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Honors Is Pedagogy

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Abstract: In response to the issue of why and how the humanities—and more broadly the liberal arts and sciences—have historically dominated honors education and disregarded preprofessional fields, the author finds that the crux of the problem is not the nature or worth of the disciplines involved or why this or that subject area is de facto included or excluded from honors. Instead, the author argues that honors is not about privileging specific content in any academic domain but about the approaches to teaching and learning that distinguish the honors enterprise. Grounded in creative, participatory, experiential strategies of what we know as active learning, honors is a way of teaching and learning that cuts across subject areas. Honors is pedagogy. As more STEM and preprofessional disciplines implement proven active learning pedagogies that have long been at the center of honors education, fields beyond the humanities and liberal arts will find mutually beneficial common ground with honors.

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K. Patrick Fazioli's lead essay poses questions of why and how the humanities—and more broadly the liberal arts and sciences (LAS)—have historically dominated honors education and the ranks of the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC). Fazioli also interrogates the economically fueled decline of humanities and liberal-arts studies in higher education over recent decades resulting from assumptions about the greater utility of STEM and preprofessional programs. Fair questions, to be sure. Allow me to take a slightly different but I believe relevant approach to the topic, one that reminds us of the central tenet that undergirds honors education, the core value that

may account for some of what Fazioli observes. My response is not to be construed as either an apology for honors or a criticism of preprofessional fields but rather as an encouragement that both affirm pedagogical excellence as common ground for nurturing our mutual goal of enhancing student learning.

For me, the crux of the problem that Fazioli rightly discerns is not the nature or worth of the disciplines involved or why this or that subject area is de facto included or excluded from honors. Instead, we should recognize that honors is not about privileging specific content in any academic domain but about the approaches to teaching and learning that distinguish the honors enterprise. In other words, what matters is not what teachers teach and what students study: what matters is how teachers teach and how students learn.

Grounded in creative, participatory, experiential strategies of what we know today as active learning—a multi-faceted methodology anchored in theory about how teachers and students construct knowledge in an active, interdependent process of learning—honors is a way of teaching and learning that cuts across subject areas. Fazioli agrees: "no single discipline or area of knowledge should be able to claim sole possession" of honors. The disciplinary prefix of any course is of secondary importance. In this sense, honors is what bell hooks would call teaching (and learning) to transgress. Inspired by hooks, Richard Badenhausen reminds us that honors is "a site of deeply radical practices" (5) that help students to "live in the gray area between disciplines" (6) and to engage in the kind of "dialogic exchange" (4) that disrupts the "single-axis thinking" and "artificial constructs" of "disciplinary frameworks" (5). Honors is transgressive, liberating pedagogy.

I do not mean to discount the importance or, in some subject areas, centrality of content learning; certain preprofessional programs are built on highly structured curricula tied to accreditation standards with end points of summative board exams or other performance measures. Honors as pedagogy does not suggest that content acquisition is irrelevant; indeed, the pedagogies associated with honors promote deeper and more meaningful, transferrable, and lasting learning of content no matter the discipline. Pedagogical excellence enhances content knowledge, a formula that recommends honors to all majors.

I also do not mean to understate the urgency and substance of Fazioli's argument. He is spot-on in articulating the demographic facts that have produced, as he says, what some call "the death of the humanities," a crisis prompted by a shift to "majors that funnel directly into a specific career path." But will such a shift—if it continues—also eventually diminish or even

eliminate honors because of perceptions that it is functional only in selected disciplines? I contend that honors—understood as disruptive, innovative, active learning—does not belong to any disciplinary domain. As a philosophy of teaching and learning that inspires transgressive practices within and outside the classroom, honors is an adaptive, radical pedagogy that enriches the academic experience of students in any discipline. Thus, while honors programs, colleges, and the NCHC can surely improve policies and procedures to increase participation among preprofessional faculty, students, and administrators, I interpret Fazioli's position as a clarion call not to change the fundamental principles of honors education to include disciplinary programs outside of the humanities and LAS but rather the other way around. That is, we should encourage STEM and preprofessional fields that have been historically underrepresented in honors to welcome and use the inherent power of honors to improve teaching and learning in these fields. After all, as Fazioli indicates, "research has shown that honors programs increase student engagement and success within vocationally oriented programs." Embracing honors means changing traditions of formal lecturing, high-stakes summative testing, rigid curricular requirements, large classes, and other preferences or necessities that have made honors seem unworkable, inaccessible, perhaps irrelevant.

Ironically, science labs, practice teaching, nursing apprenticeships, and applied engineering fieldwork are a few suitable examples of the higher-order active learning that lies at the center of honors education, making it all the more surprising that honors has not been a widespread option in such areas. Student teaching practicums, labs, medical rounds, or experiential opportunities such as law internships or business co-ops engage students not just in banking rote knowledge but in synthesizing and applying their learning, often involving thinking and doing across disciplinary domains. Honors, after all!

