

Creating and Celebrating Honors Faculty

LYNNE C. ELKES

Loyola University Maryland

Abstract: Honors faculty are defined by their dedication to their craft and their enormous impact on students in every discipline. However, their role within the larger university setting is nebulous, leading to an undervaluation of their contributions to higher education in an era of negative perceptions of the industry. Honors faculty can be tenured, contingent, academic, or professors of the practice; in every case, questions of promotion, compensation, and teaching assignments make staffing an honors program in a consistent manner difficult at best. These programs, their students, and their faculty would benefit from a more standardized approach to effectively serve honors students, especially as the landscape of higher education is shifting in terms of technology, budgets, and the approaching enrollment cliff for traditional students.

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In many cultures, teaching is a revered profession. Raising a child who becomes a university professor is a supreme achievement. No one asks if they have tenure, if they have their own office, if they are a department chair. Even the question of their academic discipline is not the focus of admiration. It is enough that a person has reached the pinnacle in education and can therefore continue the chain of knowledge through the generations. In the United States, however, where capitalism is the ultimate god/goddess and “whoever dies with the most toys wins,” the profession of teaching is not always similarly respected. That type of materialistic thinking ends, however, when our best and brightest walk through honors classroom doors (or click on Zoom screens). Many of our students see honors faculty, no matter their

background, as magicians of learning, available to make those elusive portals of knowledge open wide with endless opportunities.

Students come to higher education from many circumstances, wanting the skills to obtain a well-paying job *and* engage in the acrobatics of the mind. Honors students have usually been working feverishly for most of their lives to attain the best grades, participate in the best extracurricular activities, and simply be excellent. This exertion takes its toll on them so that by the time they reach Oz, aka college, they are excited and ready for next steps but also tired. Honors education should attenuate the academic pressure through an accumulation of college-level experiences that enhance, as Samuel Schuman suggests, the whole student—mind, body, and spirit. That is, honors should be a community of learners striving together to keep lit the fires of passion for learning and growing.

Instead, behind the curtain that cloaks the supposed all-powerful wizard, the Academy (with a capital A) too commonly takes the position that honors programs are elitist and discriminatory, that intense academic pressure is therefore appropriate. The faculty associated with honors are often similarly miscategorized, unrecognized for their lives and talents not just inside but also outside the classroom. Whether the faculty are part-time or full-time, tenured or contingent, local professionals or longtime scholars, this bias strains the enormous effort it takes to keep honors programs vibrant and well-staffed.

Defining honors faculty is an unforgiving and ongoing task. Definitions are meant to be trusted, solid, and dependable (much like honors faculty themselves), but we need to go beyond simple definitions to understand how honors faculty live and ultimately thrive within the parameters of the larger institutions of higher education. This kind of understanding means bending the parameters of what is meant by a definition.

Some descriptors that I think we can agree on are as follows: honors instructors value the relationship and bonding that occur with their students; are passionate about their subject; see teaching as a calling more than just a job; and relish the challenges and rewards that come from working with the best students on campus (Dailey). Additional key elements are authenticity as a teacher, courage to go against the grain in the classroom, and eagerness to create new challenges (Edgington and Frost).

Honors faculty frequently work on research with undergraduates; they are willing to step out of their comfort zone and try new strategies in the classroom that “challenge but also support their students, allowing them the opportunity to take intellectual risks with relative impunity” (Edgington

and Frost 232). Further, honors faculty view themselves as mentors and advocates for students, valuing their interactions and striving to incorporate “interesting experiences in the classroom” as a core focus of their teaching philosophies (Dailey 170). Honors faculty are role models who show students how intellectual ability can marry creativity for the best possible outcomes (Wolfensburger and Offringa).

Most faculty see teaching an honors course as a prime assignment given by a department chair or honors college administrator. Sometimes administrators too, falling back on their teaching skills, are tapped to teach honors courses. Nevertheless, while most programs and colleges, according to Hottinger et al., are finding more deliberate and efficient methods to staff honors courses, honors faculty can feel that they are in no-man’s land, connected only to their beloved students.

At the same time, the connections of faculty to an honors program or college can be diverse and changeable. Faculty may be on loan from a department, rotate in and out of honors, or be permanently associated with honors classes in their discipline. They may or may not be compensated for the extra effort required to provide an exceptional experience for students; some believe that the honor of instructing these students is compensation enough (Hottinger et al.).

As the number of honors programs and colleges continues to increase in both large and small institutions, many early hires may be instructors on the outskirts of the academic hierarchy: non-tenure track, contingent faculty (Edgington and Frost). The quality that this cadre brings to the classroom may be untested in some cases, but given an opportunity, their passion for a subject will naturally infuse the knowledge shared, resulting in a better, more accessible experience for students (Dailey). While this path may bring in fresh ideas and innovation, there is a risk of isolating instructors from the mission and vision of both the honors program and the university. The combination of established faculty as honors instructors alongside these instructors could yield the best outcome for students in depth and breadth of learning and real-world applications.

