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Honors Education is Discipline-Neutral

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Abstract: Neither the historical antecedents of honors education in the Oxford tutorial model nor Aydelotte's implementation of honors at Swarthmore College in 1922 involves a privileging of the humanities within honors education. The signature characteristics of honors education and pedagogies are discipline-neutral. Though the historical and institutional implementation of honors education in the U.S. has resulted in a privileging of the humanities, there are no intrinsic constraints on expanding honors to science-focused and preprofessional curricula. Such an expansion would enhance the future viability of honors programs within institutions as well as the future of professional organizations and publications.

Keywords: higher education—honors programs & colleges; Aydelotte, Frank Ridgeway (1880-1956); general education; professional education; University of Alabama at Birmingham (AL)—University Honors Program

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Nothing intrinsic in honors education makes it discipline-specific. While the humanities have traditionally dominated honors curricula, faculty, professional organizations, and publications, these biases are more an historical, institutional artifact than reflections of an essential honors pedagogy. Historical privileging of the humanities or previous claims of their primordial role in honors pedagogy may have effectively alienated the sciences as well as the professions, thwarting their involvement in honors education. Privileging of the humanities casts a dark cloud over the future of honors in our institutions of higher education as well as the future of the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) as a professional organization. The good news is that this privileging is not an essential element of honors education. The key characteristics of honors education can be implemented in any discipline.

As we celebrate the centennial anniversary of Frank Aydelotte's introduction of an honors program in 1922 at Swarthmore College, where he was the

first non-Quaker president from 1921 to 1940, it is appropriate to look at the conceptual foundations of honors education. Aydelotte achieved his efforts to raise the school's general level of intellectual discourse by providing a rigorous intellectual experience where qualified students studied in small groups for two years, without grades, and were finally evaluated by external scholars in written and oral exams (Rinn, 2003, 2004, and 2006; Carnicom, 2011). While Aydelotte was a professor of English at Indiana University and MIT prior to his Swarthmore College days, there is little evidence in his archived papers to suggest that he regarded the humanities as the main driver of his broad-based liberal arts experiment (Frank Aydelotte Papers). Academic excellence was Aydelotte's priority, which included his promotion of undergraduate research. He supplemented his curricular initiatives at Swarthmore College by having undergraduates work with faculty on research projects. In 1927, he brought the Bartol Research Foundation to campus to enhance opportunities for undergraduate research involvement. This initiative would eventually become a high-impact practice in American undergraduate education. Implementing the close interaction of faculty scholars and student mentees in a complex learning- and learner-centered activity is central to an honors experience. This interaction is discipline-neutral and can be implemented at any institution of higher education although the nature of the research is limited by the mission and resources of an institution. We see the impact of such experiences at annual NCHC conferences, where 200–350 students present their work. These presentations reflect close faculty mentoring, systematic investigation, and the empowerment that comes with intellectual inquiry. Mastery of research techniques, data analyses, and working on answers to important questions in a given field are all characteristic of an honors education.

While Aydelotte was a pioneer of honors education here in the U.S., the conceptual origins of honors education go back to the Oxford tutorial system and the contributions of John Henry Newman, one of the foremost intellectual figures of the nineteenth century, who was a strong advocate of Oxford's tutorial system as well as an influential writer on the purpose of a university (Newman, 1976). As a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, Aydelotte experienced and admired the Oxford model, several aspects of which were foundational in his launching of the first U.S. honors program at Swarthmore College. Newman's philosophy about the goals of a university education and the logistics of how they are best achieved strongly reverberated in the pioneering program at Swarthmore College and indeed in NCHC's current definitions of honors

education and modes of honors learning (National Collegiate Honors Council, n.d.-a, Definition).

