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Swan Song

JOAN DIGBY

LIU Post

Abstract: Patricia J. Smith’s argument for professionalism based on Caplow’s outdated model is inappropriate for honors administration. The steps outlined are misleading, and the use of the perennially controversial Basic Characteristics as a prescription for professionalizing honors is historically inaccurate and has no place in framing the future of honors education, which needs to remain individual and idiosyncratic to institutions. Professionalization would move honors toward a business model that is antithetical to the spirit of honors.

Keywords: professionalism; ethics; organizational ideology; learned institutions and societies; Caplow, Theodore, 1920–2015

Patricia J. Smith’s forum essay on the “professionalization” of honors education attracted my attention because I have been involved in NCHC and served as honors director at LIU Post for forty years before I was removed, dismissed, terminated, fired—however you want to look at it—two weeks before the start of the fall 2019 term and with no better explanation than “we have decided to take honors in a new direction.” The administration has repeated this party line ever since, which I read as shorthand for “we need you out of the way so we can bring the wrecking balls in.” Without consulting the Honors Advisory Board, Faculty Council, or faculty experienced in teaching honors courses, the “professional” administrators are busy at work tearing the whole structure apart. From my perspective, these self-styled professionals are analogous to Jonathan Swift’s “projector” in *A Modest Proposal*, who would solve poverty in Ireland by eating the babies. In my case, the endangered babies are my honors students, and this fills me with both anger and grief. It also makes me think about what it means to be a “professional” honors educator, something entirely different in my opinion from Smith’s argument for “professionalizing” honors education.

I see the word “professionalization”—an ugly word in its own right—as a mask that gives credibility to so-called “strategic” plans mostly focused on making money. I am very suspicious of professionalizing honors because I fear it will produce a hollow shell based on orders from the top down. The language of Smith’s article presents a dystopic view of honors education based on “exclusivity of group,” “control,” “jurisdiction of authority,” “enforcement,” and “a single body to which [‘professionals’] report.” Honors education, by contrast, cultivates creativity, individualism, and unique designs free from controlling forces. Instead of putting up barriers to formalize entry into an exclusive group, as Smith advocates, honors faculty and administrators typically encourage breaking down barriers while encouraging openness and risk-taking as intrinsic to providing a deep and rich education. Thus, I present myself as an instructive example of what happens when honors education is reshaped by controlling administrative powers ruling a degree mill and wresting curriculum from the prerogative of faculty.

We must not forget that a university—and especially an honors program—is essentially a faculty teaching students. At one point in her argument, Smith quotes J. B. Bennett’s position that “‘it is research, not teaching that provides the expertise that qualifies one as a professional’ (Bennett, 1998, p. 46).” No! This perspective is not necessarily or even commonly true in honors education, in which creatively teaching high-end students is the core of the occupation. One becomes a professional in honors education by living the whole academic life: teaching in honors, engaging in research, stretching across colleges and disciplines (the opposite of specialization), and being creative and passionate in shepherding the evolution of a program or college with help from NCHC and a broad range of inspirational colleagues. Fortunately, “no certification or examination is required to become an honors educator” (Smith) because no certification or examination could do the job of creating an honors professional.

I do not believe it possible to “make” an honors director any more than Viktor Frankenstein could make a human being, but that is what my university is trying to do by hiring two untenured professors with no prior attachment to or knowledge of honors except mentoring a few theses. With full-time employment and tenure in the balance, would they—innocent novices—fight to save the program’s unique seminars and thesis requirements? Absolutely not. These newly minted honors directors have no choice but to serve the will of the upper administration, who themselves have no experience in honors education, not even paying a visit to an honors seminar,

attending a conference, or listening to students present their fascinating research. From what I have already seen in a few months, honors courses will fall on the chopping block, and the thesis will morph into something so minimal that it will be unrecognizable by the time I retire, which is very soon indeed. In truth, I give up.

I write this swan song to have my say against the “professionalization” of honors according to the sociological model based on Caplow and offered by Smith, spelling out the attendant name change, code of ethics, and membership criteria. Let me start with the name change from “program to college.” While many institutions have gone that route, much of the change has to do with money, i.e., seeking a donor who wants his or her name on the marquee and gladly pays to be remembered in this way. My own honors program emulated this formula, but after five years no donor has come forward, and so it is a college in name only. Having no additional budget, no way of attracting even visiting scholars or paying the way for students to take part in NCHC conference, the name change is essentially bait without any fish. Many other honors colleges have found donors, but I am not convinced that the change of name to “college” really constitutes a move toward “professionalization” since few have the funding to hire honors-dedicated faculty.

On the subject of ethics, virtually all universities subscribe to a code that includes but is not limited to punishment for cheating, plagiarism, bribery, sexual harassment, and most recently payment for admissions. A moral code is not unique to honors, but the document that Smith presents as a moral code, the Basic Characteristics, is not a moral code at all. I have been involved in honors education for most of my professional life. I was there at the Philadelphia NCHC conference when the Basic Characteristics first emerged from committee, under the leadership of John Grady. He held his ground amid vociferous arguments over whether we should have such a list and what it should include. Even in the earliest iterations, these characteristics were never meant to prescribe, but rather to describe, ingredients helpful to building a program or gaining administrative support for funding, space, recruitment, and courses. The Basic Characteristics were never about ethics. They were then and have continued to evolve as a laundry list of components for a viable honors program or college. As the author of four editions of *Peterson's Guide to Honors Programs and Colleges*, I kept up with the alterations, and as a member of the Publications Board, I was specifically involved in the 2005 rewriting of the document. The Basic Characteristics were never designed to be an “ethical code,” and indeed they are not.

