

Dancing with the Stars: Stepping Up and Stepping Out in Honors Education

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One of the most profound statements in James Herbert's lead essay—simple as it seems at the very beginning of his piece—concerns his discovery early in his career that “a liberal education in honors was good preparation for life.” At Columbia College, where I have the privilege of serving as President, such a statement is life blood, and our honors program is at the front of our efforts to maintain a strong emphasis on the value of liberal learning while addressing the many challenges all of our institutions face today in the changing landscape of higher education. Liberal learning and the liberal arts are, indeed, at the core of our mission while we also strive to prepare students for life after college, whether they decide to pursue other degrees, begin a professional career, enter the job market, serve their various communities, or even backpack around the world. We ask our students to step up as

learners and leaders and step out as individuals with a strong sense of identity and purpose. We want that stepping to occur in all our efforts, but we know that in our honors program we are dancing with the stars, the kinds of motivated, high-achieving, creative, and talented young women unafraid of taking risks and accepting challenges in order to make the program and our college proud. Liberal education as “preparation for life” is what honors is about, and our program is one of the college’s crown jewels in making such rich and practical learning a reality.

Stressing the importance of what he calls “reciprocal paraphrase” and rethinking one’s own or another’s thoughts, Herbert lands on a quality of honors learning that I have observed among our honors students, a quality that I imagine comes from the exciting and effective teaching they experience in their honors courses, senior seminar, and independent projects. I am early in my tenure as president of the college, but I have already seen ample evidence of our honors students’ enhanced thinking, leadership on and off campus, amazing record of scholarly presentations at many academic conferences, and dedication to service—all stemming from a basic respect for ideas and for sharing of knowledge with others in a way that benefits everyone’s learning. They think and rethink, applying their own ideas while, as genuine honors critical thinkers, remaining open to the ideas of others and to the lessons of experience both inside and outside the classroom. Perhaps nowhere is the latter point better represented than in the impressive number of presentations our honors students make every year at regional and national honors and other academic conferences and events. Some of them even have had their work printed in national honors publications. Probably on the strength of such wide involvement in honors, one of our students was a runner-up for the NCHC Honors Student of the Year award in 2003 and two others won the prize in two consecutive years, 2009 and 2010. You see what I mean about dancing with the stars!

Herbert’s essay is full of keen observations about the meaningful learning that comes from the honors experience in college. He obviously carried his own honors faculty habits into his work for the College Board and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Another lesson that I gather is key in honors education is the tempo appropriate for deeper learning. We have to slow down. We have to listen. We have to reflect. We have to focus on how we learn differently in more transformative ways, as opposed to rushing to judgment and simply storing more information faster. I know that our honors program articulates such values in its mission, and it is clear to me that

honors education *works* at our institution. The faculty teaching our honors courses understand the program's motto: *non magis, sed melior*. They dedicate themselves to helping our honors students not just learn more but learn more thoughtfully, deliberately, so that once they have stepped up to the challenges of honors they can more confidently and successfully step out into the world as liberal learners prepared for life, as Herbert has said.

Am I proud of our honors students? You bet. Do I support all that the honors program does to help strengthen the reputation of our college? You can count on it. Do I believe in the value of honors education in enriching the lives of our talented students? Absolutely. I wish all college and university presidents were as lucky as I am to be dancing with such stars.

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