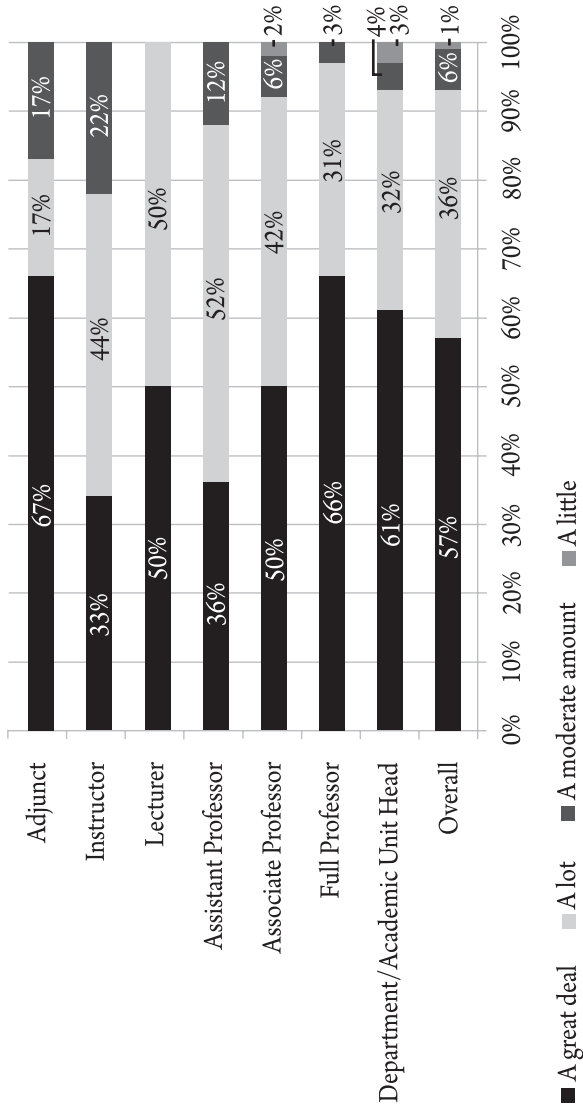


FIGURE 19. AREAS WHERE INFLUENCE COULD BE IMPROVED.