However, largely inflexible preprofessional program requirements—similar to the credit-heavy loads in STEM or secondary teacher certification—often leave little room for the enrichment of an honors course of study that may comprise general education, major, and elective credits. Furthermore, ongoing research on teaching methods in STEM courses (comparable to some of the preprofessions) reveals that the traditional, formal lecture—despite evidence of the efficacy of student-centered active learning strategies—remains firmly entrenched in those disciplines. One example is a massive study by Marilyne Stains et al. of more than 2,000 classes taught by nearly 500 faculty at 25 institutions in the U.S. and Canada. The research

team concluded that only 18 per cent of observed classroom interactions consisted of active instructional methodologies beyond conventional lecturing even though, as Barkley and Major and others have shown, the lecture can be effectively adjusted to incorporate dynamic, interactive components. Thus, honors understandably has been a hard sell in fields where curricula are locked up tight, where passive acquisition of information dominates for consequential summative evaluation, or where the variety of instructional approaches associated with active learning have perhaps been considered time-wasting impediments to prescribed disciplinary knowledge, full content coverage, preparation for the next level of coursework, or performance on certification boards.

Even with compelling support from research data, I am generalizing the history of teaching in fields outside of the humanities and liberal arts. Further, the humanities and LAS incorporate passive "stand and deliver" teaching just as other teaching fields include robust instances of motivational, creative, and active teaching. Also, while the research previously cited indicates that resistance to active learning in several fields is still an issue, the good news is that active learning—a pedagogy long identified with honors—is no longer a mere oddity in STEM and preprofessional classrooms. The efficacy of active learning in courses laden with the "tyranny" of "content coverage" has now been documented in increasing research studies by, for instance, Christina I. Petersen et al., Louis Deslauriers et al., and Scott Freeman et al. The landscape of higher education reveals a growing interest across disciplines in the merits of active learning and evidence-based pedagogical approaches, and honors is poised as a powerful lever to propel such strategies in STEM and preprofessional fields. Honors pedagogy stimulates innovations in classroom instruction, course and program assessment, and interdisciplinary course designs; it also facilitates integration of diverse intellectual frameworks to solve complex problems, application of knowledge from different disciplines, and synthesis of academic learning and non-academic personal experiences.

For disciplines that have viewed honors as an unlikely option for students on a prescribed track toward a job, the time is right to recognize the value of honors as an important complement to studies outside the humanities and LAS. Undoubtedly, as Fazioli bluntly reveals, honors programs, colleges, and the NCHC have created unfortunate obstacles for preprofessional students, faculty, and leaders. Some of the barriers he mentions are curricular pathways of elective credits, extracurricular requirements, "membership structure" and fees, and limited opportunities or support for student research and

publication. But today, honors programs and colleges are more operationally flexible and more respectful of diversity in all its guises—including different disciplinary domains—an advancement we can see in the admittedly modest yet increasing attention in NCHC journals, monographs, and professional development activities to subjects areas beyond the humanities and LAS. In NCHC publications, for instance, we find chapters or articles on topics ranging from technology to NIH and NSF biological research projects, athletics, science and diversity, mental health, calculus, professional approaches to honors, sun science, nursing and critical care patients, engineering, mathematics, prescription drug misuse, teaching science, architecture, physics, and more. We also find plenty of pieces on educational theories and methodologies, not to mention NCHC's monograph *The Other Culture: Science and Mathematics Education in Honors* or the *JNCHC* forums on athletics, the digital age, science, and technology. Honors is progressively willing and able to partner with all disciplines to stimulate pedagogical innovation and achieve the complementary goal of enhancing student learning.

As Fazioli points out, more can be done to elevate the visibility of preprofessional faculty and student conference presentations, leadership opportunities, and scholarship, but as more science, technical, and preprofessional fields implement alternative, creative approaches to evidence-based teaching and learning, they will discover more commonalities with honors. The rapid growth of the European Honors Council—dominated by universities of applied sciences, education, economics and business, law, technology, and other professional studies—is another testament to how such disciplines are embracing honors education on a global scale. Fazioli's concerns about the separation between honors and preprofessional educational programs are well-founded, and the history he recounts supports his worries about that gulf, but the gap is closing. We are recognizing the fundamental principle that honors is not about any single disciplinary perspective or restrictive content or proprietary approach to acquisition of knowledge. Many of us teach with a passion for our disciplines, but the transgressiveness of honors defies the notion that honors belongs to any particular disciplinary domain.

Fazioli has helped us recognize an important issue, and if we in honors can accept his astute recommendations for reaching out to preprofessional areas, then perhaps those fields beyond the humanities and liberal arts will be more willing to partner with honors for the sake of meaningful, transformative student learning. Disciplines throughout higher education need to continue adapting to new, evolving trends that encourage the kinds of

pedagogies that have long been at the heart of honors. Keeping the focus on how honors inspires excellence in teaching and learning regardless of disciplinary frameworks is the key to being invited into any discipline, and that can be a win for all.

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