As an undergraduate at Oxford's Trinity College, Newman read in the classics and mathematics but also dabbled in philosophy, chemistry, and geology. Ian Ker has provided a wealth of information on Newman (Ker, 1990, 2001, 2012, & 2019). Newman was to become one of the most articulate proponents of a liberal education free from narrow considerations of utility and vocational interests although what Newman meant by "liberal education" is often misunderstood. He clearly outlined his main ideas about education in *The Idea of a University*, published in 1873, which combined *Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education* (1852) and *Lectures and Essays on University Subjects* (1859) (Newman, 1976). What he saw as essential to the intellectual development of students was a community of thinkers in which faculty engage with students to develop and refine their thinking and analysis of the subject matter. The training of minds, for Newman, was not confined to developing the ability to think clearly and logically. Certainly, the abilities to grasp things as they are and to discriminate truth from falsehood were important components, but so also were the capacities to evaluate, make normative judgments, imagine, and express oneself articulately (Newman, 1976, pp. 122–124). Newman was not a major proponent of a university curriculum focused on the transmission of facts and advancement of knowledge. He railed against narrow specializations and the passive absorption of information (Newman, 1976, pp. 116–117, 120–121). For Newman, merely knowing was not to be educated. As a devotee of the Oxford tutorial system, Newman suggested that the goals of undergraduate education are best achieved in one-on-one or small-group discussions, an idea commensurate with the small class sizes, extracurricular programming, and discussion-focused pedagogies that characterize modern honors education. Newman's voluminous writings reveal that he embraced an interdisciplinary spirit when it came to the development of the intellect, as does the NCHC.

Neither Newman nor Aydelotte promoted a humanities-centered curriculum. Given that these conceptual origins of honors education and its pedagogical practices are not discipline-specific, it is important to examine the implications of our current privileging of the humanities in honors, which will have a negative impact both on the status of honors at our institutions and on the future viability of the NCHC as a professional organization. Since university administrations are placing increasing emphasis on vocationally oriented curricula, honors programs and colleges can ill afford to be solely

aligned with the humanities if they are to thrive going forward. To be in the conversation for adequate budgets, staffing, space, and other resources, honors programs and colleges must be prepared to demonstrate an impact across all disciplines. Enhancing honors options outside the humanities is not just a pragmatic strategy to avoid an existential crisis but will also enhance the educational experience of our students, who are increasingly choosing majors outside of the humanities. A humanities-focused approach gives our students the implicit and erroneous message that honors education and its pedagogical methods are only appropriate for some disciplines. Honors education would have more impact if students' major-related courses incorporated the key features of honors pedagogy. Promoting honors pedagogy in disciplines outside the humanities engenders new and improved ways of teaching in those disciplines and promotes the pedagogical innovation demanded by new trends in higher education. Leaders in honors often claim that interdisciplinarity is a key feature of honors education, but that is mere lip service if disciplines are differentially valued by those advocating the humanities as the cornerstone of an honors education. As in race relations, optimal progress is made when parties are on equal footing.

A privileging of the humanities could also affect the future of NCHC. A broadening of conference programming and journal content beyond the humanities could make our conferences and journals more appealing to a wider audience of professionals and students. The "Research and Creative Scholarship" section of NCHC's "Modes of Honors Learning" says there is "an emphasis on research writing in the humanities and social sciences" with no mention of STEM (National Collegiate Honors Council, n.d.-a, Definition). Failure to encourage and embrace honors education in STEM/preprofessional curricula and to stimulate research in honors risks future marginalization of the NCHC. We have already seen the emergence of the organization Honors Education at Research Universities (HERU), which hosts a vibrant biennial conference attractive to honors educators at research universities. In contrast, the current roster of NCHC's Committee on Science, Mathematics, and Sustainability does not have any member from an institution classified by Carnegie as a Doctoral University: High or Very High Research Activity. When I served as Co-Chair of NCHC's Research Committee with Marca Wolfensberger a few years back, we made a concerted effort to get more conference programming on research about honors since NCHC conferences at the time offered little of interest to domestic researchers or to our European colleagues, who are much more focused on empirical research