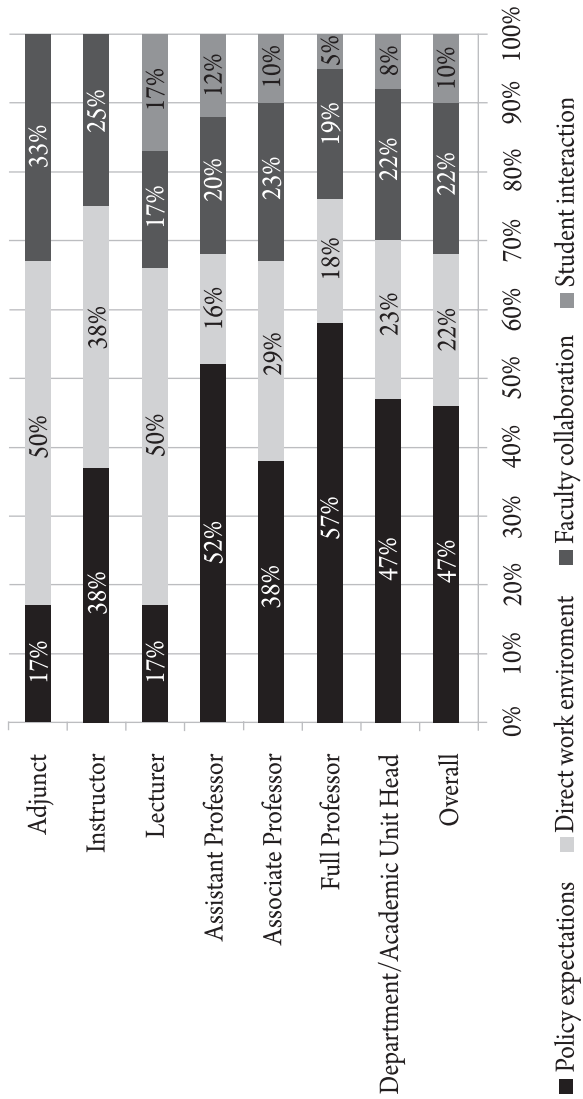


FIGURE 20. OPPORTUNITIES FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

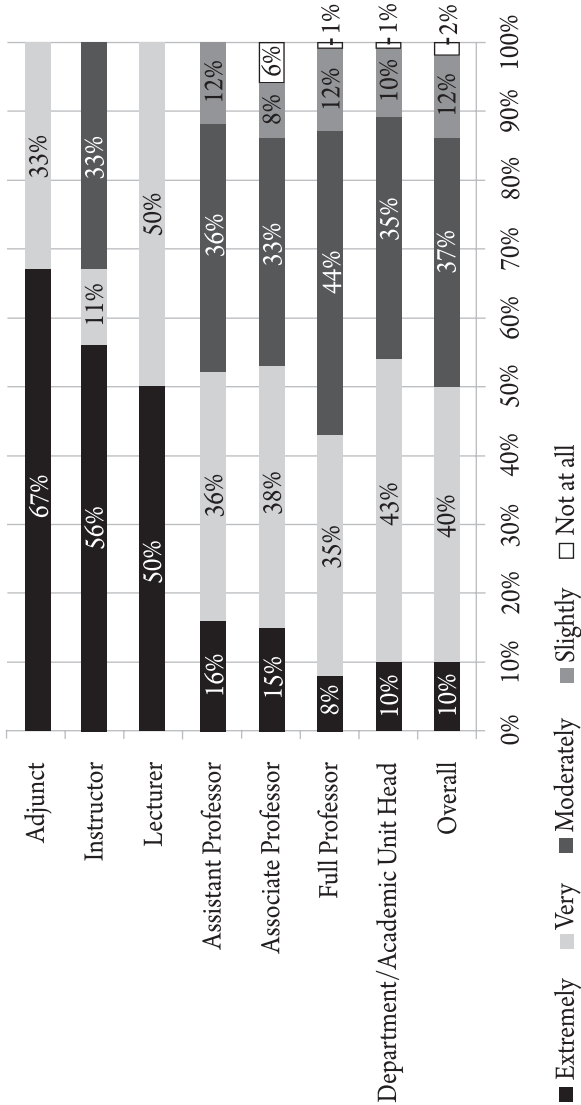