One way to break down the staffing boundaries between traditional departments and honors programs is to promote the growth of an affiliate faculty model where honors faculty are encouraged to apply for affiliate status “with the departments with which they are most closely aligned” (Hottinger et al. 124). This model could be extended to both tenured and contingent faculty.

Tenure in honors typically involves teaching, service, and research obligations. Honors students look to their honors faculty for mentoring in both student research and internships, which many would say is an integral part of the unique experience offered to honors students. This work outside the classroom can take up a significant amount of time that is not directly compensated. While most honors faculty, whether full-time or contingent, enjoy this work, their enthusiasm and dedication can be taken advantage of. Ideally such work should be recognized as part of their role and appropriately rewarded.

These issues are addressed by Miller, Silberstein, and Brckalorenz in their essay on honors and HIPs (high-impact practices):

Even if participation in HIPs is technically viewed as an aspect of teaching, “service to students” (such as providing mentoring in undergraduate research) may not be as valued to institutions in terms of tenure and promotion (Schwartz, 2012). Although faculty with clearly defined administrative roles may receive compensation for their service work, most faculty do not receive extra recognition, support, or reward for such work beyond acknowledgment in annual performance reviews (Guarino & Borden, 2017). In addition, service roles are often inequitably distributed, resulting in increased burdens for women and faculty of color (Guarino & Borden, 2017; Pyke, 2011). (Miller et al. 277)

This disparity in the reward system for service activities undermines the diversity, equity, and inclusion that are vital to the mission of honors.

Then there is the question of offering tenure to honors faculty outside of their department. For more than a decade, starting with the pioneering work of Rosalie Otero when she was Director of the University of New Mexico Honors Program (Otero), awarding tenure in honors has become more common among NCHC member institutions—not standard practice but no longer a rarity. This trend has called into question what tenure is and how it is earned, muddying the waters further as higher education struggles with an exodus of traditionally trained academics, with financial exigencies, and with changes in technology that impact the delivery and quality of undergraduate curricula. Although the issue of tenure in honors is discussed at conferences and workshops, no comprehensive research has focused on whether honors colleges should aspire to it, or if honors instructors want it, or what the qualifications should be. For instance, what about instructors without terminal degrees who are expert teachers?

All different kinds of faculty bring to the classroom a passion for their discipline and the opportunity to provide hands-on guidance to students based on personal experience. Honors faculty are rarely like Professor Julian Morrow in the novel *A Secret History*, where he actively isolates his protégés from the general population in a self-imposed bubble. Honors faculty tend to bring their students to the world and the world to their students. The variety of faculty assigned to teach honors gives students the opportunity to learn from the best. Defining what “the best” is can also lead to discussions of equity and take us back to the question of who is qualified to teach honors. Can we include professors who are not academics but possess exceptional real-world experience and useful networks? Frankly, students rarely know the difference between tenured and tenure-track professors or where their teachers are situated in the academic hierarchy.

Honors courses span the liberal arts and pre-professional academic landscapes. With the ongoing attack on higher education, complicated by the rapidly advancing capabilities of AI (read ChatGPT), faculty at all levels are at risk. Coupled with enrollment concerns as we head toward a potential cliff in traditional-age students, higher education faces a denouement. Honors faculty can fall victim to the stereotypes thrust upon academia or choose to break those barriers with innovative thinking, transforming education for the twenty-first century. Such a transformation would require the financial and emotional support of higher administrations as well as honors administrators, but it would be an opportunity to prove the value of education in all its forms once again.

In 1965, Jackie DeShannon sang Hal David’s iconic lyrics to music by Burt Bacharach: “What the world needs now is love, sweet love. It’s the only thing that’s there just too little of.” I posit that honors faculty can be defined by their extraordinary levels of love for and dedication to learning, love for those who love to learn, forming a needed bulwark against those looking to negate the importance of higher education. Support from administrators for an overhaul of designations, compensation, and paths to promotion would go a long way toward solidifying the role of honors faculty on the modern campus. Students (and their wallets) expect that higher education will create an environment that lifts up those faculty most dedicated to their craft, valuing the effort that goes into an exceptional learning experience. Honors faculty are extraordinary for their contributions to molding students into forward looking, critically thinking, educated leaders. Leaders in higher education, therefore, owe it to all their constituencies to promote best practices in creating a sustainable, vibrant honors faculty.

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The author may be contacted at

lelkes@loyola.edu.