on honors pedagogy. The NCHC monograph on science and mathematics in honors education (Buckner and Garbutt, 2012), the symposium on research in honors hosted by Jerry Herron at Wayne State University several years ago, the ongoing survey research of Andrew Cognard-Black published in *JNCHC*, and the renewed efforts of Patricia Smith and the Research Committee have been welcome beacons of hope. As K. Patrick Fazioli suggests, we need to take direct and proactive measures. A minority of research articles published in NCHC journals over the last decade report on statistical analyses. I'm not suggesting the use of statistical analysis is a demarcation of science, but it can be used as an indirect marker of a quantitative approach to evidence and data. I have reviewed for *Honors in Practice* for many years, and too often the claimed efficacy of a new initiative in honors pedagogy or extracurricular programming is supported by anecdotal evidence rather than by quantitative analyses. The paucity of articles of interest to those in disciplines outside of the humanities in our two professional journals makes them less attractive options in which to publish.

As the organizer of the Student Poster sessions at NCHC conferences for over a decade, I offer empirical support for Fazioli's claim that they are not dominated by the humanities. Table 1 indicates the percentage of posters accepted in the humanities (poster categories: Arts & Humanities; Art and Visual Media), the sciences (poster categories: Business, Engineering & Computers; Environmental Sciences; Health Sciences; Natural Sciences & Mathematics; and Social & Behavioral Sciences), and discipline-neutral

TABLE 1. ANNUAL CONFERENCE STUDENT POSTER SUBMISSIONS BY YEAR AND CATEGORY

| Year | Humanities | Sciences | Neutral |
|------|------------|----------|---------|
| 2012 | 21.47 | 58.28 | 20.25 |
| 2013 | 21.28 | 66.49 | 12.23 |
| 2014 | 16.20 | 70.83 | 12.96 |
| 2015 | 17.21 | 73.95 | 8.84 |
| 2016 | 16.45 | 73.03 | 10.53 |
| 2017 | 20.21 | 63.36 | 16.44 |
| 2018 | 20.00 | 64.52 | 15.48 |
| 2019 | 18.49 | 65.66 | 15.85 |
| 2020 | 18.34 | 66.81 | 14.85 |
| 2021 | 11.52 | 71.42 | 17.05 |

domains (poster categories: Diversity; Education & Pedagogy; and Social Justice) for the years 2012–2021. Acceptance rates did not differ significantly across categories, so acceptances are an accurate reflection of the number of submissions received. The data indicate that posters in the sciences far outnumber those in the humanities by a factor ranging from 2.7 to 4.4 in a given year. This trend has been consistent over the last ten years. One can see that a sizeable majority of our students are choosing to pursue scholarship and research in fields other than the humanities despite their honors curricula often being heavily weighted toward the humanities. Students' posters are providing a welcome oasis for disciplines outside the humanities at our annual conferences. Reflecting NCHC's disciplinary bias, it is always much easier for me to recruit abstract evaluators and poster judges in the humanities categories than it is in the sciences. Posters in the former category end up with four or five judges while the latter are lucky to get two or three.

The key components of an honors education can be implemented on a small scale. Hence, we see tremendous diversity in the types of U.S. institutions at which honors education has thrived. In a similar vein, the signature features of honors education are not discipline-specific and thus can be implemented just as easily in a course on Cicero's poetry as they can in a course on astrophysics, the only limits being the availability of enterprising faculty committed to the merits of honors pedagogy and its high-impact practices as well as an institution that values this pedagogy. Better promotion of the repository of sample honors syllabi, many of which are in STEM, on the NCHC website (National Collegiate Honors Council, n.d.-b, Sample Honors Syllabi) might encourage more faculty outside of the humanities to enter the fray.

Core curricula, or general education requirements, involve an exposure to the sciences as well as the arts and humanities, indicating that both are highly valued components of an American undergraduate education. The historical antecedents of honors education, as well as the characteristics of modern honors pedagogy published by NCHC, call for discipline neutrality. While Fazioli has documented the privileging of the liberal arts in terms of personnel, curricula, conference programming, and publications, the essential components of an honors education are discipline-neutral.

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