FIGURE 21. CONSCIOUS EFFORTS TO IMPROVE TEACHING

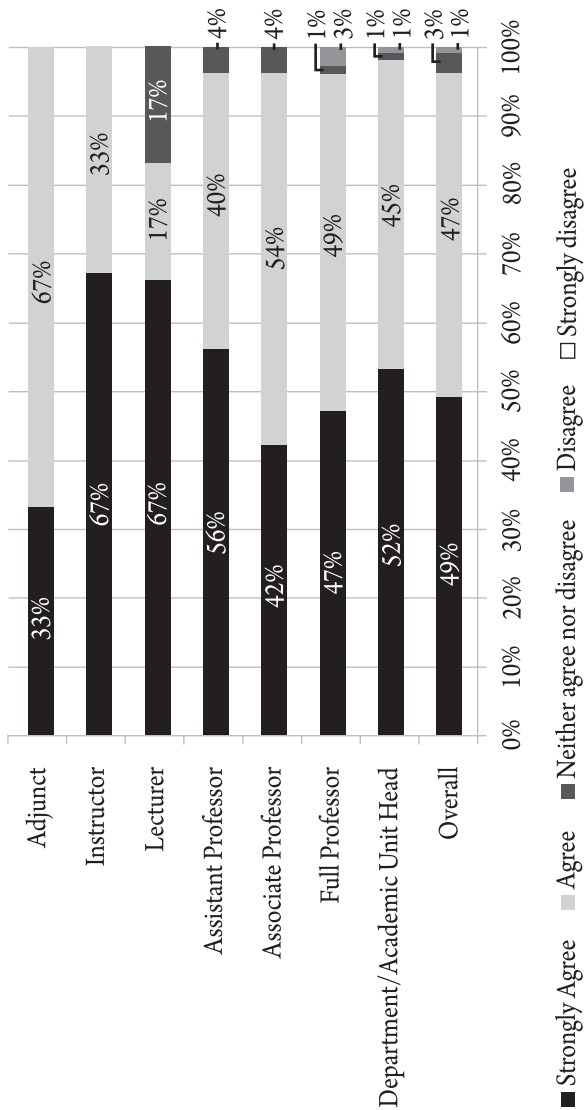
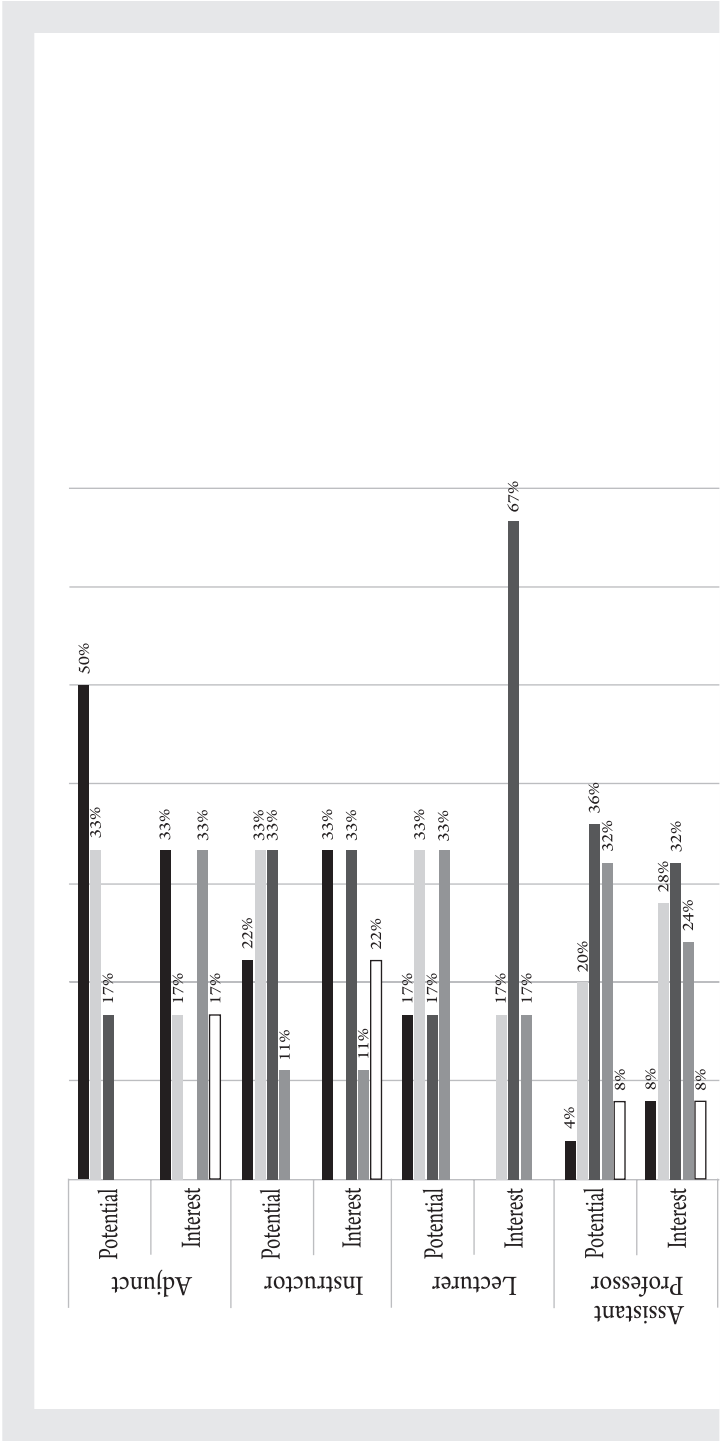
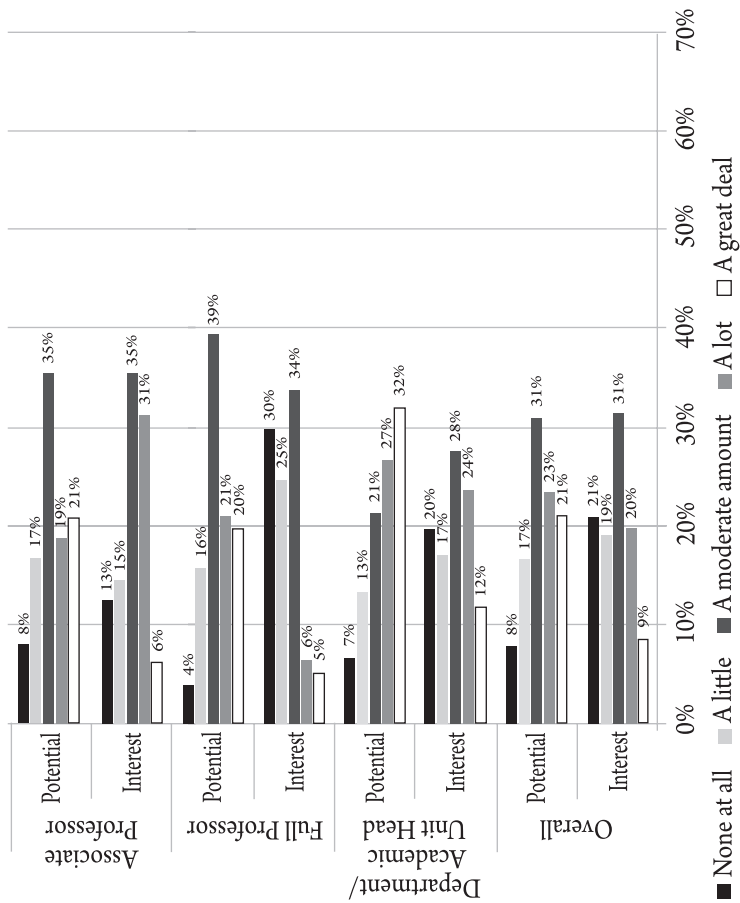


