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A Requiem for Certification, A Song of Honors

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Abstract: This essay rejects any notion of professionalization in honors programs and colleges as well as any plan for the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) that is connected to implementing a process of certification or accreditation. The author offers historical details about the machinations of a small group of powerful NCHC officers who tried to turn the organization into an accrediting or certifying body and how they were successfully blocked by grassroots opposition from the membership and by a large group of NCHC past presidents who recognized the ill will and divisiveness that would result. The author discusses the damage that certification would do to the organization by fracturing the collegial spirit and workings of the organization and the honors community it has nourished for over fifty years. As part of the *JNCHC* Forum initiated by Patricia J. Smith's "The Professionalization of Honors Education," this response takes issue with Smith's application of sociologist Theodore Caplow's theory of professionalization to NCHC and the honors community and with her implicit endorsement of certification. The essay asserts that evidence for professionalism in honors at the collegiate level is to be found in the structure and resources of NCHC's national office; the skilled and thoughtful practitioners of honors education at their home institutions; and the scholarship, intellection, and commitment found in NCHC's monograph series and refereed journals.

Keywords: professionalism; ethics; organizational ideology; learned institutions and societies; accreditation and certification

I am somewhat conflicted about my response in this Forum to Patricia J. Smith's "The Professionalization of Honors Education." This tension arises in part because I am most appreciative of her myriad contributions to honors education and the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC). In collaboration with other honors colleagues, she has collected a large reservoir of useful data about honors education and honors operations that is available

to NCHC members, and some of it has been presented in NCHC's various journals and monographs (see Smith; Smith and Scott; Smith and Mrozek; and Smith and Zagurski). In addition, I have worked closely with her and her fellow editors, Andrew J. Cognard-Black and Jerry Herron, on the most recent volume—*The Demonstrable Value of Honors Education: New Research Evidence*—in the NCHC Monograph Series, for which I serve as General Editor. (In the interest of full disclosure, I also serve as Co-Chair of NCHC's Publications Board.) Without doubt, Smith's contributions have been significant.

Despite my high regard for Smith and her work, I find this particular essay troubling in a number of ways. Its thesis/conclusion is rhetorically problematic, and I find its application of sociologist Theodore Caplow's theory of professionalization inappropriate to and distorted in its projection onto NCHC. The essay misapprehends the heart and soul of NCHC and why it has been so important to honors enthusiasts for over half a century. Moreover, its history of certification overlooks some critical details that should not be forgotten even as the specter of that internecine struggle and unpleasant period in NCHC history recedes.

Yes, honors is professional: this is true of NCHC itself as well as its members, who are adept, skilled, and thoughtful practitioners in the craft of manifesting honors education in all its bounty of richness and forms. The evidence for the professionalization of honors and for the accolades that NCHC and its members have garnered is not, however, to be discovered by inventing a certification label, which is likely to generate ill will and divisiveness as its most prominent byproducts. The fundamental and tangible evidence of honors professionalism is found elsewhere.

Smith's conclusion that "NCHC may be destined to see further agitation on the issue of certification" is circular at best. By virtue of making this claim and presenting it in the lead essay for this Forum, the author has ensured that the issue of certification—which in this case is equivalent to accreditation—is rearing its snaky-haired head once again. In a rhetorically pretzeled way, the appearance of the essay in print has proven, albeit self-reflexively, the point it intends to assert. More importantly, the claim does not prove the merits of certification even as it seemingly approaches, perhaps even encourages, thrusting the organization back into that horrific slough, the memory of which can still infuriate.

