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A Different Kind of Agitation

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Abstract: Responding to Patricia J. Smith’s essay on the appropriateness of professionalizing honors education, the author argues that discussions of specialization and standardization across honors programs should be suspended until academia has sufficiently dealt with the endemic problem of undercompensated contingent labor. The author further suggests that, rather than invite increased administrative procedures, faculty and staff exercise the characteristics most often ascribed to honors education—flexibility, creativity, community-based problem-solving, interdisciplinarity, and collaboration—to reimagine current professional practices in honors and advocate more forcefully for fair, dignified labor.

Keywords: universities and colleges—economic aspects; professionalization; labor; advocacy; Kelsky, Karen, 1964–.

The sociological schema adopted by Patricia J. Smith in her lead essay posits two barriers to the full professionalization of honors education at present: first, the lack of institutionalized “special training” for faculty who wish to become honors educators and, second, the absence of external “certification or examination” to maintain some level of standardization across programs. In my short time within this field, I have observed that the strengths honors programs have over traditional disciplines are their malleability, their shared commitment to experimentation and risk-taking, and their embrace of collaboration across preconceived institutional spaces and academic fields. That flexibility, I fear, would be dampened by a certification process that determines those who have demonstrated their worthiness to be in the world of honors and those who are to be forced out.

I am not alone in my thinking about certification and standardization, of course; reading through back issues of *JNCHC*, I found myself nodding at my honors mentor and supervisor, Linda Frost, who argues that “the pedagogy

that most clearly defines honors education is one that spurns . . . standardization and predictability, promoting instead an education more closely based on individual initiative than university mission, on surprise and pleasure rather than predictability and presupposed knowledge” (22). Paul Strong agrees: “Instead of following the mindless models forced on us by state legislators and reaccreditation visits, instead of spending our energy worrying about mission statements, reporting structures and the like, why not encourage each NCHC program to find its unique way” (55). I encountered these essays in the same week that I graded final reflections from my humanities seminar, and I was happy to see how serendipitously my students supplied further evidence of the value of keeping things a little loose for the sake of creativity and self-determination. Reflecting on their writing progress, students repeatedly noted the strengths of open-endedness. One writes that since joining honors, she has felt “encouraged . . . to think more creatively and critically, rather than constantly writing papers with strict guidelines and rules” (Cardwell 4); another writes that prior to honors, she “was always taught to follow a strict template for how to write a paper and develop my ideas, and I feared that if I did not follow the pattern exactly, my entire paper would be wrong” (Rinicker 3); yet another laments that “the public education system and even the community college I took classes at during high school were forceful about the ‘formulaic essay’” but then adds, “[i]t was such a breath of fresh air to be able to let my writing find its own form instead of adhering to a rigid structure. It always frustrated me when I was punished for going outside of the structure” (Skinner 4). By reiterating that there is no one way to write an essay, I witnessed students becoming increasingly comfortable thinking about what they wanted to explore in their work rather than trying to fulfill some expectation they thought I had; as a result, their work yielded the kind of inventive, ambitious, and thought-provoking writing we want to see as instructors. Students felt more empowered as critical thinkers when I backed off from the rigidity of a rubric and promised them generosity and guidance instead. These snippets of their reflections illustrate what we can learn when we listen to what students tell us about our professional practices.

Plenty of smart speculation in the pages of *JNCHC* and elsewhere shows that various forms of homogeneity and over-structuration create an uninspired culture of rules-following. Understanding that these arguments exist already and in more compelling forms than I would offer, I would like to address a related urgent matter raised by Smith’s essay: how the vision of professionalization offered by Caplow’s theory risks becoming another method

of gatekeeping in a system rife with hyperambitious expectations. I come to the questions posed in Smith's essay as a young academic recently on the job market, seeking employment in the humanities in what is likely to have been the worst year on record (until perhaps we see the data from this year). I write from a place of contingency, the unstable home of many and an unfortunate institutional norm. More than professionalization, Smith's essay made me think about power and how my colleagues and I are desperately enmeshed in it.

Smith shows that several of the stages in Caplow's theory have already been realized by and through NCHC: "membership" that builds community and cross-institutional solidarity; "name changing" that creates space for a wider assortment of ideas to commingle without loss of coherence; and a code of "ethics" that identifies the shared values of honors education. The final stage, the establishment of an external certification process to legitimize the work in honors by "enforc[ing] occupational barriers," has a positive intent: advocating for continued or increased resources. Smith presents external certification as a way of making legible to higher administration the professional development and service that go into producing honors education year after year. Smith cites the "Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors College," drawn from data on what honors programs already do, but she argues that this list "serve[s] only as recommendations for programs seeking to be fully developed"; in other words, it has no institutional authority behind it.