FIGURE 22. PROMOTION INTEREST RELATED TO POTENTIAL





positions within their institutions with no real desire to move on or out of academia.

### *Ability to Implement Change (Agency)*

The ability to implement change correlated with academic rank as those with higher rank indicated more ability than those at the instructor or lecturer position (Figure 17), probably the reality of assigned rank rather than specific to honors teachers. Assigned rank also affected how often opinions mattered (Figure 4). The majority of honors teachers in this study saw their role primarily as mentor.

### *Confidence and Self-Efficacy*

Honors faculty in this study indicated a high level of self-confidence and efficacy (Figure 14). They were frequent participators in faculty meetings and active problem solvers. They believed that they had the support of their administrative leaders and felt a good fit to their role. Autonomy was high at all levels, with slightly less indicated for those with higher ranks; this may simply be the effect of higher expectations and administrative responsibilities that come with an advanced position.

### *Meaningful Work*

The majority of honors teachers in this study often or always found meaning in their work (Figure 3) and indicated balance between their work and personal lives (Figure 15). The majority also felt they could incorporate their own beliefs into their role as educator (Figure 16).

## **Potential Areas of Concern among Current Honors Teachers**

The overall results of this study indicated some shared aspects of academic identity, but when the data were analyzed based on assigned rank, areas of particular interest to honors administrators appeared.

### *Faculty Governance*

The main area in which honors faculty wished for more influence involved policy expectations, with direct work environment coming in second (Figure 19). As highly involved and motivated faculty, they reported a desire for more of a voice in such matters. These results would suggest that honors program



directors should give honors faculty opportunities to get involved in the administrative process, possibly through honors-only faculty meetings and creating task forces or subcommittees related to specific policy areas.

### *Inclusion of Lower Academic Ranks*

While the results across ranks were positive, those holding lower academic ranks indicated that they felt less appreciated and valued (Figure 4) and that their opinions mattered less (Figure 5). They also indicated feeling less understanding of their individual strengths by their supervisor (Figure 6). With this in mind, honors directors should explore and implement strategies that demonstrate appreciation of lower-ranking faculty. The results were similar for role expectation among the lower academic ranks (Figure 9), though job satisfaction was strong for this group (Figure 7).

### *Compensation*

Most faculty in this survey indicated only moderate satisfaction with financial compensation (Figure 12). While still positive, such a response may indicate a need for improvement. Perhaps one option to consider would be increasing the cost of honors courses to cover higher faculty compensation.

## **Traits of Potential Honors Faculty**

### *Highly Motivated*

The cream seems to rise to the top as all faculty in this study were highly motivated to seek out and participate in professional development activities. The majority of participants stated that they made a conscious effort to improve their teaching.

One area on which honors directors should focus when recruiting teachers is faculty development, specifically in efforts to improve teaching (Figure 21). Faculty Members who make a strong effort to become better teachers should make ideal honors teachers. Honors teachers in this study had a high level of self-efficacy with little variation based on rank (Figure 14). They were confident in their abilities and felt that they could manage difficult problems effectively.

In terms of honors involvement, the majority either were invited to teach in honors (36%) or volunteered (37%). The act of volunteering would indicate a high level of motivation although it may not reflect any other traits

found in honors teachers. Honors directors might consider looking at other factors such as participation within academic departments and job satisfaction. Volunteering to teach honors courses might be a way to eliminate other duties, and faculty might assume that smaller classes and smarter students are easier to teach and manage.