Foremost among my worries is that the organization may not have someone with the wisdom, kindness, thoughtfulness, and stature of Samuel Schuman, who was universally admired and beloved, to emerge as one of the

opposition leaders to this machination. (See Remembering Sam Schuman in *HIP 11* for tributes to Schuman—a past president of NCHC, the co-founder of Beginning in Honors, and a prolific honors scholar and author, whose monographs include *Beginning in Honors* and *Honors Programs at Smaller Colleges*.) Even as Sam and I were working together in the last period of his life on his final monograph, *If Honors Students Were People: Holistic Honors Education*, we were also collaborators in the fight against certification (see my “Sam and Sam I Am Not”). He obviously played the part of the reasoned, rational arbiter opposing this idea while I played the part of a furious agitator—both calculated and necessary strategic roles for waging an ultimately successful campaign to end the relentless drive toward certification. Schuman and several other ex-presidents crafted a letter that was signed by eighteen former NCHC presidents proclaiming their opposition to certification: a letter that was widely circulated to the membership before the certification idea blew up at the New Orleans conference in 2013 (see Appendix). I fear as well that the organization’s future leadership may not share the institutional memory or possess the wherewithal to match the likes of Bernice Braid, Joan Digby, and Ada Long, three recipients of NCHC’s Founders Award who were instrumental in the struggle against certification. In addition to opposition from individuals, groups like the Georgia Collegiate Honors Council took a stand against NCHC’s becoming a certifying body.

Smith states that Caplow’s fourth step in the evolution toward professionalization is “prolonged political agitation, whose object it is to obtain the support of the public power for the maintenance of the new occupational barriers.” I have no idea what “public power” means in the context of her essay or how it connects to NCHC; however, power and agitation did not operate in the NCHC certification battle in a way that matches what I think is intimated here. The political agitation emerged from the ranks of NCHC, fomenting on the listserv and in emails and in the hallways and meetings and lobby bars at NCHC conferences. The agitation came from the membership, many of whom witnessed a leadership cabal promoting certification behind closed doors while attempting to control the nominating process for officers and members of the Board of Directors. The end result of their hidden agenda would have been the creation of a cottage industry wherein they would personally reap major dollars from NCHC’s member institutions after anointing themselves experts in program evaluation and certification.

At a Board of Directors meeting in Omaha, Nebraska, where the official agenda did not include certification, I sat boiling internally for an interminable

day and a half because while the topic never came up for debate, the process to achieve certification was moving forward at warp speed just offstage. The topic finally surfaced only because I lambasted the Board for not confronting the issue while the certification leaders implemented their strategy to evade public discussion of their plans. At conference business meetings, the topic only arose when I asked when we would have a public discussion and what the stance of prospective officers and Board members was on the topic of certification. A cursory review of conference programs during that tawdry period will reveal that no public forums were ever scheduled and that one of the few conference sessions on the topic was the one that I submitted for the 2013 New Orleans Conference: “STOP Certification/Accreditation NOW: The Backstory of a Bad Idea.” [That unwillingness by the leaders promoting accreditation/certification to engage in a full and open discussion is telling, then and now. None of them submitted an essay of support for this Forum, and none of them during the height of the controversy was willing to accept the offer to engage in a pro and con discussion for the membership within the pages of *JNCHC*.]

Fortunately, that vitriolic presentation, which would have shown how the cabal attempted to transform the “Basic Characteristics” from helpful recommendations into mandatory prescriptive features, did not happen as the abstract promised. (See Digby for a discussion of the primacy of innovation over rubrics.) The hallway uprising against certification at the New Orleans conference hotel was so overwhelming that certification as an initiative by the powerful was decimated—although apparently not forever given this Forum. Instead of showcasing my extensive documentation about how certification was being railroaded into place, the session became one of healing, in which NCHC leaders like Jack Rhodes, Rae Rosenthal, and John Zubizarreta helped to forge a conversation about devising evaluative processes that would actually benefit the members of the organization by strengthening their programs and the NCHC itself to remain vital and whole, innovative and supportive. We must never forget how certification would have fractured our community. Despite my longstanding membership in and commitment to NCHC, I would have recommended, like many other honors administrators, that my home institution cancel its membership if NCHC had become a certifying body. In reality, Smith’s conjuring of public agitation misapprehends the historical record; public agitation to endorse certification was not what happened. The public agitation was an outcry against certification.