I also served as a consultant to various honors programs during their evolution. While the Basic Characteristics played some role in discussions with presidents, provosts, deans, faculty, and students, they were surely not the focal point of discussion over two or three days of sequential and often complex meetings undertaken to help directors expand curriculum, develop honors office space and housing, and gain institutional support as they grew and shaped their future. In program reviews for institutions focused on architecture, agriculture, engineering, and business, the essential issue was often whether such institutions could reasonably offer honors programs. Discussions involved strategies and designs that were far afield of the Basic Characteristics laundry list that other institutions might easily use. In most recent years, professional schools within a university—such as schools of nursing, medical technologies, fine arts, and business—have also required alterations of traditional honors designs in order to provide inclusion for their high-end students. At my own institution, I worked with deans of these schools to modify both the number of honors courses and the essence of a capstone or thesis project adjusted to the tight sequencing of their majors. Thus, when I think of the “professionalization” of honors education, I include the modification of academic honors programming to suit the needs of students in professional schools.

Smith mentions the establishment in 2014 of NCHC-Approved Program Reviewers, consultants who have been certified by NCHC, but even before 2014 consultants came with some backing from the organization and gave advice as individuals with experience running honors programs or colleges. We did not speak for the organization, and we did not come with certificates to show that we were certified reviewers. Instead, those asking us to consult generally met us first in the Consultants Lounge at the annual conference or knew our work through articles in NCHC publications or from regional conferences; this is still a frequent means of hiring consultants without NCHC serving as a middleman.

Certifying NCHC programs and thus controlling membership in what would become an exclusive professional organization is an idea that I have opposed throughout my career and that, fortunately, has been consistently rejected by the NCHC membership. Being an inclusive organization has lost us a few friends along the way: when we encouraged two-year colleges to join, several of the big ten/big deal universities left and organized their own group. Since then, we have had some great presidents from two-year colleges, which are becoming more and more essential to American higher education every

year. We made a thoughtful decision to be inclusive, one that should warn us against keeping any institution out of NCHC. Most people new to our organization notice from the outset that we are not competitive or backbiting like people they meet at their disciplinary conferences. Setting up barriers to joining NCHC and creating a caste system based on spurious “professionalization” would almost certainly create the competition and backbiting we have been so careful to avoid.

In thinking about the “professionalization of honors,” I am taken back to my own term as President-Elect of NCHC in 1999 and to preparing documents for the 2000 conference in Orlando, at which I became the President. I produced that conference book alone on my living room floor, with no committee to review, accept, or reject proposals. Many before me had accomplished this harrowing ordeal, and after I became President I suggested that we hire a professional office staff to take on this herculean task. For my own conference, I negotiated discounted Disney tickets for students (unheard of), a keynote speaker at Sea World, and a pool party instead of a gala, which required the hotel to cook all the food in the house. It was fun—but the last splash of going it alone.

What I think of as the “professionalization of honors” has more to do with the history of building a national office with professional staff to run our conference, board meetings, organizational finances, and special programs such as directors’ retreats and Partners in the Parks than with the academic side of honors. As we have all learned, the professionalization of the NCHC, once a volunteer organization, has increased membership but also increased costs at every level. Whenever we think about professionalization, we do need to consider costs, especially in relation to individual honors programs and colleges that have expanded the number of professional staff members beyond a traditional secretary and work-study student. Over the last twenty years, professional honors support staff on campuses have grown to include dedicated honors academic advisors, graduate school and major scholarship advisors, and study abroad advisors, among others. We have been pleased to welcome this cohort to NCHC and encourage their presentations at our annual conference—a dimension of professionalization that has proven extremely functional.

While degree programs in academic administration can make good sense, I do not believe that honors directors or deans can be properly trained by such a degree. Before a professor from any discipline can be reasonably asked or chosen to run an honors program or college, that person needs the

experience of teaching in honors, publishing, participating in professional conferences and honorary organizations, and showing a keen interest in mentoring students outside of his or her discipline. Taking my cue from the good Wife of Bath, “experience and not authority” is essential. It is impossible to “make” an honors director/dean by structuring a curriculum that leads to this job; a rich academic life and extensive experience provide the training, not a degree or certificate.

On a practical note, if we look to the near future and consider the likelihood of some 2,000 honors programs nationally, no more than 10% of the total number of directors/deans positions would typically open up annually. Even that figure seems exaggerated, but for the sake of argument, we could not legitimately start graduate programs designed to fill such a limited number of positions even if universities would even think of hiring directors or deans with these shiny new degrees. My own sad and final experience suggests the greater likelihood that universities will pick honors administrators who have no experience or credentials at all. I sure hope that no doctoral degree in honors education ever surfaces and that Caplow’s more than half-century old formula for “professionalization” is never applied to the work that we do in honors.

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