### *Outstanding Teachers*

One interesting result of this study was that the overall collegiate teaching experience was varied but that those with less overall experience had a larger percentage of that experience in honors (Figure 2), indicating that teaching quality is valued over quantity and that an experienced educator might not be a good fit for an honors program. Honors directors should continue to seek out outstanding teachers first and foremost, with overall experience as a consideration but definitely not a deal-breaker.

## **LIMITATIONS**

A total of 738 honors faculty and directors were contacted via email and asked to share the survey link with their current faculty, yet just under a third ( $n=269$ ) completed the survey. While there was a good mix of roles among participants, ideally the number of participants would be higher than the number of those contacted through snowball sampling. Honors faculty and administrators in programs that are not members of the NCHC were not invited to participate in this study.

As this survey was voluntary and participants were solicited indirectly via honors directors, self-selection bias may be evident within the results. The two-week time period of the study may also have contributed to the response rate. In order to maintain participant anonymity, I did not include demographic items on geographic location, gender, or race, so it is not possible to determine if the majority of participants were from one particular area, gender, or race. While there is a degree of verisimilitude in this project, there is no way to determine the total number (population) of honors faculty within higher education in the United States, making it challenging to project the results from the sample to the overall population and to make statistical comparisons from the data collected.

Because no such similar research currently exists on academic identity among collegiate teachers, comparisons between that population and the subpopulation of collegiate honors teachers cannot be made. As the literature

review indicates that identity development is a constant process, the identity of those in this study may change over time.

## **FUTURE STUDIES**

A more qualitative study focusing on in-depth interviews with honors teachers would be a logical next step for research on academic identity among collegiate honors teachers. Explorations into the perceptions and expectations honors students have of their faculty could further illuminate the issues of stress and challenges (both good and bad) honors teachers face. Research on how honors programs are structured and administered could help explore the issues brought up in this study of how little influence honors faculty feel they have on policy. A qualitative study focusing on honors program directors and their process of recruiting teachers could serve well to test the validity of this study. A comparison of academic identities between honors and non-honors faculty would be of interest. The quality of honors faculty and their development is an area worth exploring to determine if honors programs attract highly qualified and motivated faculty or produce them. Finally, the evolving nature of identity development would suggest a longitudinal study on changes in academic identity and the factors that influence it.

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on the results of this study, some shared aspects of an academic identity appear to characterize collegiate honors faculty, including overall job satisfaction, high self-efficacy, a good work and life balance, and dedication to professional development of teaching. The relationship between teacher and student appears to be at the heart of academic identity among honors teachers; they have a strong connection to their discipline, believe teaching is more than just an occupation, and welcome the challenge of working with the best and brightest students. Honors teachers have spent their careers improving their craft through reflection and self-development. They care less about pay, benefits, and rank, either because they are comfortable with their current employment situation or because they accept it in order to work in an honors environment. Those who work in honors will not be surprised to learn that honors teachers share many positive aspects of identity: one would expect those who teach the best and brightest to be the best and brightest as well and to play an aspirational role.

While honors teachers are mostly satisfied with their work, three possible areas of concern for honors directors appear to be faculty governance, involvement of lower-ranking honors teachers, and compensation. While participants in this study stated that they were unlikely to look for employment outside of their current position, satisfaction with pay was an issue—a common complaint among college educators but nonetheless important to retaining current honors teachers and recruiting new ones.

Another area honors program directors should carefully evaluate in potential honors educators is motivation, especially among those who volunteer. Some teachers may be looking for an easier job and believe that working in honors provides that. “Easy” is not a term often associated with honors since honors students present challenges as well as rewards. While classes may be smaller, the demand from the students may be significantly larger, so honors teachers need to create in-depth experiences that require time and work. Honors students get restless and bored if they are not challenged, so teachers who are looking for an easier workload may not be successful in an honors program. Administrators also need to make sure that the motivation of those seeking to teach honors classes is not simply to leave an undesirable situation.

Teaching quality should be a more important factor than total years of experience when recruiting new honors faculty. While teaching ability is something that can develop over time, a good teacher with limited total experience should not be dismissed simply for that fact. Research participants in this study who had less overall experience had most of that experience in an honors program.

Providing a unique and challenging experience for honors students can only happen with teachers who are up to the task. While honors faculty are diverse in their disciplines and background, they do seem to share a passion for their students and appear to be more than up for the challenges they face.

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