The application of Caplow's theory to NCHC and its membership approaches the absurd when Smith invokes Caplow's notion of criminality by asserting that an organization such as ours should move "by stages from the limitation of a specialized title to those who have passed an examination to the final stage at which the mere doing of the acts reserved to the profession is a crime." A CRIME!!!! NCHC is not a medical or legal board ferreting out dangerous and illegal honors activities by individual evildoers and then adjudicating malpractice. NCHC does, however, assist honors administrators and faculty through its conference features such as Beginning in Honors (BIH) and Developing in Honors (DIH) as well as its publications and Bootcamp seminars; thus, it supports, in Caplow's words, the "development of training facilities directly or indirectly controlled by the professional society." But NCHC is not the police; it is not judge, jury, and executioner for subversive thoughts and transgressive activities. Nor should it be the developer and promulgator, according to Smith and Caplow's third step, "of a code of ethics" that will limit "the unqualified from practicing the evolving profession." If this dystopian police-state vision of NCHC appeals to some members more than the non-prescriptive nature of the "Basic Characteristics" does, I beseech them to find a different organization in which to pursue such ambitions. NCHC has always been an ally and a resource, a place where the wisdom and experience and practices—successful and not—are there for all to contemplate and appropriate as they see fit.

NCHC's mission is to offer resources and support that will make the flowering of honors easier and to offer a community of like-minded individuals. Creating a warm, nurturing, collegial environment is the heart and soul of NCHC, which is why so many people are devoted to the organization. Zubizarreta, a Carnegie Foundation/CASE U.S. Professor of the Year, recipient of the Sam Schuman Award for Excellence at a Four-Year Institution, and co-editor of two NCHC monographs, expressed a similar sentiment in one of his communiques in 2013 in opposition to certification/accreditation:

Community vs. Competition. I view a move toward accreditation or certification as fostering a climate of competition among our members, the installation of a ratings mindset that contradicts and undercuts the selflessness, collaboration, community, collegiality, and generous, open sharing and helpfulness that have distinguished and strengthened our organization for decades, setting it apart from many of our disciplinary affiliations, especially those subject to accreditation or certification.

The problematic nature of applying Caplow's theory of professionalization to the NCHC and honors education is also evident in his second stage: a name change. Perhaps an argument could be made about the significance of naming when NCHC emerged from the ashes of the Inter-University Committee on the Superior Student (ICSS) over fifty years ago, but that is not the stance here. Instead Smith argues that the important name change is from honors programs to honors colleges.

That attempt to make honors history match Caplow's theory feels contrived. Some honors colleges, such as that at Kent State University, predate NCHC and the ICSS by decades. Certainly, the transformation of many honors programs into honors colleges is, along with the emphasis on STEM disciplines in honors education, one of the seismic shifts that have occurred in honors during the last few decades, but that change is a purely institutional decision. (For a discussion of these two topics, see *The Honors College Phenomenon* and *The Other Culture: Science and Mathematics Education in Honors*.) Institutions typically make this change to increase stature, resources, academic positions, clout, and benefits to students and faculty, but these enhancements do not always occur. That individual institutions now have honors colleges does not mean that the profession of honors is somehow magically more professional. Further, Smith's citing O. M. Casale's characterization of the distinction between an honors college and an honors program is insulting and pejorative: "the move to an honors college provides 'an autonomy which . . . permits the college to serve many students in different disciplines more liberally and creatively than a narrowly conceived program can.'" The kicker is, of course, "narrowly conceived." A well-endowed honors college might have riches to bestow that an honors program does not, but that does not make it more broadly conceived. I doubt that anyone wants to pursue the argument that the honors program at the University of Georgia or at Hillsborough Community College is "narrowly conceived."