The final step of professionalization Smith attributes to Caplow mandates more formality in defining what counts as faculty excellence and argues that this step requires additional specialization in honors education. However, Smith's essay does not mention the realities that many prospective faculty members, in honors and in other areas, already face: a never-enough culture of overwork, personal sacrifice, instability, and, much of the time, chronic unemployment. A quick peek into Karen Kelsky's best-selling how-to manual for the academic job market, *The Professor Is In: The Essential Guide to Turning Your Ph.D. into a Job*, brings the excess of scholarly output expected from graduate students and early career academics harrowingly to the fore. In a chapter titled "When to Go on the Market and How Long to Try," Kelsky lists ten requirements that make someone competitive professionally, including "at least one publication, and preferably more," "a vibrant conference record," the ability to "gather leading young scholars . . . to speak on [your independently organized] panel," "a recommender from a high-status institution" outside of your own, a "publication plan" for turning the dissertation into a book,

“your own original courses developed, as well as ideas for basic intro courses and core seminars,” and, finally, the capacity to “*articulate the import of your dissertation in advancing disciplinary boundaries*” (70–71, emphasis in text). Kelsky largely directs her advice to graduates seeking employment at research-focused institutions, but the oversaturated market permits a wider range of institutions to expect what have become baseline professionalization requirements. Many early-career scholars who attend to these rules religiously, with impressive CVs, published research, and a plan for continued engagement in their field, still do not find steady work in academia, and the academic world is weaker for it. Those who do land college or university positions begin their new jobs from a place of utter exhaustion.

Thus, to propose additional specialization in honors education on top of what is already expected of college faculty—expertise, research, and pedagogical excellence within a teachable field—is too much to justify in the market environment as it currently stands. Once a faculty member is situated within an honors program comfortably, with a tenure-track or otherwise permanent status, asking for honors-specific practices might be reasonable, but the guidelines should be handled within each unique institutional context. Additionally, what professionalization looks like for honors educators should not extend beyond the standards of any other field: sharing insights through writings and presentations, teaching exceptionally well, and providing necessary service.

The question of how to deepen engagement in honors education is a good one, and as a new faculty member, I am eager to figure out how to do this through research, experience, and the relationships I build with others. But the current timing for professionalizing honors is not ideal given that higher education is, excuse the cliché, in crisis. Smith’s “prolonged political agitation” enabled by the steps already taken to professionalize honors should be directed where it is more urgently needed. We should instead think of honors education as a collective—non-monolithic, but generally committed to a robust, anti-careerist, holistic, and experiential liberal arts education—rather than as a certifiable administrative body. Yet another system of gatekeeping surrenders to the neoliberal leviathan that is the contemporary university, a culture that has increasingly undermined liberal arts education, diversity and equity efforts, and radical pedagogical possibilities. Now is precisely the time we should be resisting the movement toward greater bureaucracy, not inventing new ways to join it.

If there is a felt need in honors to “enforce occupational barriers,” a number of exclusionary models operating throughout the university already do this. The majority of early-career scholars are already taxed physically, emotionally, and psychologically to maintain the necessary qualifications within a research field, teach for what is often less than a K–12 teacher makes (already abysmally low for the credentials required), and move around from contingent position to contingent position in an effort to maintain a salary, library access, and a gapless professional history. What good can it do, in this grim labor crisis, to tighten the bureaucratic grip?

When it comes to “political agitation,” rather than seek “support of the public power for the maintenance of . . . occupational barriers” (Caplow 1954, qtd. in Smith), we should agitate on behalf of university faculty. If honors programs are unique sites for intellectual risk-taking, experimentation, service, problem-solving, and creativity, I can think of no better place to do so. While the burden is not on honors educators to fix the colossal issue of exploited and contingent labor, our ethical responsibility as participants within the educational system is to advocate, resist, imagine, and inform. Necessary work is to be done to end the unfair labor practices and administrative bloat that characterize higher education today and to fundamentally reshape academic spaces so that they are accessible, collaborative, and diverse—a truly public good. Rather than welcome externally determined legitimacy, let us instead take notes from unions, activists, and our own students. We have something important to save.

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