A claim that honors administrators in honors colleges are somehow more professional than those apparently mired in a lowly honors program is characteristic of the false distinctions that certification would have congealed, fracturing the collegiality and connectedness of NCHC and lining the pockets of certifiers bent on standardizing honors throughout the country and adopting principles of exclusion. Smith writes: "The role of the professional organization first and foremost is to establish membership criteria, thereby limiting the practice of the evolving profession to those deemed by the association to be qualified." Here is articulated the consequences of certification:

distinguishing the haves from the have-nots and consigning the latter to a lesser station in the honors universe or to non-membership. That is not the NCHC that I want to be a part of and support.

The National Collegiate Honors Council that I want to belong to and do belong to is a professional one with stewardship over significant resources because of its members, membership dues, and successful conferences. NCHC evolved from essentially an all-volunteer structure to an organization with a membership that is international in scope and a national office that houses a paid, full-time staff who are doing yeoman's service for the membership every day. The national office has grown in size and operations through the years and has matured through a series of Executive Directors with different abilities and priorities. Obviously, NCHC is a professional organization, but even as I affirm the obvious in that statement, I want to underscore the essential contributions that members of this organization have made as committed volunteers. Committees and committee members are doing outstanding work that advances honors education in myriad ways, including providing grants to individuals and programs. Supported by NCHC, Partners in the Parks is, for example, a remarkable educational experience for the students and faculty who participate. The organization's many committee members, along with the officers and members of the Board of Directors who are also volunteering to serve, are providing direction for the priorities and activities of the organization, all of which have ramifications for honors at our individual institutions.

People engaged in honors at the collegiate level are not amateurs; honors as an occupation and discipline is professional. I believe that the most profound and compelling evidence is to be found in NCHC's publications and the scholarship, intellect, and commitment they present to readers. Under the stewardship of co-editors Ada Long and Dail Mullins, and now under the guidance of Long, NCHC publishes two scholarly journals. Published since 2000, the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council (JNCHC)* is, as its editorial policy indicates, "a refereed periodical publishing scholarly articles on honors education. The journal uses a double-blind peer review process" (vi). Founded in 2005, *Honors in Practice (HIP)* also has an editorial policy affirming its status as "a refereed journal of applied research publishing articles about innovative honors practices and integrative, interdisciplinary, and pedagogical issues of interest to honors educators" (v). These publications clearly meet the standards of professional journals. NCHC also supports parallel opportunities for students through *URCA*, its online journal of

Undergraduate Research and Creative Activity, which is produced and edited by honors students from across the country. The NCHC Monograph Series has published over twenty monographs since 2005, and two more are likely to appear in 2020.

Aside from helping authors with promotion and tenure, NCHC's publications are consistently robust. Any number of publication ventures, both honors and non-honors, have come and gone while NCHC's publications have survived, matured, and grown since 2000 and the inaugural issue of *JNCHC*. Beyond access through the UNL Digital Commons, *JNCHC*, for example, is now included in ten prestigious abstracting and indexing services, including ERIC. Here are data points collected by Emily Walshe, a research librarian at LIU and longstanding member of NCHC's Publications Board, about the impact of *JNCHC*. Since 2000, *JNCHC* has engaged 492 unique authors from 248 different institutions and agencies. Fifty-four academic disciplines are represented, and nearly one-third of all articles are collaborative. *JNCHC* averages 579 readers for every article. In 2019 alone, library databases logged over 12,000 retrievals of *JNCHC* content; its digital imprint in UNL's archive exceeds 25,000 downloads. Certification is not the pathway to professionalization; the road to promotion, tenure, and professional honors status leads to and through NCHC's publications.

I conclude with the wisdom of Samuel Schuman and his fellow past presidents, who succinctly expressed the reasons to oppose certification:

NCHC has historically exhibited a welcoming, cooperative, and inclusive spirit that distinguishes it from most academic organizations. We strongly believe that the movement toward certification or accreditation could result in the creation of a class structure that we have taken great pains to avoid because it would undermine the collegiality that has characterized this organization and ultimately fracture the NCHC. . . . Honors should fit the institution of which it is a part, not an accrediting template from NCHC that could limit the often alternative and creative identity of honors most needed for each university and for each honors student in it. (Schuman et al.)

May Schuman's vision of NCHC take us into the future with the same professional, dynamic, and constantly evolving success it has had in the past fifty-four years.

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APPENDIX

Presidents' Letter Opposing Certification and Accreditation

2 April 2013

Dear NCHC Colleagues,

We are writing to you as past presidents of the National Collegiate Honors Council. Collectively, we represent a commitment to honors education and to NCHC that spans decades in which we have built collegial bonds and friendships across institutions and regions. NCHC has historically exhibited a welcoming, cooperative, and inclusive spirit that distinguishes it from most academic organizations. We strongly believe that the movement toward certification or accreditation could result in the creation of a class structure that we have taken great pains to avoid because it would undermine the collegiality that has characterized this organization and ultimately fracture the NCHC.

We want to be clear that we believe that colleagues who favor this step do so because they believe it is a logical and worthwhile next step for our organization. While we respect their integrity and motivation, we disagree vigorously with their conclusions.

We share with you an interest in the future of honors education and NCHC as an organization, and with this in mind we wish to express our strong opposition to accreditation and certification. Our belief is that either one will drive many current members out of the organization. Some research universities have already withdrawn from the NCHC in protest against the move toward certification/accreditation, and other member institutions are going to withdraw because the organization that previously welcomed them as equals now commits them to a particular rank or class.

The bent of those who would pursue the route toward certification or accreditation is to have NCHC validate our honors programs and honors colleges according to some standard. But no such standard exists, and the argument has been cogently made in several NCHC publications that such standardization will stifle creativity, purportedly one of the hallmarks of honors. The "Basic Characteristics" were always intended to be and have remained descriptive and not prescriptive documents. To recast them into prescriptive mandates would be a disservice to the member institutions.

Furthermore, we believe that certification and accreditation would be inappropriate because validation, if it is desirable, needs to come from an external agency. For NCHC to certify or accredit its own members or to rank

our honors programs and colleges is not legitimate, and it is not NCHC's mission. NCHC should not be in the business of policing honors programs and honors colleges. We consider unsavory the notion that member institutions will pay money to NCHC or its consultants in order to receive its imprimatur of certification or accreditation. We are also uncomfortable about membership fees being used to provide "grants" to institutions so that they can hire NCHC Site Visitors; this practice seems to us a conflict of interest and a misuse of membership funds.

An important aspect of honors and NCHC that gives us a role in improving the colleges and universities of which we are a part is the flexibility accorded by the honors movement and by our organization. Honors programs and colleges frequently offer what is missing or "what's next?" in curricular or programmatic terms. If the rest of a university is strong in pre-professional programs, perhaps honors will feature the classics. If elsewhere in the university students feel isolated as intellectual outcasts, honors can be a consoling and inviting gathering place. Honors should fit the institution of which it is a part, not an accrediting template from NCHC that could limit the often alternative and creative identity of honors most needed for each university and for each honors student in it.

We all are aware of the regional organizations that accredit our colleges and universities.

Insisting that honors programs and colleges be deliberately and conscientiously reviewed as part of the accreditation process would be far more effective in ensuring their future than attempting to set another process in motion.

We hope that you will agree with this collection of past presidents in taking a stand against the movement within NCHC to provide accreditation or certification for its members, which to our thinking is a conflict of interest and an enterprise antithetical to what is best about the National Collegiate Honors Council.

Sincerely,

| | | |
|-----------------|-----------------|------------------|
| Bernice Braid | Jocelyn Jackson | Anne Ponder |
| Catherine Cater | Hew Joiner | Jon Schlenker |
| Ira Cohen | Donzell Lee | Sam Schuman |
| Bill Daniel | Ada Long | Norm Weiner |
| Joan Digby | Lydia Lyons | Len Zane |
| Ted Humphreys | Bill Mech | John Zubizarreta |